Characterological Figures and Expressive Style in the Enregisterment of Linguistic Variety

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**Introduction**

Linguists have traditionally thought about linguistic variation in terms of relatively stable sets of linguistic rules or conventions called ‘varieties’ that can be mapped onto physical or social spaces. A person who employs features of a particular variety can, in this way of thinking, be identified with the place or group the dialect maps onto. But sociolinguists’ work over the past decade or two has productively complicated this picture. We now ask questions about why people use features of one variety or another rather than assuming that people inevitably speak the way they first learned to speak, and the answers we arrive at have to do with identity and agency rather than only with geography and demography. And we ask how linguistic features get linked with varieties in the first place. How do particular words, ways of pronouncing words, grammatical patterns, and patterns of intonation come to point to particular identities and activities?

One way of answering this question comes from linguistic anthropologists in the semiotic tradition. Drawing on the work of Roman Jakobson and Charles S. Peirce, anthropologists Michael Silverstein (1992, 1993, 2003) and Asif Agha (2003, 2007) have developed a framework that helps us see how ‘social meanings’ and linguistic choices can come to be linked and how sets of linguistic choices can come to be understood as varieties. Two of the key concepts in this framework are *indexicality* and *enregisterment*. A sign is indexical if it is related to its meaning by virtue of co-occurring with the thing
it is taken to mean. When we hear thunder, we often experience lightening, rain, and a darkening sky, so the sound of thunder may lead us to expect a storm. Because the sound of thunder evokes storminess in this way, thunder noise can be used to evoke a storm in a staged play. Likewise, if hearing a particular word or structure used, or a word pronounced a particular way, is experienced in connection with a particular style of dress or grooming, a particular set of social alignments, or a particular social activity, that pronunciation may evoke and/or create a social identity, eventually even in the absence of other cues.

Indexical links are created in the context of already-available models of what meanings are possible and what kinds of forms can index them. For example, people often hear the difference between two variants as meaning ‘correct’ in the case of one and ‘incorrect’ in the case of the other; or as meaning ‘us’ in the case of one and ‘them’ in the case of the other. To talk about this, it is useful to use Agha’s (2003, 2007) concept of enregisterment. According to Agha (2007, p. 81), enregisterment refers to ‘processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population.’ Registers (which Agha also calls ‘semiotic registers’ or ‘register formations’) are ‘cultural models of action that link diverse behavioral signs to enactable effects, including images of persona, interpersonal relationship and type of conduct’ (p. 145). A register emerges when a number of indexical relationships begin to be seen as related; a particular linguistic form (or nonlinguistic sign) is enregistered when it becomes included in a register. A register, in Agha’s sense may be a way of speaking linked with a ‘social situation.’ This is, of course, how the term is traditionally used in linguistics (Biber & Finegan, 1994). But registers can be associated with any sort of social meaning.
In keeping with his social constructivist, emergentist stance, however, Agha calls attention to the difficulty of using a count noun, *register*, to talk about a process. Registers appear to stabilize into nameable, describable objects only when people orient to them, and people orient to particular sets of forms in certain contexts, for certain reasons. As Agha puts it, ‘A register exists as a bounded object only to a degree set by sociohistorical processes of enregisterment, processes whereby its forms and values become differentiable from the rest of language … for a given population of speakers’ (2007, p. 168). Registers, as countable, bounded entities, only come into existence when there is some reason for people to reflect on them; they are, in other words, ‘reflexive.’

For variationist sociolinguists, the concept of enregisterment can be of use in the exploration of linguistic variation linked with contextual variation of any kind. Much of the sociolinguistic research about enregisterment has had to do with linguistic forms or set of linguistic forms that are linked, by linguists and/or by laypeople, with places (Beal, 2009, 2012; Campbell-Kibler, 2012; Cramer, 2013; Johnstone, Andrus, & Danielson, 2006; Johnstone & Kiesling, 2008; Johnstone, 2011a, 2011b, 2013a; Remlinger, 2009; Slotta, 2012), but the idea has also been fruitful in the study of ‘standard’ varieties (Agha, 2003; Dong, 2010; Frekko, 2009; Jaspers & Van Hoof, 2013; Managan, 2011; Romero, 2012), genres and situational varieties (Babel, 2011; Donaldson, 2013; Madsen, 2013; Squires, 2010; Wilce, 2008; Williams, 2012), social groups (Eberhardt, 2012; Henry, 2010), and social relations (Goebel, 2007, 2008).

