

# Language Variation and Change in the American Midland

EDITED BY

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A New Look at 'Heartland' English

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“The country I come from is called The Midwest”

Bob Dylan

*For Timothy Frazer*

# Introducing the Midland

What is it, where is it, how do we know?

Beth Simon

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## The Midland: What is it?

Region matters. Political historians Ayers and Onuf (1996) claim that

[r]egions with distinctive climates, geographies, cultures, and histories ... provide the framework for understanding who we are, what has happened to us, and what we can look forward to. ... Thinking ourselves across space, we think ourselves backward in time ... American geography thus recapitulates American history; history is immanent in the distinctive character and culture of the nation's diverse regions. This dialectic of space and time, mobility and nostalgia, has shaped our understanding of the role of regions in American history. (1)

The sense, feeling, perception, salient notion that the continental United States has had, at each stage of its history, identifiable regions, and specifically, an identifiable sociocultural and linguistic *middle* region, has been a formative and continuously influential aspect of the American popular imagination. The idea originates in the colonial period of North American settlement and inland migration, where a “three-way territorial differentiation ... New England, the Middle Colonies, and the South” developed. Webster, who finds “distinctive” pronunciation and lexical patterns for each of the three areas, describes the “middle” as “tinctured by a variety of Irish, Scots, and German dialects” (Montgomery 2004: 310). While contemporary public discourse regarding U.S. regionality is often articulated as a North – South split, Preston (1993a) found that nonspecialist listeners categorize Americans into three, not two, dialect regions. Preston himself (2003) suggests differentiating a “dialectology of the ear” from a “dialectology of the mouth.” The former yields the enduring bipartate North/South. The latter, though, reveals a four-layer dialect stack: Upper North, Lower North, “skinny Midland just south of the” Northern Cities Shift South, Upper South, and South (“deep and coastal”) (250–251).

Indeed, one of the most intriguing, repeated outcomes of Preston-inspired perceptual studies is the persistence of the psycho-social sense that the U.S. has a middle region with specific (albeit differing) states in that middle. This middle is almost unanimously labeled *Midwest* – a compound with one lexically rich morpheme, *mid*, and one lexically empty, *west*. Yet, unlike the more historically contested, idealized or commodified areas, the Midland has received relatively little scrutiny shaped by sophisticated theory, and in consequence, we are without an adequate range of ways for describing the Midland, and come up again and again against questions that we cannot answer. The fact is, there has been significantly less research, and in particular, less follow-up research, on Midland dialect (a point made independently by several contributors here) or Midland linguistic culture than, say, on the South or on such subregional Midland areas such as Pittsburgh or Appalachia. This volume, then, is, in that sense, a companion to Timothy Frazer's "*Heartland*" *English*, in that it addresses that lack.

### The Midland: Where is it?

While the regional label *Midwest*, like *South* or *North* (identifying labels with unquestionable pedigrees) is meaningful to most of the U.S. population, I want to acknowledge at the outset that *Midland* as a regional identifier is a linguist's term, rarely used outside of scholarly dialect study, and even then, linguists themselves distinguish between Midland(s) dialect and a Midwest region. For some of those who participate in language discussion, *Midland* and *Midwest* (that vague yet definite middleness of the United States east of the Mississippi (or is it east of the Rockies?))<sup>1</sup> have, in terms of texts *of* and feelings *about* the region, coalesced. A review of postings to open-access electronic lists (archived at [linguistlist.org/lists/get-lists.html](http://linguistlist.org/lists/get-lists.html)) that include or encompass discussion of American English turns up three isolated uses of *Midland*, each of them technical. It does not occur in ordinary e-talk. Even on the American Dialect Society list (ADS-L), where discussion of dialect and region is a daily matter and participants are, for the most part either professionally employed in linguistic-related endeavors or avowed students of language use, *Midwest* is the label of choice.

