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Vowels speak volumes among 'funny-talking' Raachesterians

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Staff writer

We may not know it, we may deny it and we might even be embarrassed about it, but a Pennsylvania linguist insists we talk funny in Raachester.

William Labov, a linguistics professor at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, calls our dialect the "northern city shift," claiming we say our vowels a bit more oddly than other parts of the country.

"In all of western New York state, words with the letter 'A,' such as 'man,' 'Stan,' they shift and you begin to say the vowel of 'yeah,' " Labov says.

And there are twists to our pronunciation of other vowels. When we say "desk," others may hear us say "dusk."

In many parts of the country, the words "cot" and "caught" sound identical. Not in Rochester. And, to our credit, the dictionary denotes a subtle difference.

Labov recently co-wrote *Atlas of North American English: Phonetics, Phonology and Sound Change* (available, with a CD, for \$620 from Amazon.com). While mainly written for libraries and linguists, he hopes a less technical and less expensive version will follow.

"There's an awful lot of interest in it," he says.

Labov says the same pronunciation phenomenon occurs in Syracuse, Buffalo and Detroit, "but there's no question western New York is where it started."

Labov attributes our dialect to the building of the Erie Canal between 1818 and 1825, when people of various backgrounds came together to work.

"There were so many different varieties of language, they seemed to merge into a whole new dialect."

He says comedian Lily Tomlin, a native of Detroit, talks in a twang that clearly illustrates the northern city shift.

While there's a definite dialect in these parts, not everyone agrees with Labov about its origin.

Wolfgang Wölck, a distinguished professor of linguistics from the State University of New York at Buffalo, has studied speech in western New York for more than 30 years and discussed the region's pronunciation with Labov.

"Nobody talks funny here except for me because I'm German," Wölck says.

He admits the way we sound here differs from other parts of the country, but he calls the mutation the "Buffalo vowel shuffle."

Rochester residents, Wölcck says, are known to speak with what he calls a "flat A."

"You say faaan-taaastic. Buffalonians call it a 'hard A.' A man's name is John, but sounds like a girl's name, Jan, in Buffalo."

He says the workers along the Erie Canal may have had some influence on the way we speak now, but immigrants settling to inland northern cities were a greater factor, which he calls an "ethnolect." The Irish, Italian, Polish and German populations settled in neighborhoods and were often segregated from the mainstream population and language.

The rural areas, outside the larger cities, didn't have such a strong dialect, he says. He says language was most affected in cities with a higher working-class (and less snobby) population, which tended to be less conscious of their speech.

He says the differences in dialect were more noticeable in 1970. Television has helped mainstream language. But Wölcck sees that changing.

"The country is more diversifying than unifying," he says. "People are accepting those differences as part of the local flavor."

Labov agrees on that point. "Bigger, regional dialects are getting stronger, and more different from each other," he says. But rural dialects have gotten weaker, as have dialects in some other cities, including Cincinnati.

Ed Hall, president of the Greater Rochester Visitors Association, says it took more time learning the unusual pronunciations of some of our local communities, such as Charlotte, Chili, Lima and Avon, as well as the way we accent some of our syllables, such as "complimenTARY" versus "complIMENtary."

"I think that sort of thing is charming," says Hall, who maintains a Southern accent from his native Birmingham, Ala.

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