

## Expert says fewer folks use Pittsburghese? Git aht!

Thursday, January 06, 2011

By Sean D. Hamill, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Michael Henninger/Post-Gazette

Barbara Johnstone, a professor at Carnegie Mellon University, is the region's leading expert on Pittsburghese.

For the last decade, Carnegie Mellon University linguistics professor Barbara Johnstone has been studying our distinct local lingo, publishing so frequently and generating so many discoveries on it that she's generally acknowledged to be the leading expert on what is commonly known as Pittsburghese.

She's issued papers analyzing skits on WDVE that use Pittsburghese; another about how media stories that mention the dialect educate people about it; still another about how those "Yinzer" T-shirts you can buy in the Strip District bolster the dialect's use; and how the most popular book on the dialect -- "Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese" -- first issued in 1981 has affected its use.

From all of that listening and researching, Dr. Johnstone has at least two basic -- seemingly contradictory -- conclusions: There are less of yunz tawkin' funny 'n'at than there used to be, but more of yunz go aht the way to try to.

(Oh, and you should know that the "yunz" spelling, instead of "yinz," is probably more accurate to the sound most Pittsburghers use.)

"It really is a tortured relationship we have with our dialect," she said.

Perhaps the most important observation she has made, that has gone on to influence linguists around the world, is this: "Whatever Pittsburghese is, it has played a very strong role in local identity."

Why that is the case will be the topic of her plenary, lunchtime speech Friday to nearly 1,000 linguists expected to attend the 85th annual meeting of the Linguistic Society of America, a four-day conference that begins here today.

Choosing Dr. Johnstone to give one of the three signature speeches for the conference was easy, said Keren Rice, a University of Toronto linguistics professor.

"You want to get somebody from the region to speak, but, at the same time, it has to be someone with a strong, national reputation," Dr. Rice said. "And she is an extremely well known linguist who does a lot of important work."

The fact that she is THE expert on Pittsburghese clinched it.

### PG VIDEO: PITTSBURGHESE



In large part because of her work, linguists "know to keep your ears open when you're there because you're going to hear some sounds and words you're not going to hear anywhere else," Dr. Rice said.

Nearly all of that work for the last decade has been about Pittsburghese.

And though outsiders -- and insiders -- sometimes make light of the way we strangle our vowels -- going from "down" to "dahn" -- or twist our syntax -- "It needs warshed" -- to linguists, this is one of the country's most interesting places.

"If you look at more recent research, I think Pittsburgh is a [linguistic] region unto itself," said Dennis Preston, a professor of linguistics at Oklahoma State who has followed Dr. Johnstone's work.

That work, often in collaboration with University of Pittsburgh Associate Professor Scott Kiesling, has resounded far beyond the region.

"It's not just about Pittsburgh; it's about community and identity. So, in that sense, it's of global importance," said Walt Wolfram, a linguistics professor at North Carolina State University.

When she took her post with CMU in 1997, after a decade working at Texas A&M, Dr. Johnstone, 58, who grew up in State College, Pa., didn't think she'd spend a decade listening for yunzers' linguistic idiosyncracies.

But fate one day that first year in Oakland found her rummaging through a street vendor's box of used books when she stumbled upon an updated edition of "Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese."

Initially indignant that a layman would try to catalogue a region's dialect, Dr. Johnstone said she thought of the book: "I'll figure out the facts and correct it.

"But then I realized that was wrong; I shouldn't be trying to correct it. It was something I should be studying," she recalled this week.

Dr. Kiesling arrived in Pittsburgh in 2000, and they joined forces to try to figure out why the city and its residents seemed to rally around its oddball language. They put together a website -- <http://pittsburghspeech.com/index.html> -- that brings together some of their work.

Soon, colleagues elsewhere told Dr. Johnstone she was on to something.

But it was only in the last two years, Dr. Kiesling, 43, who grew up in Bloomington, Ind., said, that they realized their hypothesis was wrong.

"We thought that people with a more-Pittsburgh-focused identity would have more of a Pittsburgh-way of speaking," he said. "It didn't turn out that way."

People proudly wearing T-shirts, buying mugs or putting up billboards with Pittsburghese words plastered all over it, like "redd up" and "jaggerbush" and "neby," encourages other residents not only to buy one, too, but to use the phrases themselves so that they, too, can be seen as real Pittsburghers.

"The Pittsburghese phenomenon is alive and well," Dr. Johnstone said. "You now have more and more people who experience it, even though most of them may have never heard someone who really speaks it."

But people who use Pittsburghese this way tend to do it consciously, and Dr. Johnstone and Dr. Kiesling thought that would mean they'd find more people also using the dialect unconsciously.

But their data showed fewer people actually speaking the dialect unconsciously, using it as part of their everyday speech and not just reciting what they're seen on a T-shirt or heard in skits.

Moreover, the dialect is now mostly confined to working class neighborhoods, and that wasn't always the case.

Pittsburghese's roots are Scotch-Irish, because that was the largest immigrant group here as the city was forming 200 years ago. The Scotch-Irish were also part of the aristocracy here and so, until World War II, the dialect was classless.

But once all those veterans returned from working with people from around the country "and were told they sounded funny,"

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Dr. Johnstone said, they became conscious of it, and slowly began hearing it as both unique, but not necessarily good speech.

Now, she said, Pittsburghese has become "part of young, hip urban culture."

"College kids from upper middle class families claim to speak Pittsburghese and they know some of the words but they don't have the accent," she said.

During this same time, though, the dialect became linked ever more to class.

"If you're a teenager on the college track and you use 'yunz,' someone is going to tell you, 'Don't say yunz,' " she said.

The duality was an amazing realization: While we generally love our Pittsburghese as a cultural touchstone, individually we shun it.

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First published on January 6, 2011 at 12:00 am