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 Pittsburghesse**

**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 *nobby* 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 gumbo 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 usual 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 Paulson, 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 dipthong. 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 dipthong. In Pittsburgh, speakers often don’t say downtown. What we say sounds more like dahntahn, aht or farh. 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 farh instead of fire, yrs 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?

But perhaps only by Pittsburghers. Paulson 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 yunz (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. Paulson 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,” Paulson 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
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 Hulce 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
come 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
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

“A Pittsburgh accent can sound
very comfortable and familiar... it
can also indicate that you’re
dumb as a box of rocks.”