

When the actor Tom Hulce came to Pittsburgh to film *Dominick and Eugene*, he wanted to sound like the part he was playing: a garbage man who lived on the South Side. That meant he had to learn to swallow some of his "I's" and to pronounce words like *caught* and *cot* identically.

Enter Don Wadsworth, the Carnegie Mellon speech and dialect coach who taught Hulce to talk like a Pittsburgher and, just recently, taught British actor Bob Hoskins to talk like an American.

Wadsworth rehearsed Hulce for a few weeks and visited the set from time to time during filming to keep an ear on his accent. Hulce even asked Wadsworth personally to be on the set for some dialogue-heavy scenes. But Wadsworth wasn't asked to teach the Pittsburgh accent to Hulce's co-star, Ray Liotta, even though Liotta played Hulce's twin brother. Seems the filmmakers thought Liotta's character, a doctor, wouldn't have a Pittsburgh accent.

They were right. For we know that accents have links to social class, and also that college graduates soften their natural accents when they encounter other ways of speaking in their upward mobility through the academy.

the Truth and Consequences of Pittsburghese

How you say *Downtown* can affect your career.

by Harry Kloman

The consequence of sounding too much like a Pittsburgher may go beyond evoking a few quizzical looks from people amused by the way you talk. Scholars know that accents have social stigmas attached to them, and some local business leaders say they don't want their executives talking that way. Even Wadsworth admits that the local accent doesn't have the lyrical quality of the Brooklyn accent or of Cockney English.

Will you lose a job for sounding too much like a Pittsburgher? Probably not. But the way you speak makes a first impression, and sometimes employers see it as part of a package.

You may get the job and then be told to clean up your speech. You may even have to take diction lessons. Or you may not get the precise job you want: In a 1982 study, a Pitt graduate student in linguistics found a link between accents and department store clerks. Only 31 percent of the clerks at the more upscale Horne's chain had noticeable local accents, while 41.9 percent of the

clerks in the lower-priced Murphy's chain had them. In the suburbs, where more affluent people live, 31.4 percent of department store clerks had the accent, while 44 percent had them in city stores.

The statistics may only be anecdotal, but the phenomenon is real: Accents identify us by education and class, and the identification can have consequences. Says one local linguist: "I don't think I've ever heard a Yuppie-type speaking with a Pittsburgh accent."

Okay. So you're planning a little Pittsburgh get-together for friends. First thing to do? *Redd up* the house. If the dinner takes place on an icy cold day, make sure the front walkway isn't *slippy*. If it's summertime, don't set up the picnic table near bushes with *jaggers*. You shouldn't be *nebbly* about your guests' private lives. You probably shouldn't serve

jumbo as the main course. And if you give your guests some leftovers to take home, you might want to put a *gumband* around the container to make sure nothing spills.

Non-Pittsburghers will certainly understand you if you talk like that. They also might smile at some of your unusual words. As with all regional accents and dialects, Pittsburgh talk has a variety of features, and reactions to them differ depending on where you say them. If something is okay to say at home, it may not be okay when you're away—and vice versa.

While everyday Pittsburghers may call it the Pittsburgh accent, linguists prefer to call it the Pittsburgh dialect. Accents merely reflect unique regional ways of pronouncing certain sounds. The notion of dialect embraces pronunciation, grammar, and words peculiar to a region.

Most people around the country say "the car needs to be washed." In Pittsburgh, many of us say "the car needs washed," dropping the standard English verb form *to be*. Our area borrowed this grammatical quirk from the wealthy educated Scots who settled in, and developed, the Pittsburgh area in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Christina Bratt Paulston, a linguist at the University of Pittsburgh, says that because of its history, the missing *to be* won't socially stigmatize a speaker—at least not in his hometown.

"If someone who's rich and healthy

along with it.

Other features of our dialect don't enjoy such privilege locally. Perhaps the most noticeable feature of Pittsburgh speech is how we say *downtown*, *out*, *flower* and other words with a common English vowel form called the diphthong. Listen closely to how the word *downtown* actually sounds: Say it slowly and you can hear the single vowel "o" drawn out into two distinct vowel sounds. That's the "di" part of diphthong. In Pittsburgh, speakers often don't say *downtown*. What we say sounds more like *dahntahn*, *ah* or *flahr*. Linguists call this vowel collapse "monophthongization."

