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Something to talk about

Wisconsin Engishes project charts trends in dialects

"Amazing." This is how assistant UW linguistics professor Thomas Punnell assesses the early public response to the Wisconsin Engishes project. Over a cup of java at Barriques Coffee Track on West Washington, Punnell, 42, explains that the project is classifying and mapping the state's distinctive dialects.

"It's all we ever think about," adds professor Joseph Salmons of the UW's Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures. Salmons, 50, joins us straight off the road from the Fox Valley, where he spoke about the project earlier in the day. His enthusiasm is all but uncontainable.

He estimates his Fox Valley audience at 100 students and community members. "I talked for 45 minutes," he says, "and there were more hands up when I finished than when I started. We knew there was interest, but I don't think I realized the extent of the interest."

Among the project's other investigators: Dictionary of American Regional English editor Joan Houston Hall and faculty from UW-Eau Claire and UW-Milwaukee.

"This is investigating," Punnell observes, "What's distinctive about English in Wisconsin?" Plenty, as it turns out. From the "Uff da" found in Wisconsin's Norwegian communities to "Yah hey" and localized constructions like "Get me a beer once," the state's legacy of Idioms is so rich as to be ripe for lampooning.

For one thing, Wisconsin residents are eager participants. "I'm a Southerner, and I'm finding that no one is self-conscious about how they talk. This region doesn't have that self-consciousness."

Dialects are changing from generation to generation. Instead of the dilution you might expect from one generation to the next, researchers are finding the opposite trend.

"Some people in younger generations actually sound more German than their grandparents," says Punnell.

Salmons ascribes this phenomenon to a subconscious tendency to adopt elders' phonetic habits as a marker of ethnic identity. Depending on the ethnicity — German, Polish, Dutch, what have you — it plays out in the distinctive formations of vowels, the hardening of certain consonants such as S, syllabic stresses, even sentence constructions. "It's pretty wild," says Salmons.

The Wisconsin Engishes team is also keeping an eye on two linguistic phenomena converging on Wisconsin. Something called the Northern Cities Shift (characterized by a rotation of vowel pronunciations along a continuum from bit to bet to bought to bought to bat) is creeping north and west from the southeast corner of the state. Meanwhile, a second dialect with incompatible vowel sounds is starting to blow into Wisconsin from west of the Mississippi River.

A number of factors are driving these movements. Salmons cites women, who "tend to engage in these shifts sooner" than men, and status-conscious members of the middle and working class.

"We expect that networking will be an important driver," adds Punnell, noting that state residents who vacation in the Twin Cities may also be agents of change.

"We're on a hunting expedition," says Salmons, adding that many of the boundaries between dialects resemble buffer zones more than border lines. "There is a huge roughness to this," he allows.

"There are places in the world where linguistic differences follow very clean lines," Salmons continues. Sometimes these borders correlate with topographical features, such as valleys. In other cases, a local or regional dialect is dependent on which ethnicity settles an area first.

Software is part of the linguistic toolkit for sorting the data. Linguists have examined sound waves in speech for decades, Salmons notes in a follow-up e-mail. The technique can pinpoint phonetic patterns. "That used to be really difficult and expensive," he elaborates, "but you can do it now on a laptop with free software. The key for us is that what we think we hear quite often doesn't correspond in the most obvious way to what's actually happening in the sound wave — our brains interpret sound to a remarkable extent. With software, we can easily see how the concrete acoustic patterns look, and start to understand why we hear what we hear."

This is important data, Salmons says, because dialects speak to who we are as Wisconsinites. "That is, language variation plays a key role in how we construct our social identities," he explains. "That's beyond the various educational and forensic applications that this work can have."*

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Talk this way

The Wisconsin Humanities Council presents a public multimedia discussion about the Wisconsin Engishes project 10 a.m.-noon Saturday, April 1 at UW Union South. For more information, phone 262-754-16 or log on to csumc.wisc.edu/WiscEngl. (Be sure to click on the link to podcast discussions of Wisconsin English by local folk duo Peter and Lou Berryman, UW folklore professor Jim Leary and Dictionary of American Regional English editor Joan Houston Hall and explore the site's other dialect links.)

Ya hey dere