

Isoglosses and Place Names in Historical Context

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This paper explores a historical dimension of comparative studies in American dialectology and toponymics. By "comparative studies" I do not mean to include all of the areas for possible cooperation between the two disciplines outlined by Raven I. McDavid Jr.,¹ but only those which seek a geographical correlation between dialect isoglosses and place name distribution. Comparative studies of this nature are familiar to readers of *Names*. The distribution of generic place names in Wilbur Zelinsky's study of the northeastern United States² offers a striking correspondence with Hans Kurath's Northern-Midland isoglosses and North Midland-South Midland isoglosses.³ Green and Green⁴ examined a smaller area and found a correspondence between three LANE⁵ isoglosses in New England and the distribution of town names ending in *-ham*, *-field* and *-bury*.

Dialect and place name studies alike, however, become more complicated as we move west from the Atlantic seaboard. In the middle western states adjoining the Great Lakes, dialect isoglosses often blur and diffuse into "transition zones" in which two or more types of speech co-exist; more frequent as well is the occurrence of "speech islands" in which a small isolated area of one type of speech is surrounded by a larger area of a different type. Speech islands and transition zones have been noted in mid-western studies by Albert H. Marckwardt,⁶ Roger Shuy⁷ and others.

Similar problems were encountered in a middle western place name study by Robert W. Bastian. Bastian mapped the distribution of several place-name generics throughout the North Central States and Upper Midwest to see if these distributions reinforced the Northern-Midland dialect boundary (more accurately, a transition zone) established by Marckwardt, Shuy and Harold Allen. While much of Bastian's data did indeed correspond to dialect isoglosses in the midwest, several exceptions appeared as well. Midland *run*, a term for a small stream, appeared as often in Michigan as it did in Indiana. Also, the Northern municipality names *corner* and *center* appear quite frequently in South Midland territory. The distribution of these place names does not correspond with any accuracy to the area predicted by dialect maps.

Why not? Bastian speculated that a “number of historical factors probably account for the gradual deterioration of the geographic relationship between generic place-names and the Northern-Midland dialect boundary in the Midwest.”⁸

Like Bastian, I encountered similarly unpredictable — or better still, unwanted — patterns when I began to study place names as an adjunct to a historical account of linguistic geography in Illinois. Shuy’s work has shown the Northern quarter of Illinois (excluding greater Chicago) speaks a Northern dialect similar to that heard in Michigan and upstate New York. A Midland “speech island” occupies the northwest corner of the state and extends into Wisconsin.⁹ Farther south, especially on the prairies, we hear language more like that of North Midland Ohio and Pennsylvania; farther south still, especially along the Sangamon, LaMoine, and lower Illinois rivers, rural speech resembles more and more that of the upland South, except in the speech island which encircles German settlement areas adjoining St. Louis.¹⁰ Since these speech areas could be traced to differential migration from the North, the north Midland and the upland South, I decided to map the distribution of place names which had counterparts in the source areas of settlement.¹¹ At that stage of investigation, I charted only those names which still appear on current maps of Illinois and the source areas. In all, I found 136 Illinois municipality names with counterparts (municipality or county) elsewhere in the eastern United States. Their classification by source area appears in the following table:

Number of names by source area

Total number of names: 136

Source Area	Northern	North Midland	Southern	Indiana
Number	56	23	52	6
Proportion	41%	17%	38%	4%

(Northern names originate in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, with the largest number coming from New York; North Midland names come from Pennsylvania and Ohio; Southern names come from Kentucky, North Carolina [the largest number from the latter two states], Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, Georgia and South Carolina).

When we plot these names by source area in a map, we begin once more to see problems.

The maps [on page no. 231] plot the distribution of Northern and Southern place names across the state. Superimposed over the map of Southern names is the isogloss which represents the northern limits of Southern influence on Illinois speech. All but nine of these names appear south of the Southern isogloss; those which do appear farther north are in areas Shuy has labelled “Midland.”

