

“Dahntahn” Champs: Identifying with the winning Steelers and speaking “Pittsburghese”

In this paper, supporting evidence is presented for the importance of considering a speaker design-based approach when analyzing style variation in speech, in that a speaker’s ability to project different facets of their self-identity through shifting the style of their speech is often the primary motivation for their so-doing. In particular, this paper looks at the strong Western Pennsylvanian identification with Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Steelers and how that identity relates to the use of “Pittsburghese”. The evidence presented is the result of an analysis of the use of monophthongal /aw/ in the recorded conversations of six different speakers, three of whom were born and raised in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and three of whom were born and raised in Butler, Pennsylvania, a small city 35 miles north of Pittsburgh. This research was conducted during the course of completing an undergraduate class in sociolinguistics at the University of Pittsburgh in the spring of 2006.

Since being a Steelers fan and speaking “Pittsburghese” are two of the most often expressed defining characteristics of being a Pittsburgher, it was expected that an increase in pride and prestige associated with identifying with the Pittsburgh Steelers, especially as Super Bowl XL champions at the end of such a story-book season, would correlate with an increased use of vernacular forms of speech associated with that same identity. Due to restrictions of time, only one feature of “Pittsburghese”, the monophthongization of the diphthong /aw/, was tracked. This particular feature was chosen as being representative because of its being 1) “by far the most salient” “of all the features of [Pittsburgh] local speech” (Johnstone, et al. 2002, 148), and 2) the only feature of “Pittsburghese” that is actually unique to the Pittsburgh area (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006, 164).

The results were interesting in that not all of the speakers displayed an increase in use of monophthongal /aw/ when the conversation turned to discussing the Super Bowl win. When analyzed collectively along gender and city-of-birth lines, the results showed that men use monophthongal /aw/ more than women, and Pittsburghers more than Butlerites, in agreement with Scott Kiesling and Marc Wisnosky’s findings that the highest use of monophthongal /aw/ is found among city-born men (2003, 1-2). However, in this study, it was found that Butler-born speakers showed an 8% increase in use when talking about the Steelers, whereas Pittsburgh-born speakers showed a 5% decrease, suggesting that it’s not simply a matter of where one is born and raised or of

identifying with the winning Steelers that lends itself to using more “Pittsburghese”; rather, it may have more to do with the degree to which an individual deems (unconsciously or otherwise) it necessary to validate or substantiate one’s projection of a particular facet of one’s self-identity by style shifting to the vernacular of that identity. In other words, Pittsburgh-born speakers don’t style shift because they already use monophthongal /aw/ and always identify themselves as Pittsburghers. Butler-born speakers do style shift because they don’t normally use monophthongal /aw/ and only sometimes identify themselves (as in a year when the Steelers are Super Bowl champs) as Pittsburghers.

References:

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