Lee Pedersen (2001), in accounting for dialect development in American English, divides the language into "Northern (Maine and northern Pennsylvania to the Dakotas), Midland (Pennsylvania and the Ohio Valley to the Upper Midwest), Southern (the South Atlantic and Gulf States to Texas), and Western (the Mississippi Valley and the Midwest plains to the Pacific Coast)." He writes

In their 19th-century westward expansion from St. Louis, the Western dialects preserved essentially Northern features as far as Idaho and Utah, while southern Colorado, upper Texas, New Mexico and Arizona retained Midland characteristics. Crisscrossing settlement patterns in this region thus resulted in a "convoluted" mix of Midland and predominantly Northern dialect features. Over time

Northern features began to dominate to the point where Pacific Coast speech became virtually indistinguishable from that of general Midwest Northern dialect as exists in, say, Chicago. (281–289)

### The Midland: How do we know?

Where the Midland is depends on who is identifying it and how they do so. It is, as Ayers and Onuf suggest, important to “critically examine the language with which Americans talk about regions” (1996:3). In a recent online discussion on the use of *regional*, Arnold Zwicky noted that “there are ordinary-language usages ... and also technical/administrative ones, and they aren’t necessarily the same”<sup>2</sup> (ADS-L 2004).

Language about region affects the notion of region. Just as ethnographers can be said to write culture, dialectologists and sociolinguists may be said to write dialects (Johnstone 2002).

This volume, in its depth, breadth and sophistication, examines language patterning in American English through the lens of *regionality*. At the same time, it foregrounds *region* as a variable, one that “is really infinitely complex” (Preisler 1998, 2:2). The scrutiny given Midland dialect here raises fundamental issues regarding the basic notion of *dialect* and, consequently, how we theorize patterns of language variation.

Collected in this volume are sixteen new, original essays, each of which discusses an issue of importance in the accounting for language variation in the geolinguistic Midland of the United States. Each represents the latest “empirical work on language ... in its social context” (Trudgill 1983:8); each is a study on dialect in, as Trudgill puts it, “its widest sense ... together with ... [its] development, diffusion and evaluation” (1983:1). The result, I believe, is greater than the sum of its parts. The contributors represent an impressive range of subfields, which in itself suggests the possibilities that open from explicit interleaving of frames, and they use the methodologies of those subfields as ways of describing, analyzing, accounting and interpreting social isolation, contact, and interaction. Rather than presupposing essentialized social groups, contributors have conducted statistical, archival, ethnographic, or textual investigations producing robust data sets that lead to deep understanding of who Midland dialect users are and the ways in which they embody conditions specific to an American Midland. By incorporating such modern concerns as urbanization, immigration, economic survival and so on into the research design, these studies not only make more sophisticated the discussion of the Midland dialect, but also provide insight into the dynamics of language change and geosocial patterns.

These essays lead to a deeper, more substantive understanding of the underlying notion of *regionality*. By exploring language in the *Midland* as well as the language of the *Midwest*, they bring *regional*, *social*, *dialect*, *identity*, and *place* into a coherent constellation, and reaffirm the position of *regionality* at the heart of the study of language variation and change. Spurred by the burst of careful research and rigorous analyses of recent years, this collection represents an important move forward in the understand-

ing of language patterning in American English. Because of the wealth of data and the methodologies used to collect and analyze them, we hope this volume offers significant insights, affecting how scholars and students of language conceive of American dialects and how they conduct research on those dialects. Contributors, in their application of contemporary methodologies to dialect research, confirm that social identity is, in multivalent ways, grounded in regionality.

I want to acknowledge and thank those without whom this volume would not be possible. Indiana University Purdue University secretaries Kate Butler and Janine Moore, master's candidate Sara Conrad, and Continuing Lecturer, Dr. Leigh Westerfield, all of the Department of English and Linguistics, and especially Shirley Champion, of the School of Arts and Sciences, provided crucial assistance in organizing and formatting the manuscript and in preparing the reference pages. Thanks go to Edgar Schneider, series editor, for his meticulous reading of a draft of the manuscript, and to Kees Vaes of John Benjamins Publishing for his patience. Finally, I want to thank the contributors to this volume for their sustained commitment and enthusiasm. All errors and mistakes are my own.

## Notes

1. The United States Geological Survey locates the actual geographic mid land, (identified as *The Midland*) in Kansas, near the geographic center of the contemporary conterminous U.S. ([www.kars.ukans.edu/projects/visualization/KansasStudyArea.shtml](http://www.kars.ukans.edu/projects/visualization/KansasStudyArea.shtml)). Certainly, though, for many, the psycho-social heart of the U.S. is east of Kansas.
2. Posting to the ADS-L@LISTSERV.UGA.EDU, 2/29/2004 8:23:15 PM: "Re: live by the dictionary or submit!"



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# What is dialect?