In this chapter, I join a number of sociolinguists who have explored how linguistic variation can be enregistered with styles, personas or identities (Bennett, 2012; Gibson, 2011; Marzo & Ceuleers, 2011; Newell, 2009; Podesva, 2011). I develop Asif Agha’s (2007) idea of the “characterological figure” as a focus of register-formation. Although he does not discuss the concept in any detail,
Agha suggests that a linguistic feature or a set of features can be ideologically linked via enregisterment with a way of being and acting associated not just with a social identity in an abstract sense, but with its embodiment in a character, imagined or actually performed. Agha defines a characterological figure as an “image of personhood that is performable through a semiotic display or enactment” (Agha, 2007, p. 177). The chapter illustrates the utility of this notion through an analysis of two talking dolls. I show how the dolls both presuppose (point to) and entail (help to create) the characterological figure of the Yinzer, a persona with a certain kind of social identity strongly linked with the city of Pittsburgh. I focus on the appearance of the dolls and some of the visual material related to them, what the dolls say, how they talk, and how their social identities are represented in their fictional biographies. I show that artifacts like these dolls invite their consumers to re-enregister a set of forms that are already enregistered with place and known as “Pittsburghese” with a particular communicative style and stance associated with a post-industrial stereotype of the working class.

**Pittsburghese**

My research site is Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where local identity has been tightly tied since the 1960s to “Pittsburghese” (Johnstone, 2013b). Pittsburghese is Pittsburgh speech as it is locally imagined. In other words, it is a set of linguistic forms which, over the course of the 20th century, were enregistered with the city of Pittsburgh in popular discourse. While the set of linguistic features that is represented when people talk about, perform, or otherwise invoke Pittsburghese overlaps with the set of features (many traceable to the English of the earliest colonial settlers of the area) which a linguist might describe as characteristic of the area, it is not the same. This is because Pittsburghese

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1 For one thing, Pittsburghese is associated almost exclusively with white people. It draws very little on the speech of southwestern Pennsylvania’s African Americans, except where their distinctive speech patterns overlap with those of whites.
results from a different set of ideas, processes, and practices than does the set of forms a linguist might describe. The set of linguistic features included in descriptions or uses of Pittsburghese is continually evolving. People continue to suggest and to use new Pittsburghese items and to argue about what should be included and why, and the visibility of particular Pittsburghese items waxes and wanes. For example, *yinz* and various forms of the verb *jag* have long been included in glossaries of Pittsburghese, but *yinz* and *jagoff*, ‘a stupid or annoying person,’ have become much more visible since around 2005; *grinnie* ‘chipmunk’ used to show up on such lists but no longer does.

Before around 2000, representations of Pittsburghese typically arose from and reflected nostalgia for the remembered past. Dictionaries of Pittsburghese included local place-names and words and phrases that the consumers of the dictionaries actually used or that they associated with things people actually remembered doing during the 1950s and 1960s. Pittsburghese was described as how Pittsburghers talk, or at least how they used to talk, and the people who talked about Pittsburghese often claimed to speak it themselves and certainly knew and regularly heard people who did.

