

Talkin' 'Skahnsin

Linguists listen to how we talk 'round here.

For newcomers to Wisconsin, a humdrum visit to the store can turn into a startling cultural experience when the cashier politely asks, "Do you wanna beg for that?"

It's one of the more comical manifestations of the unmistakable Wisconsin accent. Just as they pronounce *bag* more like *beg*, native Wisconsinites pronounce many words just a little differently. *Milk* can sound like *melk*, for example, while *cat* often comes across as *ca*.

These curious bits of the 'Skahnsin accent speak volumes to linguists such as **Joseph Salmons** and **Thomas Purnell**. The UW-Madison professors have launched the Wisconsin Englishes Project to study why Wisconsinites talk the way they do — and how those regional speech patterns may change over time.

Contrary to popular belief, regional accents have not diminished in the age of mass media. In fact, they're shifting and becoming more distinctive all the time, making them a living model for linguists who hope to understand what influences people's speech patterns. Wisconsin is a particularly intriguing place to ask that question, because it sits at the intersection of two radically different regional trends. To the west, people tend to pronounce *caught* like *cat*, a pattern linguists refer to as the "Low-Back Merger." Meanwhile, parts of southern Wisconsin are being influenced by a speech pattern, known as the "Northern Cities Shift," which tends to make *cat* sound more like *ca*.

"Wisconsin is probably the only place [in the United States] where two huge, highly conflicting linguistic patterns are colliding," says Purnell.

The researchers will study this lingual battle by collecting audio recordings of native Wisconsinites and analyzing them with acoustic equipment that breaks speech apart into sound waves, allowing them to identify exactly why someone from Chicago sounds different from someone from Rice Lake.

Salmons and Purnell say their work can have important implications for how English is taught in schools and may lead to new questions, such as how ethnicity and immigration will

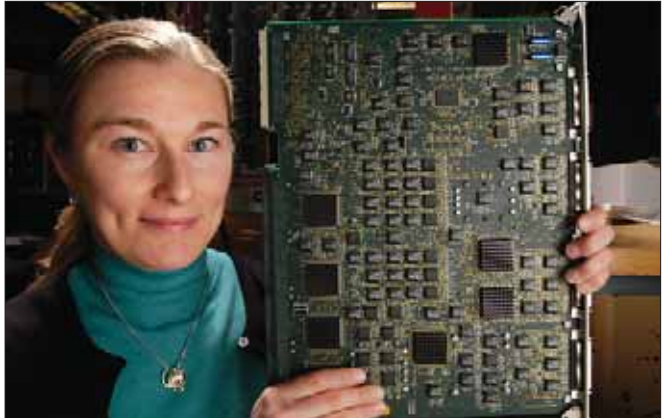


SPENCER WAITS

affect dialect over time.

"As opposed to other dialects in America, Wisconsin English has been grossly understudied," Salmons says. "This is just the tip of the iceberg."

— Paroma Basu



JEFF MILLER

Physicist Pamela Klabbers shows off the processing card that drives the world's fastest camera.

COOL TOOL

Picture This...and This...and This...

Think that hot spiffy digital camera you just bought is fast? UW-Madison researchers have developed a \$6 million camera that puts it to shame. It's designed to capture particle collisions — about 40 million of them every second — making it the world's fastest image processor.

Who needs all those snapshots of protons banging into each other? Well, particle physicists do. They've long searched for the elusive and short-lived bits of matter that are released when larger particles crash — particles that they've only theorized exist, but never seen. The UW's "camera" will be hooked up to a giant accelerator in Switzerland that will create collisions between particles traveling near the speed of light. Not only will the camera process an image about every twenty-five billionths of a second, but it will self-edit those images, sending data about only the most interesting collisions. Now that's a feature we'd like to see on some of our friends' cameras.

— Michael Penn