## Revisiting the Midland

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The identification of a distinct *Midland* dialect of American English has been contested since the first use of the term (Primer 1890; Hempl 1896). While individuals questioned the existence of such a variety, Kurath's hypothesized Midland (1949), based on relatively few isoglosses, was generally accepted until Carver (1987), using 800 diagnostic lexical items, declared the Midland "nonexistent," redefining the major U.S. dialect boundary as a North – South divide, with a Lower North – Upper South covering much of the same geographic area as Kurath's Midland. Since then, much of the discussion about existence of a Midland has focused on selection, quantity and type of features, and on methods of analysis and mapping. In this chapter, we review the ongoing controversy about the Midland, a controversy which goes to the heart of dialect study. Until recently, most research on the Midland has been confined largely to the collection and analysis of phonological and lexical features. We propose giving attention to grammar because grammar has stability across generations and, for its users, has linguistic and social transparency. Based on data gathered from existing and forthcoming linguistic atlases, dialect dictionaries, and material collected from our own linguistic surveys, we offer an initial core set of 17 grammatical items that appear to define a Midland variety of American English.

### Introduction

In his brief essay, "The Reliability of Dialect Boundaries" (2000), Lawrence M. Davis expresses "profound disappointment" (257) that so few scholars have addressed the question of whether the Midland dialect actually exists, particularly in the light of recent descriptive and theoretical research suggesting that the conventional notion of a speech region clearly delineated from those in New England, the Inland North, and the South – or the conventional method of mapping of dialects in general – is flawed (on the first point, see Bailey 1968; Carver 1987; Davis & Houck 1992, 1995; Davis, Houck, & Upton 1997; Davis, Houck, & Horvath 1999; on the second, see Kretzschmar 1992, 1996, 1998; and Kretzschmar & Schneider 1996). Indeed, Davis concludes that "with

the exception of Frazer (1994) and Johnson (1994), no one has really entered the conversation about the nature of dialect boundaries, either in theory or in regard to the existence of the Midland" (2000:259). Therefore, we begin this volume by reviewing and expanding on the issues that contextualize or validate investigation of a *Midland* variety of American English, not only because these are the issues that ground the gathering and analyzing of the linguistic data, but also because these are the determinants of the kinds of data one gathers and the ways in which one analyzes. The questions regarding Midland dialect and linguistic culture foreground the fundamental, interesting and provocative questions underlying the study of language variation.

What we argue in this chapter (and by virtue of presenting this volume) is that Midland dialect does, in fact, exist. We do so first by reviewing the Midland discussion up to the present, then by considering items labeled *Midland* by the *Dictionary of American Regional English* (DARE),<sup>1</sup> and finally by proposing an initial set of grammatical items, a number of which have not yet been adequately investigated in this context, that appear to form a core of Midland grammar.

### Background of the Midland controversy

Primer (1890) and Hempl (1896) appear to have been the first to use *Midland* as a label for a dialect or dialect area in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat ironically, perhaps, the varying conclusions attached to those early usages set the stage for the controversy that was to develop in the second half of the twentieth century. Primer, adducing no data beyond the great dialectal homogeneity that he had evidently heard in his travels, decided that "the differences in the different sections of the country are not so great that we can properly speak of a New England dialect, a southern dialect, a midland dialect" (57–58). Hempl, on the other hand, referring to his extensive survey of the pronunciation of /s/ and /z/ in *grease* and *greasy*, believed strongly in a Midland that "separat[ed] the North from the South and extend[ed] from the Atlantic to the Mississippi" (438).

It was Hans Kurath who was instrumental in developing the concept of the Midland further; he used *Midland* descriptively for the first time in his *Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (1949), still widely held as a benchmark in American dialectology. There, on the basis of evidence culled from the field records of the *Linguistic Atlas of New England* (LANE) and the *Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States* (LAMSAS) (see Kretzschmar et al. 1993), he posited three major speech areas – Northern, Southern, and Midland – mapping the latter for the first time (1949, Fig. 3, reproduced here as Fig. 1) and subdividing it generally into the North Midland, South Midland, and West Midland (28–37). It is important to realize that Kurath's evidence for the Midland amounted to just 11 isoglosses, nine lexical and two grammatical (28; six more isoglosses, five lexical and one grammatical, defined "[t]he Midland without Delaware Bay"), and that his conclusions were cautious, even tentative.