During the first two decades of the 21st century, however, Pittsburghese has increasingly come to be reimagined not just as how lifelong Pittsburghers talk but as how a certain kind of Pittsburgher talks, the type known as a “Yinzer.” The term *Yinzer* is derived from a local speech form, the pronoun *yinz* (‘you,’ pl.). It appears to have emerged sometime in the 1960s, possibly in high-school slang, but it was not in common use until around 2000. *Yinzer* can be used disparagingly or fondly, depending on who uses it to label whom, but it is increasingly used in the latter way, as a claim to localness. In 2003-2004, in the course of sociolinguistic interviews, I asked Pittsburghers whether they were familiar with the term *Yinzer*. Older people tended not to recognize the word, while younger people did. A folk dictionary of Pittsburghese (McCool, 1982) published in 1982 does not include *Yinzer,*
and *Yinzer* does not appear in a corpus of print representations of Pittsburgh speech I assembled between 1997 and 2000 (Johnstone, Bhasin, & Wittkofski, 2002). Over the course of the 2000s, the word *Yinzer* has become more and more visible, and its appearance in the final volume of the *Dictionary of Regional American English* (Hall, 2012) has given it an official seal of approval, in some people’s eyes. Like the earlier processes that enregistered Pittsbughese with the remembered past, the processes that are now re-enregistering Pittsburghese with the characterological figure of the Yinzer have been driven by people who live in Pittsburgh or are former Pittsburghers. But the development and circulation of the Yinzer persona seems to be linked to the influx in the 2000s of young, well-educated, middle- or upper-middle class people to whom Pittsburgh appeals because of its “gritty” industrial past together with jobs in the technology, medical, and educational sectors, appealing cultural amenities, and desirable, affordable living spaces. These new residents are much less likely than older, longer-term residents to actually interact with working-class Pittsburghers on a regular basis, and their encounters with Pittsburghese are as much or more in the form of written representations of it than by talking to people who speak with local accents. It is this population, together with native Pittsburghers who likewise tend not to have local accents themselves, who constitute the primary social domain for the enregisterment of features of Pittsburghese with the characterological figure of the Yinzer.

In what follows, I explore this development by means of an analysis of two talking plush dolls called “Yappin’ Yinzers.” I ask what can be read from the way the characterological figure of the Yinzer is embodied in these plush dolls about what a Yinzer is and about the relationship between Yinzerness and Pittsburghese. I show that, as represented via artifacts like the Yappin’ Yinzers, Pittsburghese is not just a set of words and phrases, but an expressive stance whose roots in the material conditions of working-class life have been for the most part erased.
The Yappin’ Yinzers

There are two Yappin’ Yinzers, one representing an adult male and called “Chipped Ham Sam,” and the other, “Nebby Debbie,” representing an adult female. Figure 1 shows the home page of the website advertising them.


At 10 inches (25.4 cm.) and 9 inches (23 cm.), respectively, they are smaller than most dolls that are meant for children, and the battery-powered plastic sound module accessible through an opening in their backs adds to their unsuitability as toys. Each time one of the dolls is squeezed in the middle,
the sound module plays a sentence uttered by someone using a Pittsburghese accent, highlighting one or more Pittsburghese words or phrases. The dolls are produced and sold by Colloquial Enterprises, LLC, which is based in a suburb of Pittsburgh. (They are manufactured in China.) The male doll, Chipped Ham Sam, went on sale in 2007, the female one, Nebby Debbie, a year or two later.

**How the Yappin’ Yinzers Link Pittsburghese with Class**

The design of the website where the dolls are for sale links the dolls with place and local practice in many ways. The primary colors on the page are black and gold, the colors of Pittsburgh’s professional sports teams and the city’s official seal, and the dolls are superimposed on a photograph of part of Pittsburgh’s downtown skyline. A stylized version of the skyline can also be seen around the small image at the bottom center, which can be read as a cartoon representation of Chipped Ham Sam holding a cheeseburger and a mug of beer and wearing a Pittsburgh Steelers football jersey and helmet. The dolls are also linked with Pittsburghese via their designation as “Yappin’ Yinzers,” via the phrase on the homepage, “Da yinz nowumsayin’?” (Do you know what I’m saying?) and via their names. “Chipped ham” (a kind of sandwich meat that was invented and sold by a Pittsburgh-area dairy-store chain) is often on lists of Pittsburghese words and phrases. Pittsburghers sometimes report not knowing that it was a regional item until they ordered it or looked for it somewhere else, an experience that often causes people to enregister words with places. “Nebby” is an adjective of northern English and Scotch-Irish origin meaning nosy. The link between Pittsburghese and the dolls’ identity is made even tighter through the rhyming of “chipped ham” and “Sam” and “nebby” and “Debbie.”
Chipped Ham Sam and Nebby Debbie represent imaginary people, and they talk. Because they have bodies, clothes, facial features, hairstyles, voices, and even personal histories in the form of biographies on small cards that come with them, the dolls package Pittsbrughese with particular lifestyles and biographies in ways that other artifacts do not, or do less. For one thing, the way the dolls are designed puts the connection between Pittsbrughese and social class front and center, forcing us to consider what social class is, how it intersects with ethnicity, gender, and other aspects of Pittsburghers’ identity, and how is linked to Pittsburgh’s identity as a collective. For another thing, what Sam and Debbie’s voices sound like and what they say lead us to consider how a particular rhetorical stance towards the world is implicated in how the people who buy them understand Pittsbrughese.

