Review of Katherine A Remlinger, Yooper Talk: Dialect as identity in Michigan's upper peninsula

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DOI: 10.1177/0075424218770050

Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (or UP) has no land border with the rest of the state, and until 1957 the Upper and Lower Peninsulas were not even connected with a bridge. The UP’s economy was traditionally based on mining and logging and now relies increasingly on tourism, while the lower peninsula is agricultural and industrial. Immigrants came to the UP from different places, speaking different languages, than did immigrants to the rest of the state. As a result, the UP has a distinctive sociolinguistic history.

Remlinger takes up an interesting part of this history. Rather than focusing on how “Yoopers,” as the inhabitants of the UP are known, have actually spoken over the years, she explores the history of the idea that Yooper talk is distinctive, which linguistic features people think make it distinctive, and what the use of these features can mean and accomplish. She sees a “dialect” as a cultural product, the result of people coming to notice aspects of how they and their neighbors talk and attributing meaning to those aspects, meaning that allows them to differentiate among people on the basis of their speech, to link ways of talking with social identities, and to put the value of some ways of talking to commercial use.

In many ways, Remlinger’s project is similar to studies of the social history of other regional varieties (Beal 1999, 2009; Eble 2009; Johnstone 2013; Johnstone, Andrus & Danielson 2006; Moore 2011). Like some of these scholars, she adduces a theoretical model based on the concepts of indexicality, identity, and enregisterment, and, like some, she is particularly interested in the commodification of language. What makes this project different is the details of the Yooper case, which are historically interesting. The first European settlers in the UP were French Canadians, who were followed by English-speakers from the eastern US, Cornwall, and Scotland, as well as Germans. These people became the managers of the mining and logging industries. A large number of the laborers who came to work in these industries, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were Finns. The Finnish immigrants maintained their homeland language for longer than other immigrant groups did, partly because they were more likely than others to be literate, so the English of the UP was in prolonged contact with Finnish. As a result, Finnish borrowings including words (sauna, sisu ‘perseverance in the face of adversity,’ and a number of terms for foods), phonological features
(the pronunciation of sauna as /saʊnə/, the substitution of /s/ for /ʃ/, and what Remlinger calls “stressed /p/, /t/, and /k/ at the ends of syllables”), and one or two Finnish-derived grammatical features became strongly associated with UP English. (How widely these features were and are actually used in everyday speech is not Remlinger’s topic, though it would be interesting to know.)

Using Finnish-derived features in one’s English can make a person sound ethnically Finnish, and some representations of UP speech call it “Finglish.” But because the Finns were mostly working people, these features came to index class as well, and eventually they, together with a few words associated with groups like the Cornish (pasty for a kind of meat pie) and French Canadians (chook or chuke from French touque for a knit hat) became associated with the UP as a whole, even though Finns had actually settled only in part of the area. Now, “Yoopanese” or “Yooperese” is tightly linked with the (imagined) “authentic” Yooper and used on tourist souvenirs and in YouTube parodies to evoke the UP’s distinctiveness and desirability. Remlinger shows how these links between language, place, and cultural authenticity are evoked and recycled in the linguistic landscape, on signs and bumper stickers, and in the media.

Remlinger also considers American regional dialects in the media more generally. She notes that the stereotypical speaker of many American regional varieties, including Yooperese, is a working-class heterosexual man, often rural, and that these stereotypical figures may even dress the same from place to place, in suspenders, flannel shirts, and boots. Furthermore, some of the same linguistic features are associated with multiple dialects: the stopping of interdental fricatives, the alveolar pronunciation of –ing. This suggests that the gender- and class-based indexicalities of regional speech are never completely separated from their place-based indexicalities. Although in some places there are, in fact, stereotypes of female dialect-users (Johnstone 2011, 2017), they, too, are represented as working-class.

In a short concluding chapter, Remlinger asks, “Are regional dialects dying?” The argument here is problematic, because here, as throughout, Remlinger never completely manages to distinguish between how people talk and how people think people talk. As a result, she conﬂates two questions: (1) Do Americans talk more like each other than they once did? And (2) Are Americans more aware of and interested in ideas about regional variation than they once were? The answer to the first question is complex. There is abundant evidence of continuing large-scale regional differences such as those caused by the Northern Cities Chain Shift and the divergence of African American and white varieties, and there is some evidence of people holding on to or even re-adopting regional features to do identity work. However, it is indisputable that young, middle-class Southerners sound more like young, middle-class Northerners than was the case one or two generations ago and that the grandchildren of people with strong Pittsburgh accents often have only the smallest trace of an accent. When it comes to the second question, the answer is apparently yes – but in part precisely because of the linguistic and social homogenization caused by mobility and the mass media (Johnstone 2016). People notice regional variation when they come into contact with people from elsewhere, and contact between speakers of different varieties leads to dialect levelling as well as to dialect awareness.
Yooper Talk will certainly appeal to people interested in the people and culture of the UP, and Remlinger has tried to accommodate this audience by illustrating phonological differences with eye-dialect spellings as well as with the IPA, explaining theoretical concepts, providing lots of visual images, and using endnotes rather than in-text citations. Sociolinguists may find the book frustrating because of its vague and inconsistent use of semiotic theory and because it is repetitive, with the same examples and bits of explanation cropping up in chapter after chapter. In one place the same sentence occurs twice on the same page. Still, they will also find the story of Yooperese interesting, particularly because of the way foreign-accented English has been enregistered with local identity in the UP.

References