

A Linguistic Study: “Soda” and “Pop” in Wisconsin and Minnesota

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Abstract

The following linguistic research study was performed to discover language patterns in association with the terms “pop” and “soda.” Research was conducted through guided conversation with the subjects. Findings revealed that much of the research conducted in the past coincides with the findings we have tabulated with this project. Research confirmed that the information in the 2002 isogloss developed by Campbell and Plumb was accurate. There has not been a significant shift in the isogloss since 2002, and findings suggest that there may be relevant data for future studies regarding the use of brand specific names being used in place of the terms “pop” and “soda.”

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the use of the terms “pop” and “soda” and develop an isogloss¹ based on where the interviewed subjects were originally from. Previous linguistic studies have shown that the use of the terms “pop” and “soda,” in reference to soft drinks, varies tremendously in the upper Midwest, especially as one travels from southeastern Wisconsin to the northwest and into Minnesota.

According to the map in Appendix A, the term “pop” is used more frequently in Minnesota, but in Wisconsin, the usage of the term seems to be more prevalent in the western side of the state, whereas the usage of the term “soda” remains dominant in the eastern side of Wisconsin. The term “coke” is used predominately in the southern region of the United States to refer to soft drinks. To ensure the accuracy of the data, it was necessary to take the use of this term into account, because the usage of this term could possibly spread from its roots to northern regions of the United States, including the Midwest.

Previous research has shown variations in the way these terms are commonly used in the Midwest region; therefore, it was essential that the subjects of this study be from Midwestern states. Since the vast majority of students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout originate from various regions of Wisconsin and Minnesota, they were suitable subjects for this study.

Literature Review

Linguistic research has been conducted in the past to determine the usage of the terms “pop” and “soda” across the United States. The usage of the terms has changed over time and a variety of terms such as soda water, tonic, and soda pop have been used to describe soft drinks (Malmstrom & Ashley, 1963). The use of the terms “pop” and “soda” began in the 1800’s, and over the course of two centuries, the usage changed greatly.

In the 1820’s the term “soda pop” was used to reference a new mineral water, which later came to be known as seltzer. In 1833, carbonated water was referred to as “soda,” and by the 1840’s, it was being sold at soda counters that could be found in many pharmacies or drug stores. The first use of the word “pop” was in the 1940’s, when a new ginger flavored beverage entered

1. A boundary line between places or regions that differ in a particular linguistic feature (Mish, 2004).

the market. Many people called this beverage “ginger pop,” sometimes referred to as “ginger ale.” “Soda pop” and a “bottle of pop” were commonly used by flappers and sheiks as slang terms in the 1920’s (Flexner, 1976).

The Coca-Cola® product was introduced in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1887. By 1909, the product was more commonly known as Coke. By 1945, Coke was registered as a trademark, and beginning in 1955, the term was used in advertising (Flexner, 1976). Today, the term “coke” is used to reference any brand of soft drink predominately in the southern region of the United States (Campbell & Plumb, 2002). However, this trend has not become widespread in the Midwest region of the country.

Previous research indicates many people use the terms “pop” and “soda” to reference soft drinks across the northern United States; however, the dominant term used in this region is “pop.” The particular usage of one term over the other seems to be determined by the region the individual is from. The fusion of these terms is prevalent in central Wisconsin where “pop” and “soda” are used interchangeably. A detailed map displaying the use of these terms in reference to soft drinks can be found in Appendix A (Campbell & Plumb, 2002).

As mentioned, in the 1920’s the use of “pop” and “soda” began as slang terms used by certain groups throughout the United States. Over time these terms moved from being slang to being commonly used by Americans to describe soft drinks. Currently, the use of the terms “pop” and “soda” seem to depend on the region from which people originate from. If a person was to move or enter into a region in which one term was dominant over the other, it is very likely that person would begin to use the dominant term. Lippi-Green (1997) states “speakers choose among sociolinguistic variants available; their choices group together in ways which are obvious and interpretable to other speakers in the community” (p. 63). If the terms continue to be used interchangeably, as they are in central Wisconsin, it is possible that one term will come to be used predominately at the exclusion of the other. Based on the literature, we hypothesized that subjects originating from the state of Minnesota would use the term “pop,” and subjects originating from the state of Wisconsin would use the terms interchangeably, with a blend in the usage of the two terms in the West side of the state, and with “soda” being used more frequently on the East side of the state.

Methods

This study’s primary method for collecting data was through the use of guided conversation, a method developed by William Labov, a renowned sociolinguist (Tamás, 1998). Guided conversation is the process of engaging subjects in a casual conversation in which they begin to forget they are being recorded or observed. Labov’s “observer’s paradox” is the theory that when subjects are aware they are being observed, their speech and various other mannerisms are affected. For this reason, the field researcher may not be able to obtain accurate information.