Part of that caution may have stemmed from Kurath's awareness that his Midland was defined very differently from his North and South. As Montgomery (2004:313) points out

[Kurath's] evidence was unusual, in that some items were shared by the North and Midland but not found in the South, others shared by the Midland and South but not found in the North. Such items helped Kurath sketch the Midland's boundaries but meant the region was defined partially by default and lacked the internal coherence of the North and the South. [As for the North Midland and South Midland regions,] each . . . shared many items with the North or the South, respectively, rather than with the other half of the Midland. Thus, Kurath's Midland was based on negative as well as positive evidence; it was where the South stopped being the South in some cases and the North stopped being the North in others.

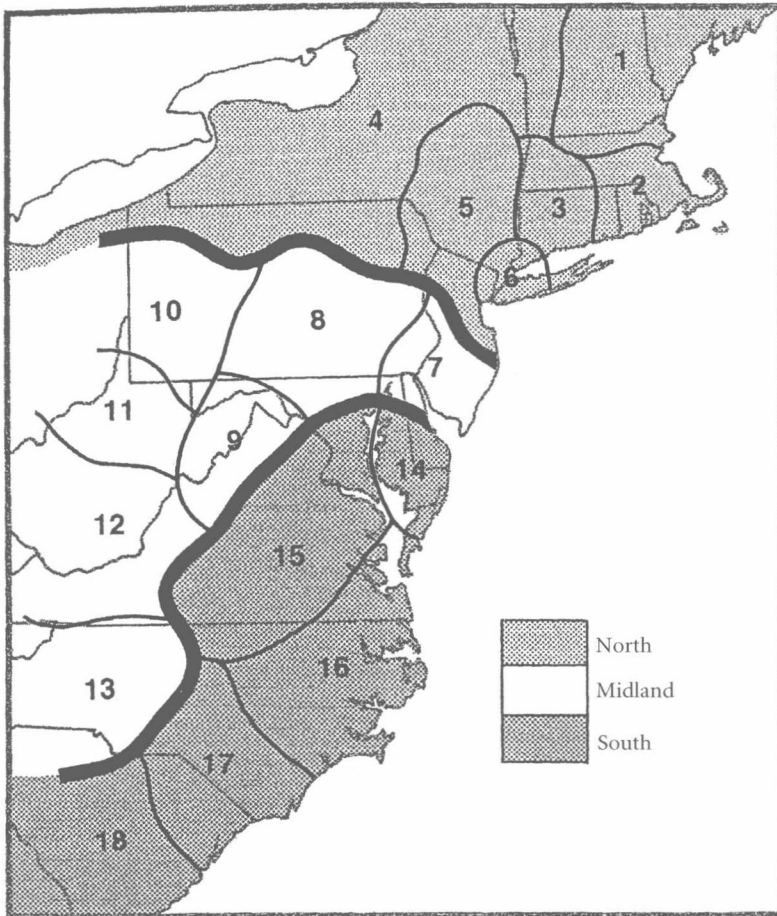


Figure 1. Kurath's dialect regions of the Eastern United States, in Carver (1987:13)



Figure 2. Kurath's Midland, extended boundaries

Kurath's concept of a Midland, particularly one cleanly divisible into a North Midland and a South Midland, was "more a hypothesis than an established fact" (Montgomery 2004:313), and he was well aware that more data were needed to substantiate that hypothesis.

Those data – which, significantly, were largely lexical and phonological – came in droves from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s from scholars such as Harold Allen, E. Bagby Atwood, Marvin Carmony, Robert Dakin, Alva Davis, James Hartman, Albert H. Marckwardt, Raven and Virginia McDavid, Lee Pederson, Roger Shuy, Gordon Wood, and of course Kurath himself (see Allen 1977 and Pederson 1977 for useful summaries). The Universities of Michigan and Minnesota, especially, became hotbeds of dialect study, and the northern boundary of Kurath's Midland was soon extended west from Pennsylvania through northern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, then northwest through Iowa and South Dakota. The southern boundary, which received less attention and took longer to map, was nevertheless finally drawn west from northern Georgia across Alabama and Mississippi, then southwest through Arkansas and Texas (see Fig. 2).

