

Hold up, y'all: Slow-speaking states survey sells US language patterns short, linguists say

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Speech differs greatly throughout the U.S., including how quickly people speak. Some people elongate their words, while others speak much more quickly.

Preply, an e-learning company, took data from two previous studies and ranked speakers in all 50 states and compiled a list of fast to slow speakers measured in syllables per second.

According to Preply, the fastest-talking state is Minnesota at 5.34 syllables per second while South Carolina is the slowest at 4.8 syllables per second.

But what do linguists who've spent years studying Americans' [speech](#) patterns think about the findings?

Linguists say speech differs across the U.S. due to factors such as race, sex, gender, and more. And geography can play a role too.

The 5 fastest speaking states:

1. Minnesota: 5.34 syllables per second
2. Oregon: 5.33 syllables per second
3. Iowa: 5.3 syllables per second
4. Kansas: 5.3 syllables per second
5. North Dakota: 5.29 syllables per second

The 5 slowest speaking states:

1. Louisiana: 4.78 syllables per second
2. South Carolina: 4.8 syllables per second
3. Mississippi: 4.82 syllables per second
4. Alabama: 4.87 syllables per second
5. Georgia: 4.89 syllables per second

Why ranking speech pattern by states may be difficult

Preply said it used two studies to analyze speech in the 50 states,

including:

1. A study by Steven Coats where researchers analyzed caption files from YouTube videos and articulation rates
2. A study by Marchex involving speech rates on more than four million phone calls

Coats' findings showed that southerners articulate slower and Americans from the upper Midwest articulate more quickly.

Dennis Preston, a professor of linguistics at the University of Kentucky, said responsible speech research takes into account the differences among age, race and more. Also taken into account are cities in the north whose populations were impacted by [historical events](#) such as the Great Migration, he said.

The Preply rankings, he said, are mean scores with no full data sets or standard deviations.

Preston said looking at state lines from a linguistic point of view doesn't quite make sense to him either.

He cited American linguist Hans Kurath, who began studying New England speech in the early 20th century. His work, Preston said, showed state lines are "completely irrelevant" when it comes to linguistics.

Using himself as an example, Preston recalled growing up in New Albany, Indiana, a suburb of Louisville, Kentucky.

"My speech rate would've been counted in Indiana," Preston said.

Previous research on articulation and speech

Preston said the first study Preply used, done by Steven Coats, was "very sophisticated" and lists limitations, including a lack of information on gender, race and ethnicity.

"For example, those cities in the upper north might have gotten slower rates because there are a large number of both African American and European immigrants who went to places like Detroit and Milwaukee and so forth," Preston said. "Another thing he mentions is what's the length of residence here? How many generations were the people there?"

What do geography and identity have to do with speech?

Previous studies have shown that slower speech is common in the South, like the commonly-known southern drawl.

When this happens, two vowels are "squished together" in one [syllable](#) to form a diphthong, said Steven Black, an associate professor in anthropology at Georgia State University who wasn't involved in the research.

"When I say 'that,' it really feels like a short word," he told U.S. TODAY. "When some southern speakers say it, they might say 'thay-at.' There's kind of a Y sound inserted in there. When you add in that extra vowel sound, that's going to make the syllable lengthened."

But Black said when people make evaluations about speech, it's not just the act of speaking being analyzed. These evaluations are also largely based on attitudes about communities of speakers.

Take this same southern drawl, for example. The speech style has some negative, widely-known stereotypes but in some ways it is viewed

positively. Some people feel southern speech has a pleasant, "down home" feel to it, he said.

And different communities abide by different rules. Northeasterners tend to overlap more in speech than southerners, he said.

"When one person is just finishing what they're saying, the next person is going to start talking," he told U.S. TODAY. "That's another way that people might perceive northeasterners to be talking faster than southerners."

In California and even in the south, people tend to wait to speak because to them, it's the polite thing to do. But in the north, speaking almost immediately when someone is done talking shows they are engaged in the conversation, Black said.

"In both cases, everyone's trying to be polite and do what they think is right for an engaged conversation," he said. "There's just different cultural conventions for how to do that."

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