Scholars don't know how this happened, but they agree that certain speech patterns can mark the speaker socially. In England and Massachusetts, it's elegant and upper-class to drop the "r" in certain words; in New York City, only lower-class people do it. By a coincidence that linguists can't explain, working-class Pittsburghers evolved a way of saying *dahntahn* that has since marked their class.

And Pittsburghers collapse other vowels as well. We'll say *fah* instead of fire, *yehs* instead of years, *Stillers* instead of Steelers. Again, no one knows why, though everyone knows that people who talk like this will probably be stigmatized—and perhaps even judged—by Pittsburghers who use standard speech.

Why can business whizzes from Boston, New York, or the South get away with keeping their accents, when Pittsburghers may have to lose theirs?

says something, it becomes acceptable," says Paulston, "as long as there's enough of them, and as long as they don't go counter to the values of the society." It is perfectly standard and acceptable Scottish English to drop the phrase *to be* from a sentence like "it needs washed." Because the Scots had education and high social standing, their contribution to our dialect became acceptable and carries little local stigma or social-class marker

But perhaps only by Pittsburghers. Paulston says people in California, for example, may notice Pittsburgh pronunciations without attaching a social stigma to it. They may just assume it's some unique regional way of saying certain words without knowing that natives make class distinctions based upon it. Yet the same non-locals who attach no stigma to *dahntahn* may think Pittsburghers don't know proper English

grammar for saying "needs washed."

The most striking class marker of Pittsburgh speech may be the word *yinz* or *yanz* (scholars differ on the spelling). In fact, this aberrant word is akin to a more sophisticated form found in most foreign languages. Modern English, unlike the world's other languages, doesn't have a different word for "you" in the plural form. *Yinz* probably comes from *you ones*, and it's similar to the familiar and Southern *y'all* or *you all*. But everyone in the South—rich or poor, college-educated or not—can get away with saying the acceptable *y'all*. Not so with *yinz*, which clearly stigmatizes a speaker.

Linguists learn in college not to judge patterns of language and dialect. Paulston says they have the principle drilled into their heads. But they certainly recognize that speech can stigmatize a speaker, and they know the stigma can have consequences.

Sarah G. Thomason, another Pitt linguist, says politicians can probably get away with talking in socially stigmatized speech patterns because "if you want to get elected, it helps not to sound too uppity." If you want to succeed in business, however, you may have to watch your tongue.

"I know that when you hear corporate executives," says Thomason, "they don't talk like that. If you want to be in the kind of business where people wear suits and ties, you want to get rid of it—at least at work." Some people even "switch dialects" to mask their linguistic roots, using Pittsburghese at home and "broadcasterese" in the marketplace. Thomason compares this with knowing two languages.

So would it surprise local linguists to hear heavy Pittsburgh dialect spoken at the upper-crust Duquesne Club? "Depends on how many drinks they've had," Paulston says. Studies have shown that when people relax, they let their guard down and sometimes slip into less conformist speech patterns, perhaps without even realizing it.

Betty Connelly, an expert on the Pittsburgh job market, has another take on why you won't often hear local dialect in an executive office. Pittsburgh natives seeking top corporate jobs will often get their degrees, work, and travel outside of their hometown area. This influences their corporate savvy—and their dialect.

"You would find very few candidates

for a top executive position who have not had their natural accents broadened," says Connelly, author of *Find a Job in Pittsburgh*. Connelly believes corporate leaders filling top jobs "look for somebody who has a plainer sound than someone with a regional accent." She says you find few local leaders with thick Pittsburgh accents because it may suggest they have "a narrower understanding of the world."

Connelly once had an employer call a local job candidate with stammering, unpolished speech "as dumb as a box of rocks." She knows of a construction executive who worked in the area for 15 years then spent six years in Utah. He returned with "a much more smooth and polished tone" and found a job with an international company based in Pittsburgh.

