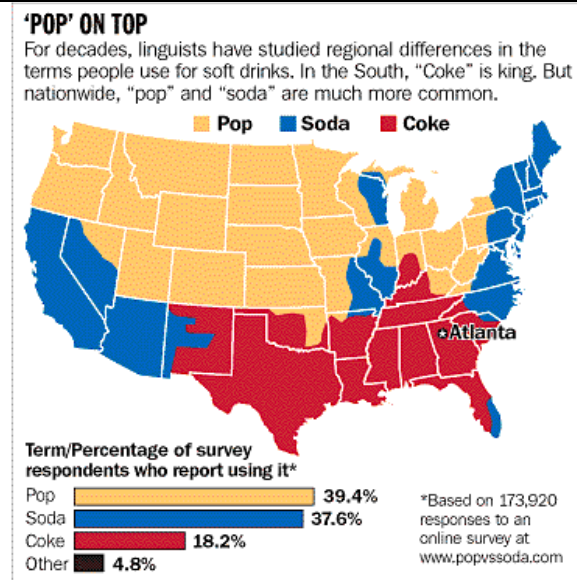


Atlanta Journal Constitution

JANUARY 27, 2005

In the South, a 'coke' could be a Pepsi

Pop, anyone? Soda? Generic term for drinks is regional



ELIZABETH LANDT / Staff

IT DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU ARE

It would be simplest to say "soft drink," but Americans have a host of terms for beverages like Coke and Pepsi, linguists have found. Some highlights:

- **"Coke" country:** Virtually all of the South, including Texas and a bit of New Mexico.
- **"Pop" territory:** Most of the Midwest, Great Plains and Pacific Northwest.
- **"Soda" usage:** The Northeast, parts of the Midwest and all of California.
- **Regional oddities:** There are two huge pockets of "soda" users in "pop" country — in and around St. Louis and in eastern Wisconsin, notably Milwaukee. In Miami, people use "soda" instead of "coke."
- **Oldest terms:** "Soda" and "pop" are both older than "coke."
- **Fading terms:** "Dope" is falling out of use in the Carolinas. "Tonic" is less common than it once was in Boston.
- **What about Canada?** Exclusively "pop."
- **Want to cast your vote?** Go to www.popvssoda.com.

Sources: Bert Vaux of the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee; Luanne von Schneidmesser, senior editor of the Dictionary of American Regional English; staff research

By SCOTT LEITH

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

A Coke is a Coke. Except when it isn't. And if it isn't, you're probably somewhere in the South. In a seemingly homogenous place like the United States, there's still nothing standard about what people in different parts of the country call soft drinks. In the South, it's Coke — or coke, to be generic — even if you're really asking for a Pepsi. In Minnesota, it's pop. In Arizona, it's soda.

Confused? For those who study linguistics, the whole thing is nothing short of fascinating. Academicians have studied soft drink terminology for decades, using nationwide surveys and, in recent years, questionnaires on the Internet. What they've found might surprise you.

"Contrary to the popular opinion that regional diversity is disappearing, it's being maintained and strengthened," said Bert Vaux, who is a linguistics professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Vaux said the differing usage of soda vs. pop vs. coke breaks down so clearly that it's one of the best ways to tell where someone grew up.

"It has the clearest regional difference," Vaux said. "It's more useful than 'y'all.'"

To most Southerners, of course, "coke" is well-known as a generic term for soft drinks, as in, "What kind of cokes do y'all want?"

Coca-Cola — the drink, that is — originated in 1886, while "coke" started to become a generic term in the early 1900s.

Coca-Cola didn't much like it. But by 1941, company leaders gave in and started using the term themselves. In 1945, "Coke" became an official trademark of Coca-Cola.

"You don't want consumers to be asking for 'coke' and get something that's less than a Coke," said Coca-Cola archivist Phil Mooney.

"Coke" actually is the least-used of the big three generic terms, but it sounds right to people like Georgia Tech student David Thompson. When the Conyers native

hears people use "pop" or "soda," he corrects them.

"I tell 'em to say it right," he said.

Alan McConchie took a different approach. As a student at the California Institute of Technology in Pasadena in the mid-1990s, he decided to ask people why they said "soda," because he was accustomed to "pop" from his younger days in Washington state.

In 1995, when the Internet was still just a curiosity for most, McConchie crafted a pop vs. soda vs. coke survey for the Web. The results arrived steadily before jumping in 2002, when news reports about his odd project rippled through the nation's media.

Today, McConchie lives in New York, and his old site is still at it. As of Wednesday, it had counted about 174,000 responses.

The numbers aren't exactly scientific, but Vaux, who spent much of his career at Harvard before moving to UW-Milwaukee, notes that McConchie's results have proved to be a reliable indicator of trends.

Bear in mind a few caveats, however. Bill Kretzschmar, a professor of English and linguistics at the University of Georgia, notes that regional differences — like the use of "coke" throughout the South — aren't nearly as pronounced in places with a large number of newcomers like Atlanta.

"It also tends to get watered down among highly educated people," said Kretzschmar, who serves as vice president of the American Dialectic Society.

Those with more education tend to move around the country, he said, picking up new terms or just adopting benign ones like "soft drink."

Damon Weisser, born in Southern California, used "soda" until he moved to Montana as a kid, where the local word was "pop." Once back in San Diego to attend college, he adjusted.

Now? "Everything's soda," he said.

The only place where there's no debate is in the industry itself. Bubbly products like Coke Classic and Pepsi-Cola are universally known as "soft drinks."

Just don't expect to see an ad that uses such a term — it's all about promoting the brand.

"We really have shied from classifying it any way that could be generic," Mooney said.



Linguistics professor Bert Vaux has noted what people call their soft drinks.