I would be hard to miss the way in which Chipped Ham Sam and Nebby Debbie link Pittsbrughese with characterological figure of the Yinzer. Sam and Debbie are not just dolls that happen to speak in Pittsbrughese. They are “Yappin’ Yinzers.” The Pittsbrughese they speak is part and parcel of the fact that they are Yinzers. Their Pittsburgese presupposes their Yinzer identity (the Pittsbrughese that emerges from the sound module when the dolls are squeezed is one of the things that identifies the dolls as Yinzers), and the Yinzerishness of their voices, their appearances, and the life stories they come with helps to identify their speech as Pittsbrughese.

For one thing, the dolls’ appearance links them to the characterological figure of the Yinzer and the Yinzer figure to them. Both dolls look like white people. Chipped Ham Sam has blond hair in the style popular in the 1980s known as a “mullet.” Nebby Debbie’s hair is brown, pulled back from her face except for a few bangs on her forehead. Both dolls have large, open mouths, extending almost from ear to ear. Sam’s abdomen is exposed, attention drawn to it with a sewn-on plush ball
representing his navel. Debbie wears gold hoop earrings and makeup: mascara, yellow eye-shadow, bright red lipstick, rust-colored finger- and toenail polish. She is wearing a black mesh top over a sleeveless gold t-shirt, track-suit trousers with orange stripes, and black mules with heels. Sam has on a Steelers jersey with the number 0, and, on the back where a player’s name usually goes, “YINZER.” He is wearing blue cut-off shorts, gold and black socks, and shoes that might be taken to be construction boots. To the Pittsburghers and ex-Pittsburghers who buy them for themselves or as gifts, Sam and Debbie are likely to be taken as unsophisticated and somewhat backward in style.

The front of the card that comes attached to each doll’s arm identifies the doll as a Pittburgher. The top two thirds of the page have the words (in gold) “yappin’ Yinzers,” superimposed on a photo of the Pittsburgh downtown skyline. Under this is “Pittsburghers with personality,” and this is the doll’s name. The claim that the dolls have “personality” suggests that they are to be seen as larger than life in some ways, but it also points to how they are meant to evoke personas. Inside each card on the left-hand page is a set of three bulleted “quick facts” about each doll. On the right-hand page is the heading “9 Hilarious Pittsburgh Sayings” with three of the doll’s utterances reproduced in speech balloons emanating from skyline building windows. We return to the “sayings” shortly.

The “quick facts” about Chipped Ham Sam are these, as they appear in the card:

- Born of Polish and Ukrainian parents (with whom he will most likely always reside) on October 12, 1975 – exactly 9 months to the day from the Lombardi trophy’s first arrival in the “burgh”.
- Given the nickname “Chipped Ham” because of his insatiable desire for barbequed chipped ham sandwiches, a local delicacy.
• A fanatical supporter of Pittsburgh sports, Sam can usually be found screaming at a television at one of his favorite South Side watering holes.

Sam is identified in ethnic terms, as having Eastern European parents. He is identified as a fan of Pittsburgh sports and implicitly as the child of sports fans, conceived right after the Steelers’ first national championship. (The Lombardi trophy is held by the winners of the year’s Super Bowl.) He is identified as being in younger middle age (born in 1975, which means that he would have been 34 in 2007 when he was created). He lives with his parents. He is identified by what he eats (chipped ham sandwiches) and that he drinks (South Side watering holes, or bars). “South Side” links him with an older working-class neighborhood and with its transformation into an area where people now go to drink. And he is identified as someone who “screams at a television.”

The quick facts about Nebby Debbie are the following:

• A life-long resident of the Pittsburgh borough of McKees Ricks and almost a graduate of the local High School, Debbie has found recent fame as the top nail stylist in the area. Her signature rhinestone-leopard nail art is most requested by her loyal customers, followed by black-and-gold zebra stripes.

• You can find Debbie trolling for love on most Friday and Saturday nights at various Station Square, Strip District and Mt. Washington hot spots, as well as anywhere the city puts on fireworks or is giving away bobble heads.

