The New York Times
ON THE WEB

March 17, 2006

It's Not the Sights, It's the Sounds

By TIM SULTAN

I WANTED to kiss Lori Austin, the waitress behind the counter of August 25, a diner near Wales Center, N.Y. I had been pretending to look at the wall art — a sunset landscape painted on a circular saw — but was actually straining to listen in on the conversation three elderly women were having at a nearby table. I was not having any success. The more I listened, the more quietly they talked.

"Thee-at painting?" Ms. Austin suddenly said. "A man from around here made it. Can I get you some more coffee? How 'bout this cold snee-ap?"

Bless you, Lori Austin, I said to myself. You just gave me the two raised vowels before voiceless stops I'd driven 350 miles for.

Fueled by frequent stops at diners (this was my third pie and coffee, and it wasn't lunchtime yet), I was in the midst of a road trip through the American linguistic landscape. My guide was not Rand McNally but rather The Atlas of North American English, by William Labov, Sharon Ash and Charles Boberg, the first complete survey of American phonetics, published late last year by Mouton de Gruyter.

The atlas is a voluminous, expensive ($620) and unmistakably academic book. It comes with audio samples and 139 maps that do not tell a traveler the shortest route from Ashtabula to Kissimee but do show where on the highway the monophthongization before voiceless consonants will occur.

When I called Professor Labov at his linguistics lab at the University of Pennsylvania and proposed I take a phonetic road trip — a journey about listening, much as a blind person or linguist experiences travel — he was enthusiastic. "When I travel," he said, "I always ask myself, what do I expect to hear that tells me that I'm not just anyplace?"

According to Professor Labov, New York City is a natural departure point. The broadest variety of dialects is found on the Eastern Seaboard. "These are the sites of the earliest settlements, with the greatest concentrations of immigrant groups," he said. "As you travel westward to Ohio and beyond, changes in speech are less striking."

While Eastern New England might seem to be an obvious destination, with its natives' distinctive habit of losing the "r" (*pahk the cah in Hahvahd yahd*), this accent has been so widely mimicked that the region seems a bit like an overharvested fishing ground.

Professor Labov suggested a more exotic destination.

Rochester.

"Driving northwest from New York City, you may detect a gradual change in speech, but by the time you reach Rochester, you will be firmly in what is called the Inland North region," he said. "This area includes the cities ringing the Great Lakes from Rochester to Chicago. The dialect spoken here is commonly known as the Chicago accent, though people in Rochester don't know that they are speaking in the same way as people in Chicago."

He offered a hint. "If you're not sure what Chicagoan sounds like," he said, "watch old episodes of 'NYPD Blue' and wait for Detective Sipowicz to ask, '*What hee-appened?*' Having Dennis Franz, a Chicago native, portray a New York City cop is like trying to put a square peg in a round hole."

I LEFT Brooklyn in midafternoon, driving up Route 17, a four-lane highway that has a backcountry feel to it once you pass Monticello. Snow started falling, and the lower Catskills rose in humps on either side of the road like the backs of large sleeping animals. Towns were small and few. Roscoe. Fishs Eddy. Deposit. I was passing through the Western New England accent zone — where people's accents sound like a milder version of the Inland North — but I wasn't stopping long enough to detect it.

For Professor Labov, who has spent 40 years listening to the vocalizations of thousands of Americans, identifying a regional accent is an easy matter. Indeed, if he were seized from his office, blindfolded, taken on a long drive and dropped at the counter of a nameless diner, he would know where he was by the time he heard the specials. But to the nonlinguist, identifying a change in someone's pronunciation while, say, stopping for gas is not as easy as it might seem. Professor Labov suggested several mechanisms to gauge such changes.

"You're always hoping to get people to say the same words in different regions so you can make a direct comparison," he said. "For instance, if you want to hear how locals pronounce the nasal short 'a,' you could ask directions for a fictitious street like Tasker Avenue. Hopefully, they'll scratch their heads and say aloud, *'Tee-asker Ee-avenue?'* "

A more direct approach is to write several words commonly used in linguistic studies — like cot and caught, don and dawn or pin and pen — on cue cards and ask people to say them out loud. In the South, pin and pen are pronounced the same (pin), and in half the country the sounds of cot and caught are identical (caht). In Rochester, cot and caught will sound different. There the short "o" resembles the "a" sound in cat. Rochester becomes Ratchester. Socks sounds like sax. And caught will sound a lot like cawt.

The first sign that I had entered a different dialectic zone came at the Market Street Brewing Company pub in Corning, N.Y., 250 miles from Manhattan. Eavesdropping on the barkeeper and a customer, I found an unmistakable Fargo-ness to their speech. Out

came the cue cards. Cot and caught. Same or different? Different. In the mouths of these two Corning natives, cot sounded like caht. Socks became sax. They were unaware of anything distinctive about the way they were speaking.

