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How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher: Exploring the Role of a Folk Dictionary in the Production of a Dialect

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Overview

In an analysis of a corpus of print and online folk dictionaries, Hilliard and Wolfram (2003) provide a descriptive overview of this genre, sketching the contents and overt goals of such dictionaries and speculating that they serve functions related to identity and solidarity as well as promoting the regions whose speech they depict. This paper takes a much closer look at one folk dictionary, *Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese: How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*, exploring the particular historical circumstances of its production and reception in the context of the 20th-century “enregisterment” (Agha, 2003) of “Pittsburghese” in the local imagination as a distinctive, clearly bounded local dialect. I argue that a full understanding of the role that folk representations of dialect play in vernacular norming and language change requires taking a historical and discourse analytic perspective on the discursive and social practices that give rise to metalinguistic discourse like this.

Tracing the history of local dialect awareness in the context of economic change and mobility, I show that *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*, which has been in print for almost 25 years, arose out of a discursive practice – metalinguistic talk about local talk -- that can be traced to the early 20th century (Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson, 2006). Drawing on an archive of newspaper articles about local speech and on historical

research about local language experts, I describe the specific constellation of ideas and people that produced *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*. In the process, I touch on the functions of texts like *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*. Building on work by Johnstone and Baumgardt (2004) and Johnstone, Andrus, and Danielson (2006), I describe how representations of speech help construct dialects and places and link them in discourse about experiences of talk and space.

The text

To judge from the extent to which it has been borrowed from, by far the most influential description of local speech in Pittsburgh is *Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese: How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher* (McCool 1982). Originally published in 1982, this 39-page paperback book was reprinted in the late 1990s and is widely offered in bookstores and souvenir shops. On the cover (black and gold, the colors of the local sports teams) is a photograph of the downtown skyline of Pittsburgh with cartoon word balloons emanating from four building windows. In them are the words “worsh,” “imp ‘n arn,” “yunz,” and “dahntahn.” Like other such booklets, as well as similar lists contained in newspaper and magazine articles and on websites about “Pittsburghese” and many other varieties of English, *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher* combines generic elements of a dictionary with elements of a school vocabulary exercise. Words and phrases are listed in alphabetical order. Each entry consists of the word to be defined, spelled in a way that is supposed to be taken to represent how it is pronounced, followed by a short definition. Then the word’s usage is illustrated in a sentence. For example, the first entry under “C” in *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher* is “cahch” [handout]:

Cahch: a piece of furniture usually found in the livingroom.

“Dad’s asleep on the *cahch* again.”

The other entries in *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher* similarly contain a combination of semi-phonetic respellings like ‘cahch,’ jokey definitions, and references to Pittsburgh places, products, and preferences.

Figure 1 [handout] shows how “Pittsburghese” phonology is represented in *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*. The table lists, exemplifies, and describes each feature that is represented in the spelling of two or more dictionary items, definitions, or example sentences. Some of the respellings represent pronunciations that are in fact characteristic of southwestern Pennsylvania: ‘cahch’ for *couch* or ‘aht’ for *out*, for example, represent a monophthongal pronunciation of /aw/ which appears to be a 20th-century innovation in the Pittsburgh area (Johnstone, Bhasin and Wittkofski 2002). Other entries represent pronunciations that can be heard in Pittsburgh but are in fact much wider in distribution: ‘arn’ for *iron*, for example, represents monophthongal /ay/, which is widespread in regionally-marked American speech, particularly in the South and South Midland areas. Still others represent what Preston (1985) calls “allegro forms”: pronunciations which are common in casual American speech everywhere (‘at’s’ for *that’s*), or “eye dialect”: pronunciations which are completely standard but appear to be nonstandard because they are spelled in a nonstandard way (‘bahks’ for *box*). The same spelling sometimes represents various sounds: ‘a’ represents [a] in ‘arn (iron),’ [æ] in ‘at’s (that’s),’ and [ə] in ‘Ahia (Ohio),’ for example.

Of the grammatical features that are represented in the book, some, including positive *anymore* and the constructions *need* and *want* + past participle, are regionally

variable in the US, whereas others seem to represent stereotypical nonstandardness that is not particularly linked with region. ('Ahz' for *I am*, for example, sounds more like an old-fashioned caricature of African-American speech than like anything particularly characteristic of Pittsburgh.) Some entries appear to make claims about Pittsburghers' interactional style rather than their pronunciation or grammar ('Alright' is defined as a local reply to 'How are you?'), and others seem to be about local history and taste rather than strictly local vocabulary. (Examples of the latter are 'babushka,' a kind of headscarf worn by and named for Slavic grandmothers, and 'boilermaker,' a bar drink consisting of a shot glass of whiskey submerged in a beer.)

