

## Variation and Change in the Signified: The prehistory of 'Wisconsin Accent'

The study of variation and change in attitudes and perceptions is growing. This paper extends both issues by asking how a variety comes to be named and identified as unique over time. Specifically, how are names given to speech varieties, and how do these names remain stable even though what they refer changes dramatically? We examine distinctive, recognizable regional varieties only now emerging in the American Upper Midwest (e.g. Remlinger et al. 2009, Purnell et al. forthcoming, Schuld et al. forthcoming), where the historical absence of established regional speech patterns has not inhibited discussion about them.

Adapting methods from historical sociolinguistics and perceptual dialectology, a survey of written sources shows 'accent' and 'dialect' have been discussed with regard to Wisconsin since a century before a regional variety emerged. Meanings of the terms foreshadow current stereotypes of now-enregistered regional speech, both in terms of (1) developing associations with the influence of immigrant languages (Delahanty 2011) and (2) forging a narrative of Midwestern English as 'normal' (Preston 2006:283). Data come from searches for 'Wisconsin accent', 'Wisconsin dialect' into the mid-20th century and early work on American dialects: newspapers (Chronling America, 19th Century America Newspapers, NewspaperArchive), general corpora (COHA, NgramViewer) and scholarly sources (*American Speech*, *Dialect Notes*, various monographs).

Earliest attestations, Stage 1 (INDIRECT REFERENCE), typically treat speech of people from Wisconsin without expressly naming a 'Wisconsin accent', e.g. in newspaper political discourse: "a Wisconsin delegate, whose accent told he was of foreign birth" (Council Bluffs 1890) and "'Misdier Speagher, exclaims Representative Kustermann of Wisconsin, who has a German accent and is proud of it" (Salt Lake 1910). These uses begin to associate Wisconsin with immigrant English. The same holds even later in books on American language: Herman & Herman (1947:298) observe that the speech of places like Milwaukee "is colored with the German dialect". Aside from placenames, Mencken only mentions Wisconsin for immigrant Norwegian (1937:626ff). Contributions to *Dialect Notes* also treat Wisconsin in terms of immigrant languages — Czech, Norwegian, Italian — save for a southwest Wisconsin word list.

In Stage 2 (CONTRASTIVE REFERENCE), we find Wisconsin framed as 'normal' in direct contrast to some other already enregistered variety — e.g. North Carolina or Cockney — with Wisconsin speech the unmarked member of a contrast. As early as 1913, *Saturday Evening Post* published a story with a passage about a school teacher from Georgia dismissed in Wisconsin for trying to teach children "the rich and delightful accent of the South", advising "What that girl should have done ... was acquire the Wisconsin accent." Only around mid-20th century do we find Stage 3 (INDEPENDENT REFERENCE), references to specifically regional speech patterns, consistent with Remlinger et al. 2009, including via reallocation of immigrant features to regional.

In this sequence, reference of a variety completely changes, reflecting highly structured patterns of variation and change. Changes in the signified predate, in some sense, the existence of the signifier and long predate modern meanings of 'Wisconsin accent' and related terms. In this (pre-)history we can find the formation of stereotypes.

## References

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