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ENG 322—Final Research Project

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Research Question

The research I've conducted is based off of a 2014 study by Jack Grieve, Costanza Asnaghi, and Tom Ruelle. In their study, they tested a variety of lexical variations across the United States, but for my research I decided to focus specifically on the use of the variables "garbage can" and "trash can". My hypothesis comes directly from their study, and it states: a theoretical horizontal barrier exists which goes through the middle of the United States, and those above it use "garbage can" more frequently whereas those below it are more likely to say "trash can". Adding to that, those closer to the barrier are more likely to use the terms interchangeably.

Literature Review

"Garbage can" and "Trash can" are two variables that are often included in studies concerning lexical variation. From BuzzFeed quizzes to academic papers, researchers use these variables to draw dialectical lines throughout the United States. One such study was conducted by Harvard University in 2003 using online surveys. Since then, the studies have become more detailed, but they still continue to use the internet for gathering data.

In a study from 2003, Harvard University created online surveys to collect data from sources across the country. Since then, modern research, such as a 2016 study by Huang Yuan, Dianshing Guo, Alice Kasacoff, and Jack Grievetested and 2012 study by Costanza Asnaghi, primarily use search engines, such as Google and Bing, and social media platforms, such as Twitter, to gather their information. One thing that all three of these studies have in common is

that the only independent variable they take into account is location. Each study maps out regions of the country most likely to use each variable, and

Across the scholarship, a few patterns emerged, such as those in the deep south are more likely to use “trash can” and those in New England, specifically the Connecticut and Delaware area say “garbage can”. However, overall, the research seems to point to a wide variety of lexical maps for these two variables, insinuating that there isn’t a clear line distinguishing those who use “trash can” as opposed to “garbage can”.

The study from 2014 by Jack Grieve, Costanza Asnaghi, and Tom Ruetten draws the clearest borders for the two variables I’m researching, and because of that I’ve chosen to use it as my baseline for my research. Grieve and Asnaghi contributed to the other scholarship that I mentioned, and this particular study follows patterns from the Harvard study in that they primarily use online surveys to gather information. My research will supplement this study by either confirming or denying the existence of this invisible barrier.

Research Methodology

In order to gather data for my research, I conducted both surveys and interviews. I emailed and Facebook messaged people who I knew that lived in the different regions in the United States. I contacted people from the New England area, the Northwest, the Southern States, and the Southwest, and after they agreed to participate in my research I either arranged an interview, either in person or through Skype, or emailed them a survey to answer. **[Put number of participants and where they are from. I’m still getting data, so this number is a work in progress].**

The interviews and surveys consisted of the exact same questions. None of the participants knew what variable I was investigating because I wanted the most authentic data

possible. I asked each participant to list all of the places where they have lived in the past ten years, and I organized them by where they lived the longest.

In the interviews, I showed twenty-five flashcards depicting images of both nouns and verbs. I used verbs so that the participants would have a more difficult time guessing which variable I was looking for. Within the twenty-five cards, I mixed three in that showed different types of trash cans/garbage cans to determine whether the participants used different terms for each type. Because another commonly tested lexical variable is the name people give to soft drinks (soda, coke, pop, etc.), I included two images depicting these beverages so that there was more than one type of repetition.

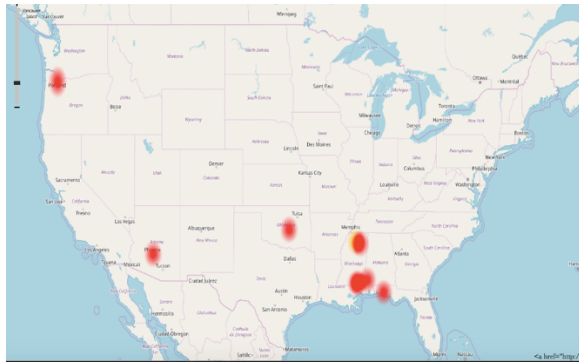
If I was unable to arrange an interview with the participants, I emailed them a survey with the same flashcards, so they could answer and send them back. All of the questions were exactly the same, and I am putting the data from the surveys in with the interviews to organize everything. I included the survey questions in Appendix A.