To summarize, "Pittsburghese," as it is represented in *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*, includes numerous features that are in fact neither nonstandard nor regional, but simply the orthographic representation of casual speech or a sort of conventional non-standard orthography. Of the features that are in fact limited in geographic distribution, many are characteristic of North or South Midland American English in general. "Pittsburghese" also shares features with Appalachian speech, and identical borrowings from other languages (such as Slavic terms for foods), are found wherever there were Slavic immigrants. Even the features that are the most limited in geographic distribution (monophthongal /aw/ in words like "dahn", and words that originated in local brand names) are used outside of Pittsburgh and its suburbs.

Thus in the sense of being a set of features that are each heard only in Pittsburgh and nowhere else, or even a set of features that is collectively found in Pittsburgh in nowhere else, there is no Pittsburgh dialect. "Pittsburghese" exists only in talk about talk, in textual artifacts like *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*, in conversations about

local speech, in oral parodies. Such representations of local speech constitute a set of linguistic prescriptions: a dictionary and a grammar for the imagined local variety known as “Pittsburghese.”

How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher in historical context

“Enregistration” If a language is a dialect with an army and a navy, a dialect could be said to be a way of speaking with a grammar and a dictionary. As Michael Silverstein (1998) and others have pointed out, “languages” and “dialects” are cultural constructs, produced by a group of people using or orienting to a particular set of linguistic features, in a process that also constructs the group itself. Associations between particular features of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, on one hand, and imagined “languages,” “dialects,” and “speech communities,” on the other, arise in local social and discursive practices that are enabled and constrained by larger-scale political and economic conditions.

In a study of the history of Received Pronunciation (RP) in Britain, Asif Agha (2003) points to some of the mechanisms involved in the identification of a set of linguistic forms as a “linguistic repertoire differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register” which has come to index “speaker status linked to a specific scheme of cultural values” (231). What became RP was once a geographically bounded accent; speaking it was more or less automatic consequence of growing up in the area where everyone spoke that way. Now, however, via a variety of discursive and metadiscursive activities, a particular set of features associated with this accent have been “enregistered”: represented collectively in the public imagination as a stable variety and maintained

across time and region via practices that reiterate the value of the accent and its link to social status.

HtSLaP and the enregistration of “Pittsburghese”

How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher is one of a large number of discursive practices and artifacts that have enregistered (and continue to enregister) local speech in the local imagination as unique and unchanging. It instantiates a discourse genre with a long history in Pittsburgh. This history can be traced, in part, in a Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh archive of materials about Pittsburgh speech published between 1910 and 1997.³ Analysis of 20 newspaper articles that are from Pittsburgh publications and that discuss pronunciation, lexical, and grammatical features described as characteristic of local speech⁴ shows that stories calling attention to linguistic differences between this area and others, which have appeared sporadically since at least 1910, became much more frequent in the post-World War II years, beginning in the 1950s. This was the era when the grandchildren of the immigrant industrial laborers who had arrived between 1880 and 1920 began to come of age, no longer speaking the homeland language and with weakened ties to immigrant religions (Oestreicher 1989; personal communication). While their parents and grandparents thought of themselves mainly in ethnic or religious terms, these Pittsburghers began to develop class and regional consciousness. The ground was thus fertile for ways of imagining what it meant to be a working-class Pittsburgher, and the existence of local pronunciations and dialect forms that people elsewhere recognized as different and Pittsburghers elsewhere identified with home provided an easily available resource for doing this.

Newspaper articles about local speech that began appearing regularly during the 1950s and 1960s were usually feature articles segregated from the “real” news and accompanied by cartoon illustrations. These early articles treat features of regional speech largely as curiosities, which are characterized almost exclusively in a disparaging way. Another way in which Pittsburgh speech is presented as an object of reproach is through the use of “eye-dialect” spellings in several articles.

Local curiosity about local speech coincided in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the willingness of a University of Pittsburgh dialectologist, Robert Parslow, to legitimize these forms in interviews by explaining their history and referring to them in the aggregate as a dialect. The term “Pittsburghese” first appears in an article published in 1967 (Gleason 1967). The article’s title, “Only in Western Pennsylvania Do You Hear ‘Gumband’ and ‘Needs Washed,’” makes an explicit (if inaccurate) claim for the variety’s distinctiveness. This is the first article in the archive to feature quotations from Parslow, who is quoted extensively throughout the article, discussing the place of Pittsburgh speech in the Midland dialect region as well as the historical background of the Northern U.S. dialect region.