Interviews were conducted with seven human subjects and the conversations were recorded. Since research was conducted during Spring Holiday, subjects were more difficult to recruit. The selection of subjects was not random, but rather they were selected by chance appearance as we went to various residence halls on campus and asked students that were in the lobby or their rooms to participate.

The purpose of the conversations was to guide the subjects towards a topic or idea that would require them to use either the term “pop” or “soda.” After obtaining a signed consent form and demographic information from the subject, we proceeded to ask a variety of questions about campus life at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. Conversations were recorded with the use of a laptop computer and iMovie® recording software. The subjects of our research knew they were being recorded, but were not aware of the primary goal of the conversation. Subjects were first

asked what region they were originally from or, in other words, where they grew up. This information was to be used to develop an isogloss and to allow us to compare and contrast our findings with previous research. Eventually the conversation was guided to various questions regarding food service options and vending machines available on campus. Below are examples of some of the questions. Please note that these are not the only questions used while conducting our interviews, but rather specific questions that led our subjects to use the terms “pop” and/or “soda.”

1. What do you think of the food service options and selection offered on campus?
2. What do you think of the vending machine options here on campus?
3. What do you think of the Pepsi[®] company taking over the vending here on campus?
4. Would you prefer Coca-Cola[®] products over Pepsi[®] products in the vending machines around campus?

Results

Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that subjects originating from the state of Minnesota would use the term “pop” and subjects originating from the state of Wisconsin would use the terms interchangeably, with “soda” being used more frequently. After conducting our research, it was determined that the subjects from the state of Wisconsin tended to use the term “soda” more frequently. Although the original hypothesis was that the terms would be used interchangeably by subjects from Wisconsin, “soda” was the only term used by these subjects. Subjects that originated from the state of Minnesota consistently used the term “pop” when referring to soft drinks. The term “soda” was not used by any subject from the state of Minnesota. Research confirmed that the information in the 2002 isogloss developed by Campbell and Plumb, found in Appendix A, was accurate in relation to the two states and the subjects’ usage of the terms. See Table 1 for the results of our study.

Table 1

Frequency of Usage of the Terms “Pop” and “Soda” in Reference to Soft Drinks

Subjects	Origin	Pop	Soda
Subject 1	Ripon, WI	0	3
Subject 2	Wisconsin Rapids, WI	0	1
Subject 3	Richfield, MN	2	0
Subject 4	Verona, WI	0	1
Subject 5	Ladysmith, WI	0	1
Subject 6	Eagan, MN	1	0
Subject 7	Minnetonka, MN	1	0

While conducting research, subjects from both states also tended to use certain brand names to refer to soft drink brands. However, in no case did we find brand names being used generically for soft drinks, as has happened with “coke” in the American South. Figure 1 shows which brand names the subjects used during the course of the guided conversations. All subjects tended to name specific brands before using the terms “pop” and/or “soda” in reference to soft drinks.

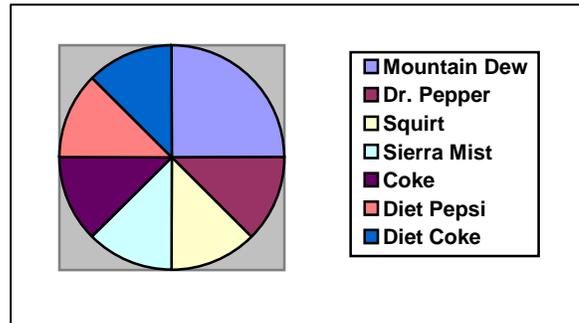


Figure 1. Use of Brand Name Terms in Reference to Soft Drinks

Conclusion

The findings of this research supports the original hypothesis that subjects originating from the state of Minnesota would use the term “pop,” and subjects originating from the state of Wisconsin would use the term “soda.” Results show that there is no shift in the isogloss for the terms “pop” and “soda” (Campbell & Plumb, 2002). The findings were consistent with the 2002 study regarding these terms found in Appendix A.

The initial hypothesis did not include evaluation of the use of brand names to reference soft drinks; however, findings have shown that subjects from both states used name specific brands when referring to soft drink brands. Over time, it is possible that certain brand names may be used generically to refer to soft drinks, as the term “coke” is currently used for this purpose in the American South.

Based on the findings of this study, it is hoped that other researchers will be inspired to further investigate the usage of the terms “pop” and “soda.” In addition, we hope that future researchers will consider further investigation of the usage of brand names to reference soft drinks.

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Appendix A

From Campbell and Plumb (2002)

