Steel City Speak

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Many people in Pittsburgh and western Pennsylvania are convinced that a distinctive dialect of English is spoken in the area, which they call "Pittsburghese."

When people talk about "Pittsburghese," they often mention words like yinz (you, plural), slippy (slippery), and nebby (nosy), sounds like the vowels in Stiller's (Steelers) or dahntahn (downtown), and expressions like n'ot (and that, used to mean something like et cetera). People in Pittsburgh enjoy talking about "Pittsburghese," and they make commercial use of examples of it on t-shirts, postcards, souvenir shot-glasses, and other such items, as well as on the Internet.

But many of the linguistic features considered unique to the Pittsburgh area are found elsewhere in the region. Words like yinz are used in other parts of the Appalachian Mountains. Other features are found to the west of Pittsburgh, in the central and south-central parts of the Midwest. Some pronunciations identified with "Pittsburghese," such as still (steel) are heard throughout the U.S. Even the features of "Pittsburghese" that are the most local can be heard in a fairly large area of central and southwestern Pennsylvania.

Although not confined to Pittsburgh, many Pittsburghers employ a dialect variety that is known as "North Midland" or "Lower Northern" English.

The earliest English-speaking immigrants to North America brought their native English dialects with them. The people who settled in New England and in the South came mainly from southern England, and they brought elements of southern English dialects. (For example, New Englanders and Southerners alike may drop the r sounds in some words.) The Midland dialect area starts in a narrow band in the Mid-Atlantic states (southern New Jersey, southeastern Pennsylvania, and northern Delaware and Maryland) and spreads westward into the Midwest and southward along the Appalachian Mountains. Its boundaries trace the migrations of English-speaking people who came to America by way of Philadelphia and other ports on the Delaware River. These people originated in northern England and Scotland, and they brought some characteristic pronunciations,
There are few things more popular in Pittsburgh than ice hockey star Mario Lemieux (pictured above) and the city’s beloved football team, the Steelers (left).

words, and grammatical structures with them.

The people from northern England, some of whom were Quakers, came to the eastern part of Pennsylvania and moved west into central Pennsylvania. The largest group of early English-speaking immigrants to southwestern Pennsylvania were from Ulster (northern Ireland). These people were largely “Scotch-Irish” (also called “Scots-Irish”), the descendents of Scots who had settled in Ulster at the beginning of the 17th century. They spoke a Scottish variety of English (influenced by the Scots Gaelic language) which was then influenced by Irish English and probably also by Irish Gaelic. Many of these Scotch-Irish, along with other people from Ulster of native Irish and northern English ancestry, emigrated from northern Ireland to North America at the end of the 17th century and during the 18th century. Scotch-Irish immigrants also settled west and south of Pennsylvania, moving along the Ohio River and the Appalachian Mountains. Thus many features that can be traced to their way of speaking are found in Midwestern and Appalachian speech as well as in western Pennsylvania. Some of these words and structures are also still in use in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Among the many words used in southwestern Pennsylvania that are probably Scotch-Irish are red up (clean up, tidy), neby, slippy, and diamond for a town square. So is the word jag in the sense of poke or stab, from which come jagger (thorn, burl), jaggerbush (thorny bush), jag somebody off (irritate), jag around (fool around, goof off), and jagoff (a derogatory term for someone stupid or inept). Yinz, which is found

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Speaking the Penguins’ Language

PITTSBURGH’S BELOVED Penguins ice hockey team recently parted with their coach, Ivan Hlinka (pictured above).

Why?

Because most of his players couldn’t understand him.

As with most professional sports, language skills (or the lack of them) can pose big problems for coaches and players in the National Hockey League.

Many skaters hail from Eastern Europe and many others are natives of French-speaking Quebec. English is the common tongue that must be learned by stars and their coaches for effective communication in this fast-moving game.

At the end of last season, Hlinka’s lack of English language skills was a source of concern for the Penguins’ management who ordered him to learn the language during the off-season.

“English was the problem for him, for sure,” said Penguin player and fellow Czech, Martin Straka. “Obviously, everybody knows there were sometimes some miscommunications on the bench, maybe a little bit. In the locker room, he tried to say some stuff, and he couldn’t say it to the guys because the English wasn’t there.”

But Hlinka did not enroll in an ESL program or buy the latest language software. He chose instead to watch a few videos in English.

“Language was the only thing,” center Robert Lang, another Czech, said. “He should have pushed a little bit harder to learn the language. It’s a shame he had to go. I don’t think there’s any other weakness. If not for language, he would be here still.”

According to Penguin’s general manager, Craig Patrick, Hlinka’s English did improve over the summer break but he and owner-player, Mario Lemieux, were worried that the younger Penguins wouldn’t grow and learn under a coach who spoke a language that only two of the top eight players could comprehend.