The distribution of Northern place names, however, is as surprising as their numerical preponderance. Sixteen Northern names cluster in the Northern dialect area of Northeastern Illinois, set apart by isogloss *ab*. Nine more Northern names cluster farther west in the Northern-Midland transition area bounded by the broken lines. The remainder occur in Midland territory — half of all Northern names, which, to be more specific, actually appear in the Southern area. This seemingly chaotic scattering of Northern place names must discourage the dialectologist or the place names scholar hoping for some benefit from comparative studies.

To see if a pattern exists where none is immediately apparent, we should turn to demographic history, which dialectologists rely on to interpret spatial patterning of language variants. But even here the answers are not immediate. 1870 census figures by county show New Yorkers to be clustered in the extreme northern parts of the state, where we have Northern speech or Northern-Midland transitional areas (New England natives were present in such small numbers that the published summaries did not include them in the tables). A small percentage of New Yorkers lived just to the south of these regions, but New York settlement in the southern two-thirds of the state is negligible. Ohio settlement is important in much of the Southern territory, but comparatively few Ohio place names appear in Illinois.

A better use of census figures demands an examination of settlers' nativities by political units smaller than the county. With the increasing availability of manuscript census returns since 1850 on microfilm, it becomes possible to examine the distribution of settlement sources township by township. This small-scale investigation reveals that individual townships frequently exhibit their own internal microgeography of settlement. Several examples of this midwestern phenomenon appear in the forthcoming "Settlement History of the North Central States." In Licking County, Ohio, Virginians remained the largest element of the population as late as 1870,

but the county was also dotted with enclaves of settlers whose total number would be small in comparison to the county's population. The town of Granville . . . was founded in a well-documented move from its parent and namesake city in Massachusetts, while the principal city of Newark was founded by New Jerseyans who gave the place its name. Utica and Homer are both New York place names, and suggest enclaves from that state as well.¹²

This pattern of Yankee enclaves in towns surrounded by a different rural population appears elsewhere in Ohio:

By 1850, the town of Athens retained a 'Yankee' character, but the rest of the county did not. The town's adult population was 44 percent Ohio born, but the out-of-state natives included 21 percent New Englanders and 9 percent

New Yorkers, for a combined ‘Yankee’ born population of 30 percent. Only 13 percent of the adult Athenians were from Pennsylvania, and less than 4 percent were from all the states of the South. But the rural remainder of Athens County presented a different character. In the rural townships, Pennsylvanians made up 25 percent of the adult population, and Virginians another 13 percent — proportionately twice as many Pennsylvanians and more than three times as many Virginians as in the town of Athens, while only 17 percent (a little more than half the proportion in the town) of the rural population was of ‘Yankee’ birth.¹³

This tendency of Northern settlers to cluster in towns is evidenced as well in Illinois. In McDonough County, whose original population was heavily Southern, 158 “old settlers” survived by 1878, the bulk of whom were from the South, Pennsylvania and Ohio. Only six of the survivors were of Northern origin, but five of these were located in the county seat at Macomb, while the sixth was in Bushnell, the county’s second largest municipality.¹⁴ In Sangamon County, Illinois, Southerners made up 57 percent of the 1850 adult rural population, but only 30 percent of the population of Springfield, the state capital. Yankees, on the other hand, made up 17 percent of the population of Springfield, but only 9 percent of the rural population. This tendency of Northerners to settle in the towns, moreover, was reinforced by a New England tendency — as we have already seen in the case of Granville, Ohio — to resettle entire communities *en masse*. In Western Illinois, for example, an entire congregation from Fairfield, Connecticut, settled on Round Prairie and promptly renamed the village for their former home.¹⁵

A common tendency in the settlement of the lower Middle West, then, was for Northerners to gravitate to the towns, sometimes simply transplanting entire communities, and setting up shop in the midst of a Midland and often Southern hinterland. As I have shown elsewhere,¹⁶ this pattern of settlement often led to urban/rural ethnic cleavage observable within a single county in urban/rural speech differences persisting down to the present day. It also led to some intracounty variation in toponymic landscape. In McDonough County, for example, streams located in the southern and northwestern parts of the county — the early townships which were settled by Southerners — include Southern *branch* as part of their name. On the prairies of the east and north, settled somewhat later, the only stream generic is *creek*.