Once I gathered all of the data, I marked the data with dots on a map of the United States. In Appendix B, the map shows my results. I used a red marker to depict all of the places where “Trash Can” is said and a blue marker to illustrate where “Garbage Can” is more common. This gives a visual representation of my data and either confirms or denies Grieve’s, Asnaghi’s, and Ruetter’s hypothesis.

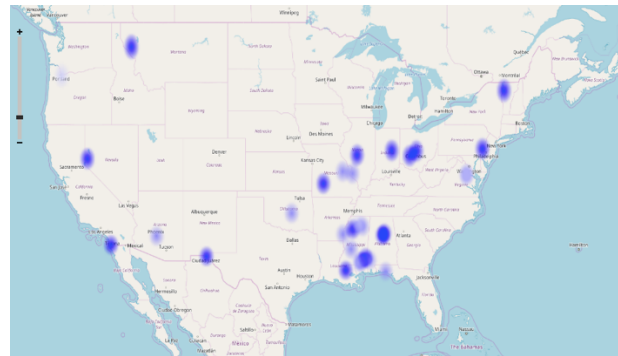
Summary of Findings

Of the thirty-three people that I interviewed and surveyed, 80% used the variable “trash can” when referring to one of the three images, 12% of participants used “Garbage Can”, and 7% used a different term, such as “Trash Bin” or “Waste Basket”.

Those who use “Garbage Can”:



Those who use “Trash Can”:



Analysis of Findings

Concerning My Hypothesis

The findings of this research contradict the hypothesis put forth by Grieve, Asnaghi, and Ruette, but it supports the aspect from the Harvard study that I tested. Grieve, Asnaghi, and Ruette found that those that use “garbage can” more frequently live in the Northern part of the United States, but my tests resulted in the opposite. Only one of my participants living in the previously designated “garbage can” area used this term, and the rest either used “trash can” or another term. However, one aspect in which my research did agree with Grieve, Asnaghi, and Ruette was the fact that “trash can” was the preferred term overall. In regards to the Harvard study, I did find that participants were more likely to label the outdoor “garbage/trash can” as “Garbage Can”, which suggests that the variation of image had an impact on what participants called it. Therefore, my hypothesis was disproved with my geographic variable yet confirmed in the sense that “Trash Can” was the most used overall and the image shown made a difference in the label used.

Limitations

My study’s most significant limitation concerned the lack of participants from across the country. Though I had thirty-eight participants, most of them hailed from the Southern and Eastern half of the United States, so my information from the West half was restricted. I was also missing participants from many States, so that led to gaps in my data that would have given more responses to code.

A second limitation stemmed from my use of surveys and interviews. Had I been able to use only one method, my data might have looked differently and been more cohesive. I only had six interviews, and the rest of my data came from surveys, so had I been able to have at least half-and-half or something of the sort, it would have been more easily separated and coded accordingly.

Other Linguistic Variables

One variable that would be interesting to go more in detail with would be gender. Out of my thirty-eight participants, only three were males. Two of them contributed to the “Other Terms” category, so it would be interesting to test more for gender and study whether that makes a difference in the term used. Out of the thirty-five women, there was some variation, as is shown by my charts in the findings section, but “Trash Can” was the preferred term overall. Because I didn’t specifically look at gender, this didn’t contribute to my personal study, but there is evidence here that gender could make an impact on whether “Garbage Can” or “Trash Can” is the preferred variable.

Further Research

Many of my participants, though I categorized them by where they have lived the longest, spent a year or two living overseas, so one possible area of further research could be whether or not spending a significant amount of time outside of the United States makes a difference on the variable used.

Another area of research could be investigating specific areas of the United States in more detail, such as taking one State and testing it by county or town instead of using the entire United States.

Total Number of Variables	Number and % of “Trash Can	Number and % of “Garbage Can”	Number and % of Other Terms
108	84	12	12
	78%	11 %	11%