• Boy is Debbie nebby. She seems to know interesting little tidbits about everyone in town, and if she feels she is missing any of the scoop, believe me, she’ll ask.
Debbie is not identified in ethnic terms, but instead in terms of the working-class neighborhood she is from (McKees Rocks), her education (“almost” a high-school graduate), her profession (fingernail stylist), and the tastes of her professional clients (rhinestone-leopard and black-and-gold nail designs). Like Sam, Debbie is linked with social practices and consumption, but these involve sex (trolling for love), spectacle (fireworks), and the consumption of things (bobble head dolls), rather than sports and the consumption of food. Both dolls are identified in ways that evoke a style of communication, Sam by “screaming at [the] TV” and Debbie by being nosy (“nebby”), gossiping (“seems to know interesting little tidbits about everyone in town”), and being unafraid to dig for information (“believe me, she’ll ask”).

The communicative style that is both evoked and suggested by the Yappin’ Yinzers is also enacted in their actual speech, in the form of the pre-recorded utterances that play when the sound module is activated with a squeeze. Although both are advertised as coming with nine “hilarious Pittsburgh sayings,” Debbie actually comes with eleven. Figure 2 lists and glosses the dolls’ utterances. (For nonstandard pronunciation, I use conventional respellings where available, IPA elsewhere.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nebby Debbie</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Jeat yet? ‘Did you eat yet?’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. You ain’t gonna believe this, I just saw whutsername with whutsisface. ‘You aren’t going to believe this, I just saw what’s-her-name with what’s-his-name.’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How ‘bout yinz redd up them rooms [ru&lt; mz] before comp'ny comes over [o&lt;vr]? How about if you (pl.) clean up those rooms before company comes over?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Yinz better settle down [da:n]? ‘You (pl.) had better settle down!’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. **Watch out when yinz go outside, it’s col’ out there today.** ‘Watch out when you (pl.) go outside. It’s cold out there today.’

6. I hafta go da the bafroom. ‘I have to go to the bathroom.’

7. **Yinz ain’t ‘upposed to be out [ə:t], yinz are grounded [ɡraːndəd]!** ‘You (pl.) aren’t supposed to be out. You (pl.) are grounded (confined to the house).’

8. **You’re ‘upposed to put a gumband around [ə:rənd] it.** ‘You’re supposed to put a rubber band around it.’

9. I ain’t payin’ no hundert dollars [dɔwɛrζ] fer ‘at! ‘I will not pay a hundred dollars for that.’

10. What’s goin’ [goɪn] on? ‘What’s going on?’


Chipped Ham Sam

1. *What yinz doin’ over [oʊr] dere?* ‘What are you (pl.) doing over there?’

2. **Come off it, fer cryin’ out [aː] loud [laːd]!** ‘Come off it, for crying out loud!’

3. **Hows come yinz ain’t watchin’ the [ə] game?** Pixburgh’s on. ‘How come you (pl.) aren’t watching the game? Pittsburgh’s on.’


5. Nuh-uh! ‘No!’

6. **Quit jaggin’ around [ərənd]!** Quit fooling around!

7. **Jinz eat jet?** I’m gettin’ hungry fer a sammich. ‘Did you (pl.) eat yet? I’m getting hungry for a sandwich.’

8. I’m going down [daːn] the Southside [saːsaid] to drink some Irons n’at. ‘I’m going down to the Southside to drink some Iron City beer, and things like that.’

9. I’m taking the trolley [trɔwi] downtown [daːntaːn]. ‘I’m taking the trolley downtown.’
The Pittburghese word represented most often in both Sam and Debbie’s speech is *yinz*, ‘you (pl.),’ which is heard eight times in the 20 utterances. Versions of *Jeat jet?* ‘Did you eat yet?; Have you eaten yet?’ appear in both dolls’ repertoires. Other lexical items often associated with Pittburghese are *Irons* ‘Iron City beer’, *n’at* ‘and things like that’, *redd up* ‘tidy up’, and *gumbands* ‘rubber bands.’ *How’s come* ‘why, how come’ and *nuh-uh* [nʌˈɁʌː], an emphatic ‘no!’ are also sometimes found on lists of Pittburghese (Johnstone, 2013b, pp. 3–40; Johnstone et al., 2002). Both dolls use *ain’t*, and there is one instance of negative concord in Nebby Debbie’s speech (“I ain’t payin’ no hundert dowers fer ‘at!’”). Phonologically, the dolls’ speech sounds casual, with numerous elided syllables and sounds. Both voices use Pittsburgh accents, though somewhat inconsistently. Of the many words in the utterances that could showcase the area’s characteristic monophthongal /aw/ (*down*, *out*, *outside*, *grounded*, *around*, *loud*, and *downtown*), not all are actually monophthongized every time. Both speakers use fronted versions of the vowel in words such as *over*, *going*, and *ob*, and Debbie’s voice fronts the /u/ in *rooms*. Each script includes a word that showcases /l/-vocalization, *trolley* for Sam and *dollars* for Debbie, and both voices strongly vocalize these /l/s. In *bathroom*, Debbie is represented as using /ʃ/ for /θ/.