The next day, at the Silver Lake Family Restaurant in Warsaw, N.Y., Lois and Russ Hurlburt were splitting an order of eggs benedict. Mrs. Hurlburt, 90, is a retired high school literature teacher, and her husband had been an auctioneer. Both had a keen interest in this language experiment and were eager to take my test. Cot and caught. Don and dawn. Same or different? Different: dahn and dawn. They pronounced these words exactly as the people in Corning did and were surprised to hear that anyone would pronounce them any other way.

"Nobody with the Chicago-Rochester dialect makes a fuss about it," Professor Labov said. "They aren't as self-conscious or aware of it. Give a New Yorker or a Southerner a piece of paper with a word on it and ask them to say it, they'll start sweating."

After more conversations and cue-card spot checks with waitresses, farmers and hunters made it clear that the Inland North accent was thriving in these small towns outside Buffalo and Rochester, it was time to look at Professor Labov's atlas again. Directly south lay the Midland, a vast accent zone that stretches from Pennsylvaniato the Great Plains and borders the Ohio River to the south. A buffer between the linguistic powerhouses of the Inland North and the South, the Midland has few unifying linguistic features and in many respects is considered the default of American English: this is what American sounds like when small regional dialects have eroded.

The Midland would not hold much interest to a person searching out accents were it not for three enclaves that have retained unique speech: St. Louis, Cincinnati and, in particular, Pittsburgh, which seems to be the Galapagos Islands of American dialect.

"Pittsburgh is a special case," Professor Labov said. "Generally, local dialects have been absorbed by larger regional ones. But Pittsburgh, though part of the Midland, has retained its own speech patterns. In fact, Pittsburgh does things no place else does, like pronouncing 'ow' as 'ah' and very often dropping the 'l' when it comes at the end of a word." (Radial, for example, winds up sounding like radio.)

Julie Schoonover, the barkeeper from Corning, had described the dialect of the Steel City (a k a *Pixburgh*) more succinctly: "If you want to hear some freaky talk, go to Pittsburgh," she told me. "It's all *'yinz goin' dahntahn'* down there."

WHERE A regional accent ends and another begins is, of course, fluid, and it has taken linguists like Professor Labov years of repeated testing before they could confidently define the borders of the various phonetic regions.

The librarian in Westfield, N.Y., still exhibited the classic Inland North speech pattern. But an hour south, the woman behind the information desk at the Pennsylvania Welcome Center on Interstate 79 pronounced cot/caught and don/dawn (*dahn/dahn*) as if they were

the same, exactly as Professor Labov's maps predicted would happen once a traveler left the Inland North.

Outside Lou's Little Corner Bar in Pittsburgh's Little Italy, which is known as Bloomfield, it was snowing hard. Inside, a loud argument about the president and weapons of mass destruction was taking place. Did he know? Did he not know? The bartender, Donna Bruno, whose fiancé is in Iraq, did not have an opinion. But on the existence of Pittsburghese, she was clear.

"Of course we talk funny," she said. "We string words together. East Liberty becomes S'liberty. Down the street becomes dahnthestreet. And it's always what yinz doin? Why we talk this way, I don't know, but it might be because each neighborhood was settled by different ethnicities during the steel years." Professor Labov basically concurs with this theory.

Dawn Spring, a waitress working the breakfast shift at Tom's Diner on East Carson Street, had learned from experience that Pittsburghers speak a language of their own. She'd lived in Texas briefly. "I'd say, 'I'm gonna redd up my car,' which means clean up, and no one down there knew what I was talking about. We say yinz, they say y'all. We say gum band for rubber band. We in Pittsburgh may not speak proper English, but we know what we're saying. And that's what matters, right?"

Professor Labov agrees, up to a point. "I love the variety of language," he said. "The puzzling thing about this whole business of dialects is that sound changes do not help us communicate. Dialects prevent us from understanding each other. And yet, instead of growing weaker, as one might expect with television and telephonic communication, regional dialects are strengthening. That's the mystery."

There was little mystery as to what the flashing blue lights just off Liberty Avenue in downtown Pittsburgh signified. "License and registration," the police officer said as he leaned into my car window. "You're in the bus lane, son."

"License," "registration," "bus," "lane." Nothing unusual about the way these words were being pronounced. Couldn't he have said, "I cot you driving dahntahn in the bus lane, son"? I briefly considered doing a cue-card test but just as quickly rejected the idea. Asking for directions out of the city and back to New York seemed like the more prudent course. He let me off with a warning.

For the first time in two days, what was being said trumped how it was being said.