Studies in perceptual dialectology indicate that based on their imagined mental maps, listeners can match speakers to geographic regions (Clopper & Pisoni 2004; Plichta & Preston 2005). This process is subjective and sensitive to listeners’ identity and attitudes (Preston 2010), of which place of origin is one dimension (Benson 2003; Bucholtz et al. 2008). The question that arises is how covert subjective regional attitudes play within the context of a single national community that shares overt stereotypes. In this study, I manipulate a socially marked phonological variable to investigate how listeners from different parts of Ukraine conceptualize the social space in Ukraine.

Ukraine is known for its symbolic confrontation between ‘two Ukraines’ (Riabchuk 2002): South-Eastern (‘pro-Russia/n’) and Western (nationalistic, ‘true’ Ukrainian), separated according to stereotype by the Dnieper River. Russian is widely spoken in Ukraine; however, due to Ukrainianization policies, Ukrainian is widely used, even by Russian speakers. In the context of active Ukrainian nation building, Russian accent, and in particular the reduction of /o/ to [a] in unstressed positions, which is the norm in Russian, has become explicitly stigmatized and labeled as ‘not true Ukrainian’ (e.g. Standard Ukrainian moloko [molo'ko] ‘milk’ vs. Russian-accented Ukrainian [mala'ko]). In this study I analyze Ukrainian residents’ reactions to [a] use vs. [o] use.

The study uses a matched guise technique. Six speakers each recorded two short texts in Ukrainian, in two versions each – one with unstressed [o] and one with unstressed [a]. 25 participants from Western Ukraine and 24 from Eastern Ukraine listened to one version of each text and matched each speaker with a region of Ukraine.

Overall, as expected, both listener groups identified [o] samples with the West and [a] samples with the East. However, there were some interesting differences in the response patterns of Westerners and Easterners. For instance, listeners from the West were sensitive to the Dnieper River as a boundary (p<0.0001): they put [o] samples almost exclusively West (93%) and [a] samples mostly East (81%) of it. No Westerners placed [a] samples in far Western zones, or [o] samples in far Eastern zones. Easterners’ responses were more evenly distributed (p=0.23); they placed 65% of [o] samples West and 52% of [a] samples East. Surprisingly, some [a] samples were placed even in far Western zones.

Linking social and linguistic space together, the results show that each group has its own vision of Ukraine: more homogeneous for Easterners, more segregated for Westerners. The claim that all Ukrainians believe there to be ‘two Ukraines’ thus turns out to be too simplistic. The data show subtle, covert differences in how different groups conceptualize of social divisions in Ukraine. This illustrates that even broadly shared stereotypes are situated and interpreted at a local level. Moreover, given that the [a] pronunciation is stigmatized and associated with the East, the fact that Easterners represented the country as more homogeneous raises a question about how and why the two pronunciations are interpreted differently at the local level. These issues are left for future research.