The speech acts performed by these utterances lean heavily toward the directive. The bold-faced items in the lists above are all things a person could say to get someone else to do something. These include “Come off it,” “Quit jaggin’ around,” “Yinz better settle down,” and so on. Of the twenty utterances by the two dolls, eight (arguably nine, if “What’s going on?” is taken as a suggestion that the addressees stop what they are doing) could be used as directives. (“Get out of town” and “Come off it” could also be used as exclamatives, of course.) Almost half of the time, in other words, the
Yappin’ Yinzers tell other people what to do or what not to do. Nebby Debbie’s audience is also called up by what she says. Whutsername and whutsisface could suggest that she is accustomed to talking to people she knows well, people who will be able to identify who is being talked about, or that she does not think it is important for her interlocutors to be able to identify them. All but one of her directives represent instructions that adults (especially mothers) address to children, instructions to tidy up, settle down, put on warm clothes before going outside, get back into the house.

Another attribute of the Yinzer speech style, as it is figured in the dolls, is a distinctive tone of voice. This occurs only in the male doll’s speech, in the places that are italicized in Figure 2. In these places, the pitch and volume of Chipped Ham Sam’s voice are raised. The effect of this higher, louder voice is to make him sound aggrieved and petulant.

As represented via these dolls, the Yinzer character is highly gendered. Male Yinzers, the dolls suggest, go to bars to eat and drink, females to find romance. Male Yinzers like sports, female Yinzers like the fireworks that sometimes follow sports events and the souvenir bobble-head dolls that are sometimes given away there. Male Yinzers wear an outdated hairstyle from the 1980s; female Yinzers wear a lot of makeup. Males yell at the Steelers; females yell at their children. But there are also many commonalities, especially in how their speech styles are represented.

Who, then, is the prototypical Yinzer, as this character is figured in the Yappin’ Yinzer dolls? He or she is a white Pittsburgher who does things in Pittsburgh, a sports fan or at least a wearer of the team colors. A Yinzer dresses casually. A Yinzer uses Pittsburghese words and sounds like a Pittsburgher. A Yinzer has a big mouth, and when he or she opens it, the voice that emerges is
casual and sometimes nonstandard. A Yinzer is uninhibited, not afraid to tell people what to do. A Yinzer yaps.

Judging from what the dolls look like, how they are described, what they say, and how they say it, we might be tempted to say that the Yinzer character is working class. But what would this mean? Neither Chipped Ham Sam nor Nebby Debbie is explicitly identified as working-class. Sam is not assigned a job, a trade, or a profession in the biography that accompanies him. Debbie is identified as a nail stylist, which means that she may be an independent operator, not a salaried worker. Neither doll is dressed in work clothes (although Sam wears what might be work boots). The dolls’ income is not specified. Nothing they say has explicitly to do with socio-economic class. And yet there are reasons to claim that consumers are meant to think of the Yinzer figure, as it is represented in the dolls, as working class. One of these reasons is their communicative style.

