Language and Place: "Pittsburghese"

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By Barbara Johnstone

Many people in Pittsburgh think there is a distinctive kind of English spoken here and nowhere else. They call it “Pittsburghese.” When people talk about “Pittsburghese,” they mention words like “yinz,” “slippy,” “nebby,” “chipped ham,” and “gumband”; sounds like the vowel in “dahntahn” (downtown); and expressions like “n’at.” Examples of “Pittsburghese” can be found on t-shirts, postcards, souvenir shot-glasses, and other such items, as well as on the Internet and in oral performances like those of WDVE radio DJ Jim Krenn. An informal “dictionary” of “Pittsburghese,” Sam McCool’s New Pittsburghese: How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher, is available in many places where Pittsburgh books and souvenirs are sold.

According to linguists, there isn’t a dialect unique to Pittsburgh. Many of the words, grammatical structures, and sounds that people in Pittsburgh think are found only here can actually be heard in other states and regions, too, and even the most local of the features of “Pittsburghese” can be heard in a fairly large area of Pennsylvania. This is in part because the English-speakers who first brought many of the words and grammatical structures associated with “Pittsburghese” didn’t just settle in the Pittsburgh area but also to the west and south, primarily along the Appalachian mountain chain. Many of these first English-speaking settlers were “Scotch-Irish” (also called “Scots-Irish”): Scots who had emigrated to northern Ireland before moving to North America in the 17th and 18th centuries. Among the words and structures used in this area are Scotch-Irish are “redd up,” “nebby,” and “slippy.” Some of these words are still in use in Scotland and Northern Ireland. “Yinz,” which is found throughout the Appalachians in various forms (such “yousuns”), is Scotch-Irish as well, as is the grammatical construction in “needs washed.”

Other words found in lists of “Pittsburghese” are associated with later immigrant groups: “babushka” and “pierogie” come from Slavic languages and remind people of Eastern European customs. Still other elements of the popular conception of local speech are words associated with working-class life: the “Stillers,” and “Imp n’ Arn” (Imperial whiskey and Iron City beer), also called a “boilermaker,” again a mill reference.

Some words that are associated with “Pittsburghese” have commercial sources and were spread through the media. “Klondike” was a trade name invented by Isaly’s for ice cream bars sold in its dairy store chain. According to Brian Butko’s history of Isaly’s, “chipped ham” — the lunchmeat and the word for it — was invented when a store manager tried running some tough ham through the slicer that was used for chipping dried beef. The origin of “gumband” isn’t known, but it’s possible that the first ones sold in Pittsburgh were called “gumbands” rather than “rubber bands” by their manufacturer. The spelling of East Liberty as “’Liberty” was apparently created as part of a public-relations campaign to draw people to the neighborhood.

“Pittsburghese” is a good example of how geographical places and the customs associated with them can have different meanings in different contexts. Many Pittsburghers do speak with a regional accent (linguists would call this “North Midland” English). Some of them would like to lose this local sound, because it can be a liability in school and on the job market. Research by University of Pittsburgh graduate student Christina Gagnon showed that when Pittsburghers are asked to compare voices reading in a local accent with more standard-sounding, news-announcer-like voices, they evaluate the local-sounding voices as lower class and less desirable. But “Pittsburghese,” — Pittsburgh dialect as it’s represented in cartoons, on T-shirts, and on the radio — can function as a symbol of local identity and pride. Pittsburghers talk about and want to hear about local speech more than people in almost any other American city, both in humorous contexts and in more serious forums like museum exhibits, presentations to community groups, and magazines like this.

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Works Cited