Seattle to Spokane: mapping English in Washington state
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Recently, the Atlas of North American English (Labov, Ash, Boberg 2006) has suggested that there is too much variation in the English of Washington state (WA) for a pattern to emerge. Wassink, Squizzerz, Schirra and Conn (2009), however, report finding consistent patterns of raising of prevelar (ey), (ae) and (e) in Seattle, providing detailed evidence that sociolinguistic patterning of English does exist in WA. The purpose of the study reported here is to ascertain what perceptions long-time residents of WA have of the English spoken in the state through a perceptual account of variation there. This paper reports the results from 232 WA residents who were asked to draw on a map of WA (as described in Preston and Howe 1987 and elsewhere) the outlines of places in the state where they think people’s English sounds different and to give a label for that variety.

In an effort to take advantage of new tools available to cultural geographers, respondents’ hand-drawn maps were analyzed and compared using ArcGIS 9.0 Geographic Information System software. This software allows the respondent maps to be quantitatively aggregated. Although some residents reported that they perceive no difference among speakers in WA (e.g., “no difference”), the resulting composite maps from other respondents show the majority feels that there are patterned differences among speakers in WA. Perceived rural and urban differences were among the most salient: urban areas were labeled as “fast,” and as “slang,” while rural areas were labeled as “hick”/“country.” Some respondents even showed awareness of the raising pattern in Seattle suggested by Wassink et al. (2009) with examples like “‘bag’ = ’beg’”. This perceptual account of variation in the English of WA will contribute to our understanding of the dialect variation and the social and regional evaluation of it in this under-studied region.