**Social Class and Communicative Style**

Scholars continue to debate about how to define social class, and this is not the place to rehash the entire debate. The view I take here is similar to that of other ethnographers of the post-industrial “working class” (Dunk, 1991; Foley, 1990; Fox, 1997; Lindquist, 2002; Weis, 1990). According to scholars like these, the social identities associated with class result from the material circumstances of work (one’s relationship to the means of production, whether as hourly wage-earner, on one end of the spectrum, or as owner and/or investor, on the other) as well as the ideology that shapes how a person makes sense of those circumstances. Social class is thus both a material and a cultural phenomenon. People’s understanding of their own place in the economic system, and what that entails when it comes to how to act, talk, and think, is shaped by models that circulate as people perform class identity in interaction with others. People have various ways of talking about this
aspect of social identity, some of which do not involve using the term “working class” at all, and “working-class culture” can take a wide variety of forms. Still, the concept of class is useful, even if the people we study may not overtly orient to it. In a capitalist economy, the need to work (or not), along with the kind of work one does, shapes how people think and talk about identity, just as biology shapes how people understand gender and sexuality and physical appearance shapes how people understand race. As Julie Lindquist explains it in the introduction to an analysis of working-class rhetorical practices, “Implicit in my claim to take as my subject ‘working-class culture’ is the assumption that shared cultural experiences (and the narrative processes and products of these experiences) are linked to material conditions” (Lindquist, 2002, p. 5).

One aspect of the working-class experience is opposition. As Thomas W. Dunk puts it in a study of a “working man’s town” in Ontario, Canada, “Class happens because of the common experiences of a group of people whose interests are different from and usually opposed to the interests of another group” (Dunk 1991, 27, emphasis mine). This may be opposition rooted in competing economic interests, as in the classical Marxist account. This is the sort of opposition that leads to labor unions, to negotiations over wages, hours, and working conditions, and to strikes. Or it may be opposition rooted in struggles against the hegemonic ideology circulated in bourgeois institutions and practices like schooling, as in more recent interpretations of Marxism (Gramsci, 1971; Thompson, 1966; Williams, 1982). This is the sort of opposition that leads working-class teens to reject school culture (Eckert, 1996, 2000, 2004; Weis, 1990) and adults to value low-culture activities like team sports that involve group physical activity over high-culture intellectual ones like theater or ballet (Dunk, 1991, pp. 90–91). It is the sort of opposition that leads working-class arguers to value the “common sense” that arises from lived experience over “formal, theoretical knowledge that is not immediately applicable to work and to action” (Lindquist, 2002, p. 99).
Linguistic anthropologist Douglas Foley (1989) takes this argument a step further, suggesting that class differences in post-industrial settings are fundamentally differences in expressive style. Foley combines Jürgen Habermas’ (1984) insights about how communication is affected by modern economic life with Erving Goffman’s (1959, 1981, 1986) analyses of “the performance of self.” Goffman claimed to be describing how social interaction always works, everywhere, and was apparently uninterested in how inequality could be created and perpetuated in interaction. Foley, however, sees Goffman as “an ethnographer of communication in late capitalist society, despite [Goffman’s] claims to universality” (Foley, 1989, p. 149). Foley points out that “Goffman’s empirical descriptions of communication look very like what Habermas calls instrumental action” (152).

Habermas’ work critiques modern, bureaucratic, knowledge and service economies, where ways of speaking have become increasingly regimented. What Habermas calls “instrumental rationality,” geared toward efficiency, productivity, and profit, requires people to perform elaborately constructed identities in highly staged, instrumental interaction, where “traditional normative ideals about doing what one says and being sincere and truthful become less of a constraint on communicative action” (Foley, 1989, p. 155) than the ability to manage one’s identity by playing the kinds of language games Goffman describes. For Foley, working-class social identity is “stigmatized,” in Goffman’s terms, because traditional working-class expressive norms are different from and opposed to those of the “normal” social actors Goffman focuses on. As Foley describes it (151),

Two generalized class roles are routinely enacted in recurring everyday situational speech performances. Bourgeois/petit bourgeois actors typically assume they are leaders with “normal” identities and superior speech, who have the right to speak often and in an official
manner. Standard, official speech is authoritative and proper. Proper, polite speech and etiquette become a strategic weapon in their everyday communication. … Conversely, working-class actors assume they are outsiders and subordinates with “stigmatized” identities and inferior speech . . . . Unofficial speech is often non-standard, informal, and lacking in politeness forms. Impolite speech becomes an unstrategic form of expressiveness that either meekly enacts the subordinate, stigmatized role of outsider, or openly, hostilely rejects it. These more open, dialogic speech practices help preserve the dual role and identity of an uncultured, inferior outsider and rebel.

