

The University of Pittsburgh ~ Department of Linguistics

Colloquium Series *Presents:*

“Media Technology, Metalinguistic Expertise, and the Enregistrement of ‘Pittsburghese’ ”

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This paper explores the roles of newspapers, a website, an online discussion board, and a Wikipedia entry in the history of a dialect locally known as “Pittsburghese.” Drawing on Agha’s (2003) work on “enregistrement,” I am studying how a set of linguistic forms that can be heard in southwestern Pennsylvania have come to be thought of as unique to the Pittsburgh area and tightly linked to local identity. In this presentation I focus on historical shifts in sources of expertise about local speech. I trace how increasingly interactive communication media have helped reallocate rights to describe and evaluate local speech and made it possible to contest these rights in new ways, and I suggest that these changes have implications for the trajectory of the dialect and its study.

Geographic and social mobility during the later half of the 20th century made local linguistic features hearable to working-class Pittsburghers, as they began to come into contact with people who spoke differently and, accordingly, began to adjust their speech to sound more correct or cosmopolitan or, alternatively, more like their peers. The collapse of the local steel industry caused people to look for new ways to imagine what it meant to be a Pittsburgher. A set of local forms now associated with localness and working-class lack of pretension were available for this purpose. The term “Pittsburghese” was apparently coined in 1967, and newspaper features on local speech began to treat it less as a set of unrelated oddities and more as a “real” dialect. Through the efforts of a local linguist, academic research came to be thought of as a source of expertise about local speech.

In the 1990s, the development of more interactive media began to shift the center of epistemic balance. A 1990s website encouraged visitors to contribute entries to a list of “Pittsburghese” words. As technological changes enabled even more interactivity online, expertise about local speech was explicitly contested. On an email discussion board from 2001, people argued about whether “our local dialect” was “charming” or “embarrassing” and about the sources of expertise required for a person to have a right to judge. Outsiders and in-migrants to Pittsburgh based their epistemic rights in cosmopolitan experience; Pittsburghers based theirs in local experience. Though mentioned occasionally, academic research was rarely treated as a source of expertise.

This democratic diffusion of the right to create knowledge is often celebrated. However, as Ronkin and Karn (1999), Hill (1995), and others have shown, popular discourse about vernacular speech often encodes racism, classism, and other forms of discrimination. Thus I turn, finally, to an effort by academics to reclaim expertise about Pittsburgh speech. In 2006, Dan Baumgardt and I developed and posted a Wikipedia entry on Pittsburgh Speech. I describe the steps we took to try to insure that our expertise, based on six years of research, would, at least for a time, trump others’. In conclusion, I explore the implications of struggles over expertise for the future of dialects and dialect research.

Friday, April 3, 2009 at 3:00 p.m.

Room G8 ~ Cathedral of Learning