The inclusion of testimony by a dialectologist marks the beginning of a shift away from treating “Pittsburghese” as a somewhat objectionable curiosity and toward reifying and legitimizing it. Of the twelve articles in the archive that appeared after 1967, nine feature some sort of “expert” testimony, from Parslow, fellow University of Pittsburgh linguists, a Carnegie Mellon University English professor, local teachers, and Frederick Cassidy, the editor of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Local speakers’ attitudes are also increasingly solicited, and the possibility that the local way of talking

may actually be appropriate in some situations begins to be broached. The term “Pittsburghese” is used without quotation marks, and reporters treat it as distinctive and unique, sometimes by making the explicit claim that it is. (For example, the headline of a 1973 article (McGough 1973) is “Pittsburghers Have a Dialect all Their Own.”)

Through the discursive activity represented in the newspaper archive, “Pittsburghese” began to acquire legitimacy. As it was talked about repeatedly in the same or similar ways, it also became increasingly standardized. The same words, sounds, and structures were mentioned again and again, and their spelling became more and more consistent. Spellings that represent the morphological structure and historical origin of words, like <YOU’UNS> for the second-person plural pronoun, were gradually replaced with increasingly phonetic spellings, such as “yuhnz,” “yunz,” and “yinz,” which erased traces of the local form’s similarity to and historical connection with forms used elsewhere.

By the time *How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher* was published, then, Pittsburghers had come to believe that they or their neighbors spoke a dialect, and that the dialect was unique, local, and sometimes even appropriate. Conditions were right for this dialect to acquire a dictionary, and dialectologist Parslow was the first to take on this task. In a letter dated 4 May 1979, Parslow agreed to the request of the Pittsburgh Diocesan Holy Name Society for an introduction to local speech meant for people attending the society’s national convention in Pittsburgh that year. The booklet he produced, “A Little Guide to Pittsburghese,” has as its central section a dictionary-like alphabetical vocabulary list representing local pronunciations with nonstandard spellings. Some representative entries are on your handout

Two years later, Goodwill Industries published a booklet by Sam McCool called *How to Speak Pittsburghese*. It was reissued the following year by Hayford Press, still under Goodwill Industries' copyright, as *Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese: How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher*. McCool had a BA in English from the University of Pittsburgh, where it is possible he took a course from Parslow and may have seen Parslow's booklet for the Holy Name Society.

McCool's book looked similar enough to Parslow's booklet to make members of Parslow's family suspect plagiarism (Patricia Parslow, personal communication). A comparison of the two texts suggests that this is unlikely, at least on the level of words and definitions: while 33 of the 57 words in the Parslow list (or 57.9%) are also in McCool's list, only 27.7% of the total items on McCool's list are defined or exemplified the same way on Parslow's list. Structurally, the two dictionaries are very similar, but Parslow and McCool could have been drawing independently on previous instantiations of this folk-dictionary genre from elsewhere. (Hilliard and Wolfram describe folk dictionaries dating from the 1960s (e.g. Freeman 1961); neither Parslow nor McCool invented the genre.)

How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher has served as a model and a source for a great deal of subsequent discourse about how Pittsburghers talk. To cite just one example, a comparative analysis of *How to Speak* and a souvenir "Pittsburghese" t-shirt that was for sale in the late 1990s shows that 26 of the 32 items on the shirt (or 72%) are also in the McCool book, and 20 of these, or 78%, are spelled identically in the book and on the shirt. Almost all of the eighty 2003 and 2004 interviewees for the Pittsburgh Speech and Society Project said they owned the book or had seen it.

Discussion

Folk dictionaries like *How to Speak* do not simply describe existing dialects, or even folk ideas about existing dialects. Rather, they are part of the process through which sets of features that can be heard in a particular area, or in the speech of a particular category of people, come to be identified as a dialect in the first place. I have referred to this process, using Agha's term, as the "enregistration" of dialect. To put it another way, dialects do not pre-exist talk about dialects. This is true of academic dialectology as well as folk dialectology, although I will not go into this facet of the argument here. If we think, as more and more of us do, that people's ideas about dialects affect the trajectory of particular features, then we need to understand processes of enregistration like the one I have been exploring here. This will require new research methods.

Dialect enregistration is a historical process. It takes place in the context of particular constellations of social and economic conditions and particular constellations of people. To understand how it works in a particular case, we need the methods of historiography. Dialect enregistration is also a discursive process. It takes place in particular instances of metalinguistic talk, in particular genres (of which the folk dictionary is one). So to understand how it works, we also need the methods of discourse analysis.

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