"In the business world," says Connelly, "no one wants to be thought of as ignorant, unschooled and unpolished, and you don't want to have any part of your speech sound that way. A Pittsburgh accent can sound very comfortable and familiar to someone you're greeting across the desk. A Pittsburgh accent can also indicate that you're dumb as a box of rocks, and if it communicates that, it's detrimental to you."

Some local business leaders agree that the Pittsburgh dialect—particularly some of its colloquialisms—can deter you in the marketplace.

"It just sounds very, very local," says Lance Shaeffer, executive vice president of the area chamber of commerce. "I would think it's possible that too thick of a Pittsburgh accent or too much use of Pittsburgh jargon could potentially be a detriment." But he adds: "I wouldn't think it sounds any different than any other domestic accent in their local contexts."

James Haberman, a native Pittsburgher and vice president at a major brokerage firm, says people seeking top business jobs probably have worked other places and are "less likely in a work environment to use local colloquialisms." Yet he acknowledges that he hears things like *yinz* and *dahntahn* outside the office from people who would never talk that way at work. "When people are relaxed," he says, "they may tend to use slang words with friends."

Haberman says language is never the primary reason for being turned down for a job. "If a person spoke like that," he says, "it's conceivable there would be other types of things as well that would make up a reason why you wouldn't hire

them. If that was the only reason, I suspect you would still hire them. It would just be a matter of indicating to them that it would be more appropriate to lose those things in their business and professional speech."

Sarah Mizerak, who runs two small consulting firms in Pittsburgh, says "the Pittsburgh slang is a definite liability" in business, and some features "tend to

music, which would excuse it."

Of course, no one knows why some accents sound more lyrical than others. But experts like to speculate. Maybe Pittsburgh's hard-working, no-nonsense people developed a way of speaking that matched their work-a-day practicality. Connelly, the job expert, says there's a "plainness and honesty" to the Pittsburgh accent that might even help in a job

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make us sound rather parochial and uneducated." Like Haberman, she knows people "who have gone to work on their diction and their language to try to advance," and some who have been "taken in hand" by their companies to improve their speech.

So why can business whizzes from Boston, New York, or the South get away with keeping their accents, when Pittsburghers may have to lose theirs? Haberman offers a theory. "Pittsburgh is viewed as a blue-collar town," he says, "so the accent is viewed as a blue-collar accent."

For Wadsworth, teaching Hulse to talk some Pittsburghese was a rare opportunity: When he works with the accent at all, he's usually teaching people to lose it. Other English-language accents are easily recognizable to people who hear them in movies or plays. The Pittsburgh accent doesn't have that kind of notoriety.

Nor does it have what it takes to become so famous. Wadsworth says some accents have a musicality that makes them attractive in performance. Cockneys have their familiar glottal stops, and Brooklynites have a broad, lyrical nasality. Those accents are colorful and fun. "But the Pittsburgh accent doesn't have that same kind of color," he says. "It just sounds incorrect." He pauses, then adds apologetically: "I hate to be so judgmental about it. It doesn't have the

interview. Says Wadsworth, himself an area native: "We're such a practical lot."

Hulse only went so far in learning the local dialect. He learned to thicken his "l's" and turn them into "w" sounds in the middle and at the end of words. He learned not to pronounce "au" and "o" differently in certain words. But Wadsworth and the filmmakers decided not to teach Hulse *dahntahn*. "It sounds like you're mocking the geography or the character," says Wadsworth. "People might stop and listen to the accent, and we don't want that to happen."

Wadsworth has even taught some local business executives to lose their Pittsburghese when their bosses decided they had to sound less regional. The hardest things to overcome? Our flat nasal pronunciation of words like "honest," and the way we turn statements into questions with a rising inflection at the end of a sentence.

"When the world hears Sophie Masloff," says Wadsworth, hesitantly, and looking somewhat sheepish as he talks, "they know something about her, at least they think they do, from her accent. It tells where she's from. It could be she's very proud of that, and maybe we want her to be. It does have a very provincial sound or feel to it. We let the Kennedys do it, but we judge Pete Flaherty"—he pauses, not wanting to offend, then adds quickly, almost guiltily, with a short chuckle—"and everybody else in Pittsburgh government." □