Just before he was canned Hlinka tried his best to sum up another Penguin’s loss in English. “I think it should be the stupid team on the other side if you can win the game, and we gave them everything in the first period.”
throughout the Appalachians in various forms (such you’re), is most likely Scotch-Irish as well. So is the grammatical peculiarity found in expressions like The car needs washed or These customers want seated, where other dialects would have an infinitive (needs to be washed) or a present participle (needs washing). This is also found in Appalachian English and in the central Midwest.

While it is possible to trace the history of words and structures through written sources, it is much more difficult to tell where regional pronunciations come from. For one thing, our standardized spelling system does not capture the differences between various ways of pronouncing a word (coffee is spelled “coffee” no matter whether it’s pronounced /koʊfi/ or /kaɪf/ or /kɔˈfiː/ or some other way). For another thing, large-scale changes in pronunciation are surprisingly common and quick. (Think, for example, of the large differences that now exist between British and North American accents, all of which developed over just a few generations.) But some features of the accent of southwestern Pennsylvania are geographically distributed in the same way—in the Pittsburgh area and to the west and the south—as are words and grammatical structures we know are Scotch-Irish in origin. This suggests that these may be older features that spread with the early settlers. One of these is the use of an r sound in the word wash, so that it sounds something like “wash.” Another is the tendency to pronounce the long i sound in words like fire or tile as something more like ah (faehr or tahl).

Other pronunciations which people think of as local are shared with other geographic areas. Many people throughout North America use the same vowel sound in no andCaught, cot and caught, body and beauty. But unlike many Americans further west (and like many Canadians and some Americans further east), the sound many Pittsburghers use is the augh variant, rather than ah. Also shared with people elsewhere are the use of the same vowel sound in steel and still or meal and mill and the same vowel sound in pull and pool or full and fool. These “mergers,” or the collapse of two sounds, in some situations, into one, are becoming more common throughout the U.S. So is the pronunciation of I with a w or o sound in some words, like school for school or donar for dollar. There is one pronunciation, however, that seems to be much more restricted geographically. This is the “Pittsburghese” pronunciation of down as dahnt or house as taws. Western Pennsylvanians born before 1900 do not seem to have used this sound, but by the middle of the 20th century it was quite common. Dialectologists do not yet know how this pronunciation originated.

It is often thought that people in different Pittsburgh neighborhoods and Pittsburgh-area towns have different accents. But if Pittsburgh is like other cities that linguists have studied, this is probably not true. What probably is true is that the same sounds and words are used more in some areas and less in others, depending on things like whether the neighborhood is mainly working-class and whether people stay in the neighborhood to work or commute to work. This is because children learn their accent primarily from their peers, not their parents, and each new group of immigrants to the area learned English from people who were already speaking English.

Other words that are sometimes associated with “Pittsburghese” have commercial sources. Jumbo lunchmeat, Klondike ice-cream bars, and chipped ham all originated as names for things produced or sold by local companies.

Dialects spread when people pick up features of the speech of people they are like, talk to a lot, and/or identify with, and the children of immigrants were far more likely to want to emulate the speech of the local people who already spoke English than to emulate their parents’, accents. Largely because they have always been segregated from other groups in work, education, and housing, casual African-American speech in Pittsburgh, as in other northern cities, continues to preserve more of the southern-sounding features African-Americans brought with them, although North Midland features can also be heard in many Pittsburgh African-Americans’ speech.

Different ethnic groups have introduced new words into the local vocabulary: Germans made up a large part of the earliest European population of western Pennsylvania and words like gesundheit and sauerkraut are among a number of German terms that are widely used in the U.S.

Other words that are sometimes associated with “Pittsburghese” have commercial sources. Jumbo lunchmeat, Klondike ice-cream bars, and chipped ham all originated as names for things produced or sold by local companies. The spelling of the Pittsburgh neighborhood name East Liberty as S’liberty (which is the way it often sounds when people are talking quickly) was invented in the context of a campaign to promote the neighborhood. Gumband, the local term for rubber band, may also have been what the first people who sold them in Pittsburgh called them.

Is “Pittsburghese” going to die out, or is it likely to persist? Some people think that the mass media, together with the fact that we are more mobile than we once were, are making the U.S. increasingly homogeneous. People who think this is likely to suspect that eventually we will all talk the same way. Among the reasons to think that local-sounding speech features may disappear are the fact that many people move around the U.S. more than they once did, and it is easier for some to move in different social classes and social circles that the ones they were born into. Furthermore, the media expose us all to the same ways of talking, and new kinds of employment, such as jobs in service industr-

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