

'How to Speak Midwestern,' a Heartland Dialect Guide

By **Jennifer Schuessler** - NYT article

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Learning to speak Midwestern: Can there be any more urgent national task?

You wouldn't think so from all the postelection commentary laying Donald J. Trump's surprise victory at the feet of disaffected white working-class voters in the Rust Belt — or more specifically, the failure of coastal elites to understand them.

Unto the breach steps Edward McClelland's "How to Speak Midwestern," a dictionary wrapped in some serious dialectology inside a gift book trailing a serious whiff of Relevance.

Not that Mr. McClelland, a native of Lansing, Mich., who now lives in Chicago, set out to write a topical book. Hillary Clinton's name appears only once, when he notes that he stumped for Bernie Sanders in Iowa but ultimately voted for Mrs. Clinton "because we haven't had a president with an Inland North accent since Gerald Ford."

Still, the book can be read as questioning the resurgent notion — perhaps strongest in the Midwest itself — that Midwesterners are the most authentically American of Americans, starting with their allegedly neutral speech.

"Accents are an important element of regional identity," Mr. McClelland writes. "And an important element of Midwestern identity is believing you don't have an accent."

Full disclosure: Like Mrs. Clinton, I'm a white woman who grew up in the Chicago suburbs. When it comes to pinched nasal vowels and strongly pronounced r's (a phenomenon linguists call rhoticity), I'm With Her.

That "white" part is important. The heavily industrialized (and segregated) Inland North — as dialectologists call the region stretching roughly from central New York across the Great Lakes — "has a wider divergence between white and black speech than anywhere in the country," Mr. McClelland writes, with African-Americans largely maintaining speech patterns brought from the South. (Mr. McClelland notes the existence of various Midwestern "blaccents," though he doesn't explore them.)

"How to Speak Midwestern" is a product of Belt Publishing, a three-year-old Cleveland start-up that promotes a kind of progressive Rust Belt pride without succumbing to cliché or hipster irony. In addition to producing an online magazine, Belt has put out anthologies dedicated to Akron, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Youngstown and other cities, along with titles like "How to Live in Detroit Without Being a Jackass."

Mr. McClelland, whose previous books include "Young Mr. Obama: Chicago and the Making of a Black President" and "Nothin' but Blue Skies: The Heyday, Hard Times and Hopes of America's Industrial Heartland," takes a pan-Midwestern approach, offering a sweeping consideration of the broad forces that have shaped the region's speech, as well as glossaries dedicated to 11 cities, states or subregions.

Readers will learn the lingo of Yinzers (Pittsburghers), Cheeseheads (Wisconsinites), Baja Minnesotans (as those from the Land of 10,000 Lakes derisively call people in Iowa) and Michiganders (a coinage often attributed to Abraham Lincoln, who used it as an insult during the 1848 presidential campaign). But in addition to Midwestern, they will also pick up a good bit of Linguist.

Monophthongization? That's the turning of double-stepped vowels into a single sound, as in Steeler fans waving their "Terrible Tahhls" (towels) as they head "dahntahn" (downtown).

Final obstruent devoicing? The tendency to pronounce final consonants without vibrating the vocal cords, made famous by the "Saturday Night Live" skit "Bill Swerski's Superfans" and its paeans to "da Bearsss" (rather than "da Bearzzz").

Linguists divide the Midwest into three main regions, whose durable speech patterns reflect different waves of European settlement. The Inland North, initially settled by Yankees heading west from New England, is the most consistent region, with an accent that largely sounds the same from Rochester to Milwaukee. (It's also a region whose speech pulled subtly away from the rest of the country during the 20th century, thanks to a mysterious phenomenon known as the Northern Cities Vowel Shift.) The Midlands, which stretches from Pennsylvania and Ohio west to Kansas and Nebraska, shows much greater dialect diversity among cities, thanks to the clan-based social structure of the Scots-Irish, who began arriving via the port cities of the Mid-Atlantic States.

And then there's the North Central region (Minnesota, Northern Wisconsin and the Upper Peninsula of Michigan), which has a strong German and Scandinavian influence, though few people, Mr. McClelland reports, actually sound like characters in " Fargo." For superior Minnesotan, Mr. McClelland prefers the "clipped, brisk, nasal" speech of Kurt Russell in the hockey movie "Miracle."

Mr. McClelland's introductory chapters on these three regions dangle plenty of fascinating tidbits. For example, studies have shown that working-class women show less pronounced regional accents than their husbands, perhaps because of greater contact with doctors, teachers and other professionals.

And who knew that the lack of verb endings in Minnesota's remote Iron Range might be traceable to the polyglot immigrant mineworkers who, in a region lacking a base of native English speakers, had to cook up a mutually intelligible pidgin?

The glossaries, on the other hand, may come as a bit of a letdown to old-school wordniks. As a devotee of The Dictionary of American Regional English, I was disappointed to find Mr. McClelland's glossaries light on entries like "devil strip" (as the grassy area between the sidewalk and the street is known in Akron, Ohio) and "n' at" (a Pittsburghism, short for "and that," which is tacked on to the end of a sentence to mean "et cetera").

Instead, Mr. McClelland offers lots of place nicknames, sports-related slang and local delicacies. Not that they aren't useful: I, for one, plan to seek out mettwurst, a homemade cold-smoked ring sausage, next time I'm in western Iowa. But the word lists come off less as language guides than cheery tourist-bureau advice.

So, whither the Midwestern tongue? One scholar Mr. McClelland interviews sees an erosion of its specific varieties, as young people identify more as Midwesterners than as Chicagoans or Buffalonians. Others see a weakening of the Northern Cities Vowel Shift.

As for Mrs. Clinton, in addition to heeding other portents, she might have taken note of the claim, cited here, that her native Inland North is losing linguistic dominance to the Midlands, which has become the "great swing region of American accents."

As the Scandinavians in my Midwestern family tree might have put it (using an allegedly Norwegian term that, Mr. McClelland writes, is "seldom heard in Norway"): Uff da!