Kurath's Midland continued to be championed on nearly all fronts during this period, even receiving additional support from the work of cultural geographers such as Zelinsky (1951, 1973) and Glassie (1968). Yet some of the linguistic data did not fit the model very well, suggesting that it was perhaps overly simplistic and needed revising. Especially in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, for example, the Northern/Midland

boundary turned out to be a vexingly broad “transition area” of mixed usage, and the Southern/Midland boundary was marked by many lexical isoglosses that stretched deeply into the South. In all, it seems remarkable that the Kurathian Midland became cemented as firmly into the American dialectological paradigm as it did. Indeed, as Montgomery (2004:315) notes, its influence extended even beyond dialectology proper; it was, for example, adopted as received wisdom by Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* and the *DARE* “to identify the regional dimensions of many terms.”

In 1968, Charles-James N. Bailey, who lived in the Midland, questioned why he should be unfamiliar with so many of the lexical items that Kurath and others had linked to the area. Indeed, Bailey charged that the Midland was little more than “an unsubstantiated artifact of word geography,”<sup>3</sup> also arguing, however, that the evidence did support the existence of the North Midland and South Midland as subdialects, but that they should more accurately be renamed Outer Northern and Outer Southern because they had more in common phonologically with the North and South, respectively (which Bailey renamed the Inner North and Inner South), than with the North Midland. Bailey’s pronouncements, perhaps because they were intuitive and anecdotal, had little effect on how scholars interpreted data gathered over most of the following generation, however; the assumption, apparently, was that any truth in Bailey’s observations could be accounted for by some of the lexical items in Kurath’s database (which dated to 1933) having become archaic or obsolete. In any case, dialectologists generally continued to champion Kurath’s Midland, now subdivided primarily into just the North Midland and South Midland, as the standard.

In 1987, Craig Carver brought the question of a Midland forward. Drawing heavily on Linguistic Atlas and other materials but citing as his primary evidence more than 800 diagnostic features from the lexical database amassed by *DARE*, Carver declared the Midland “nonexistent” (161; actually, he acknowledged a weak Midland lexicon based on 40 isoglosses, but said that it represented a “layer” rather than a dialect).<sup>4</sup> In Carver’s view, the major dialect boundary in the United States is a “North-South linguistic divide” (94–97), the significance of which Kurath had vigorously denied (1949:vi; but see also Kurath & McDavid 1961, where such a divide is shown to be an important pronunciation boundary). Interestingly, the location of Carver’s divide approximates Kurath’s North Midland/South Midland boundary: from the Atlantic across the Delmarva Peninsula to just south of the Pennsylvania border, then west to the Ohio River, on to the Mississippi, and west again to Oklahoma before veering southwest. Carver (1987:248) then subdivides each of the resulting two regions into upper and lower halves, producing an Upper and Lower North and an Upper and Lower South (Map 8.1, reproduced here as Fig. 3).

Because their primary dialect boundaries are so similar, it may appear that the major difference between Kurath’s and Carver’s visions of speech regions in the United States is rhetorical rather than substantive – that Carver, in effect, merely relabeled Kurath’s North and South Midland. Carver (181) is careful to explain that this is not the case, however:

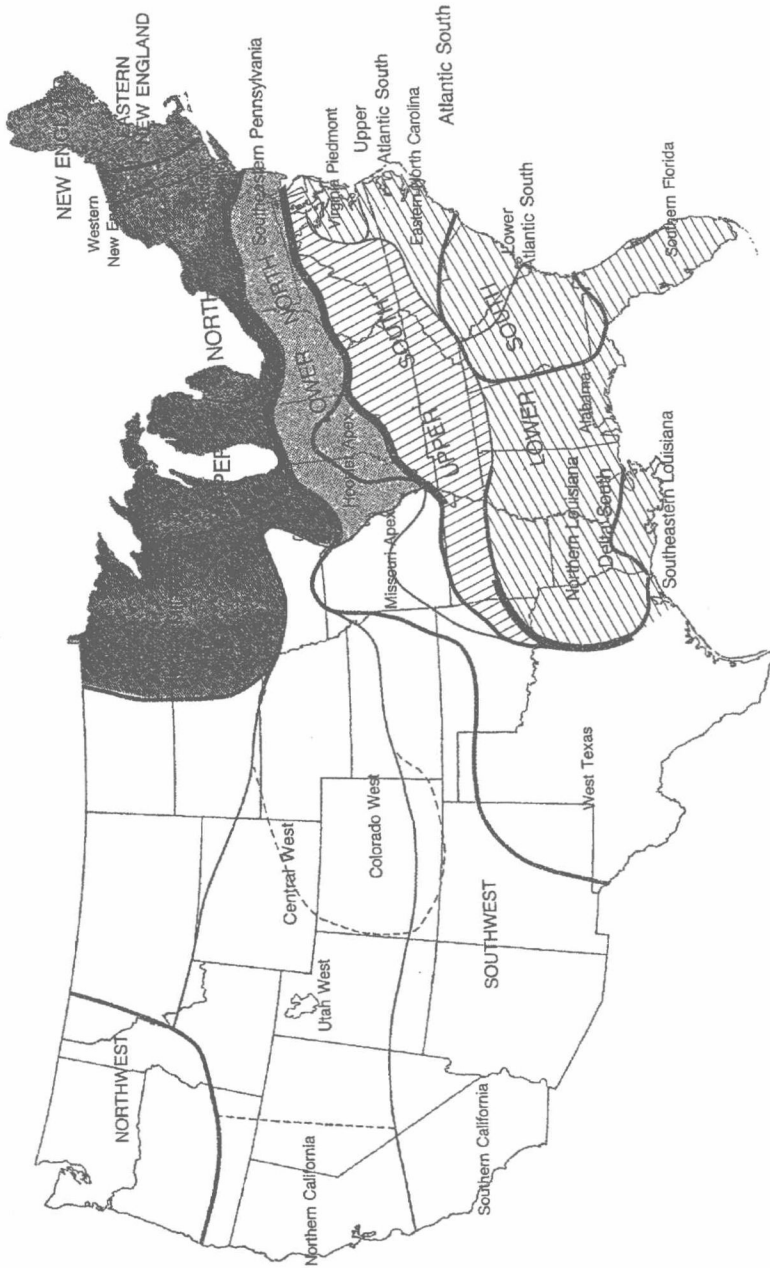


Figure 3. Carver's major dialect regions, in Carver (1987:248)



This difference in names – Upper South versus South Midland and Lower North versus North Midland – is an important one; more is at stake in this opposition than mere nomenclature. At issue is how to classify the major dialect regions, which is itself a problem in understanding how the dialects relate to each other and has numerous implications for the cultural and historical geography of the area.

Like Bailey, Carver believes that many more similarities exist between Kurath's South and South Midland than between the South Midland and North Midland, and that the North and North Midland have more in common than the North Midland and South Midland – in short, that the two halves of the Kurathian Midland are more accurately conceived of as extensions of the North and South – and labeled them accordingly.

Carver's retooling of the Midland explains away some of the annoying irregularities associated with the Kurathian interpretation of data – for example, why so much of the Midland's lexicon and even more of its phonology are not unique to the area, but instead are North Midland/Northern or South Midland/Southern, and why so many Midland and South Midland isoglosses bundle west of the Appalachians (Frazer 1987b: 157). But a closer look at some of Carver's claims in the light of more recently-published data, and at his methods in general, have caused some to question the reliability of his conclusions.

Frazer (1996) notes, for example, that Carver cites as one of Kurath's drawbacks that he limited his analysis to Atlas field records from only the Atlantic states, which produced a "view of the country [that] was incomplete and could not reveal ... that *till* in expressions of time ("It's quarter till nine") is used throughout the South" (Carver 1987: 180). Yet Carver's "throughout the South" characterization seems particularly liberal in light of data from the *Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States* (LAGS; Pederson et al. 1986–1992). There *till* is classified as an example of the "Highlands/Piney Woods" pattern of distribution: it is well-established in the mountains of northern Georgia and eastern Tennessee, in the Piedmont and hill-and-valley regions of Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, and in Arkansas, northern Louisiana, and the piney woods areas of southern Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and the Florida interior, but occurs only weakly in the coastal plains of Georgia and Alabama, and even more weakly along the Gulf Coast (Vol. 3, 156–157). All of this causes Frazer to wonder whether *till* might not fit into the dynamic picture painted by Gordon Wood (1963) of Midland forms intruding into the coastal South west of Georgia in a patchwork pattern, and to conclude, in any case, that Carver's description of *till* is inaccurate.

Kretzschmar (1996) offers no opinion as to the feasibility of a Midland per se, but calls into question the theoretical basis of Carver's (as well as Kurath's) conclusions. According to Kretzschmar, Carver's use of evidence in determining dialect boundaries does not improve over Kurath's: both use subjectively-determined quantities of data to fit their preconceived notions of dialects and dialectal differences by selecting a random number of isoglosses to form bundles where they believe those bundles should occur. He explains in some detail, using Carver's determination of the Lower South as an example (1996: 21):