The communicative style of the “working class actor” Foley describes here maps almost exactly onto that of the Yinzer persona. Located outside the new economy and its regimented modes of speech, the Yinzer can speak freely, using casual, nonstandard, regionally marked speech forms, speaking directly, telling people off, gossiping, and yelling. But the Yinzer is also frustrated, petulant and sometimes whiny. Her kids misbehave; his team makes idiotic plays on the football field. Yinzers have big mouths and are unafraid to open them, but when they do, they yap powerlessly, like miniature dogs that think they are bigger than they are.

As enregistered in artifacts like these dolls, Pittsburghese is not just a set of words and phrases, but an expressive stance. The dolls embody a stance that is both oppositional and powerless, embedded in a specific set of consumption practices, communicative needs, and vocal styles. While Pittsburghese t-shirts and other such artifacts link words and meanings with place and to a certain extent with local practice (Johnstone, 2009), the dolls much more explicitly invite their consumers to enregister Pittsburghese with a specific stance toward the world, the stance of the Yinzer, limiting the possible meanings of speaking Pittsburghese in a way that other artifacts do not. The Yappin’
Yinzers help focus and standardize not only what counts as Pittburghese but who speaks it, what they say, and how they sound when they say it.

**Discussion**

Why, then, would anybody buy one of these dolls? Foley’s analysis suggests a way to answer this question. As noted, working-class expressive culture is oppositional. According to Foley, working-class actors like the Yappin’ Yinzers resist the expectations of lifestyle and speech style that are tied to the kinds of non-physical labor that are increasingly the only option: the expectations that one finish school, speak properly and politely, and so on. They resist the commodification of speech in the form of the scripts that a call-center employee has to read, the put-on friendliness of mall-store employees, the carefully managed speech style of the well-trained teacher or manager, the untrustworthy identity performance of lawyers. They resist what Foley refers to as the “theft of communicative labor” in “an overly administered world of manufactured symbols and identities” (Foley, 1989, p. 156). Working-class expressive style makes a claim to authenticity, to the realness of people who are not putting on elaborate performances of self.

But “such expressions of cultural resistance may also become commercialized” (Foley 1989, 156). This happens when the Yinzer persona, once linked causally with the experience of being working-class, gets de-linked from the actual conditions of labor and appropriated as a second-order symbol of local authenticity. Once this happens, people start to use the term *Yinzer* for anyone from or even just living in Pittsburgh. TV reporters and teachers – members of the speech-regimented new economy –now adopt elements of a Yinzer persona when they perform Pittburghese, leaning forward, raising their voices, speaking in a higher pitch, complaining, giving orders, calling people jagoffs (a Pittburghese word derived from the verb *jag* that traditionally meant ‘idiot’ but has come
to have obscene overtones). They Yappin’ Yinzer dolls represent a way of life that their consumers, participants in the post-industrial economy, would not choose for themselves, but the dolls also evoke nostalgia for an imagined time when people could speak their minds and sound like whoever they were, an imagined time when there was no need for the kind of persona management that is now required.

However, Neither Sam nor Debby is represented as having a traditional working class job, and this leads to another way of interpreting the Yinzer figure’s meaning. Sam’s work, if any, is not specified, and Debby is an independent entrepreneur at the bottom of the cline of prestige when it comes to careers. The dolls act working-class in some ways, but their actual work is not the skilled labor, protected by union contracts and paid a comfortable wage, that people think of when they think of the American working class of the 20th century. They are “working-class without work,” to use Lois Weis’s (1990) term, exemplars of a post-industrial stereotype that exists not only in Pittsburgh but also in other places where people whose forebears were proud of their labor are now marginal and often struggling. This means that the dolls can be seen not just as representations of former working-class Pittsburghers – ideologically linked with us, even by people whose forbears were not miners or steelworkers -- but also as representations of a pathetic, marginalized class of contemporary Pittsburghers --- ideologically other.

To summarize, the Yappin’ Yinzers enregister Pittsburghese, along with other modes of action, appearance, and taste, with a characterological figure that can be evaluated in at least two ways, as a positively valorized reminder of working-class Pittsburghers of the past and as an image of the stigmatized post-working class of the present. They complicate the semiotic value of Pittsburghese
in a way that is more and more typical, as Pittsburghese moves from being a representation of a way of speaking that people remember to being an icon of a persona linked with a way of life.

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