The likelihood for Midwestern towns to be dominated by Northern populations makes clear the reason for so many Northern place names appearing in a non-Northern dialect area. Southerners and Midlanders who lived in rural areas would not likely be given much choice in the naming of towns. This also explains a discrepancy in Bastian’s generic place-name study. The

most characteristically Northern generic place names in his investigation are *brook*, *center* and *corner(s)*. *Brook* appears nowhere south of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary, but the community generics occur several times in southern Illinois and Indiana and with increasing frequency south of the dialect boundary in Iowa and Kansas, where they appear with "unexpected frequency."¹⁷ But social history explains the discrepancy. *Brook* is of course a landscape feature and is therefore rural. And since Southern populations were common in rural areas south of the dialect boundary, the most frequent stream generic in that area is, instead of Northern *brook*, Southern *branch*. But *corner* and *center* are names given to municipalities, and so like Northern town names, we find them appearing frequently south of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary.

Comparative studies, then, can be valuable to scholars in dialectology and toponymics. But the results may be frustrating unless the analysis includes detailed studies of an area's underlying social forces.

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Notes

¹"Linguistic Geography and Toponymic Research," *Names* 6 (June, 1958), pp. 65-73.

²"Some Problems in the Distribution of Generic Terms in the Place-Names of the Northeastern United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 45.4 (December, 1955), pp. 319-349.

³*A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1949), figure 3.

⁴E. Green and R. Green, "Place Names and Dialects in Massachusetts: Some Complementary Patterns," *Names* 19 (December, 1971), pp. 240-251.

⁵Hans Kurath et al., *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1939).

⁶"Principal and Subsidiary Dialect Areas in the North-Central States," *Publication of the American Dialect Society* 27 (April, 1957), pp. 3-16.

⁷"The Northern-Midland Dialect Boundary in Illinois," *Publication of the American Dialect Society* 38 (1962). See also Alva Leroy Davis, "Dialect Distribution and Settlement Patterns in the Great Lakes Region," *Ohio State Archeological and Historical Quarterly* 60 (1951), pp. 48-56.

⁸"Generic Place-Names and the Northern-Midland Dialect Boundary in the Midwest," *Names* 25.4 (December, 1977), p. 234.

⁹Shuy, p. 38.

¹⁰See Marckwardt, Shuy, Davis above; also Timothy C. Frazer, "South Midland Pronunciation in the North Central States," *American Speech* (Spring, 1978), pp. 41-48; also "Ohio and the 'North Midland' Dialect Area," *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore* (Fall, 1978), pp. 45-52.

¹¹This original body of research was reported in "Cultural Geography in Illinois: Regional Speech and Place Name Sources," *Great Lakes Review* 4.2 (Winter, 1978), pp. 19-30. See pp. 26-27 for a listing of the actual names mapped; since that time *Little York*, *Rockport* (NY), *Plymouth* (MA), *Chambersburg* (PA) have been added to the list. Maps accompanying this paper are copied and adapted by permission from *Great Lakes Review*.

¹²Timothy C. Frazer, "The Settlement History of the North Central States," ms. prepared for inclusion in *Linguistic Atlas of the North Central States*, Ohio Chapter, p. 11.

¹³“Settlement History,” Ohio Chapter, pp. 11-12.

¹⁴S.J. Clarke, *History of McDonough County, Illinois, Its Cities, Towns, and Villages* (Springfield, Illinois: D.W. Lust, 1878).

¹⁵James K. Braken, ed., “Sarah Senn Burton’s Diary of a Journey to Illinois,” *Western Illinois Regional Studies* 4.2 (Fall, 1981), pp. 115-135.

¹⁶“Sound Change and Social Structure in a Rural Community,” *Language in Society*, forthcoming.

¹⁷Bastian, p. 232.

