

## **Researchers track evolution of Philly's odd accent**

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PHILADELPHIA

(AP) -- Will Philly no longer be a place where residents drink wooder and root for the Iggles?

Gid eowt!

A University of Pennsylvania linguistics professor says the Southern-inflected sound of the Philadelphia dialect is moving toward a more Northern accent. Some of Philly's trademark twangy, elongated vowel sounds are becoming less so, though others are getting stronger.

"Certain changes have continued in the same direction over 100 years and everybody's doing it," said Bill Labov, who has studied the Philadelphia accent since 1971 and recorded hundreds of native speakers born between 1888 and 1992 and living in dozens of neighborhoods. "It doesn't make a difference if you come from Port Richmond or Kensington or South Philadelphia."

With apologies to comedian Jeff Foxworthy, you might be a Philadelphian if: you say beggle (bagel), wooder (water), tal (towel), beyoodeeful (beautiful), dennis (dentist) or Fit Shtreet (Fifth Street). Your pronunciation of your own hometown might come out more like Philuffya, you call your football team the Iggles, you say "ferry" and "furry" the same way, and "radiator" rhymes with "gladiator."

Technological advances have allowed Labov and his colleagues to turn their

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decades of field recordings into voice spectrographs - computer-generated visualizations of the human voice like an EKG - to track speech variations over time. Regional dialects are cemented by adolescence, so a recording of a 75-year-old Philadelphian made in 1982, for example, should provide a snapshot of what people sounded like around 1925.

The researchers' recent paper in the journal *Language*, titled "One Hundred Years of Sound Change in Philadelphia," concludes that the city's linguistic character is not disappearing altogether - but it is changing, with the most dramatic shifts occurring in the mid-20th century. The reasons aren't entirely clear but higher education appears to be a factor, as does simply being aware that certain local inflections are disparaged by outsiders.

"When we came to one of the most important Philadelphia features, of saying 'gow' for 'go,' it got stronger and stronger," Labov said, "until people born around 1950, 1960, when it turned around and it went the other way."

The Philly accent is getting thicker in other ways, however. Younger speakers use sharper "i" sounds than their parents and grandparents, pronouncing "fight" and "bike" more like "foit" and "boik," and their "a" sounds are closer to "e" so words like "eight" and "snake" are closer to "eat" and "sneak."

"Children speak like their peer groups, not their parents," said Penn linguistics doctoral student Josef Fruehwald, so changes tend to occur by generation.

The familiar Philly-ism "wooder" also might be drying up.

"That sound is moving toward 'ah' so instead of 'cawfee' more Philadelphians are saying 'coffee,' 'wooder' becomes 'water,'" Labov said. "As people become aware ... they tend to reverse them. They say, 'Oh we shouldn't talk that way.'"

Not sure if you've heard the Philly patois? Listen to TV commentators Chris Matthews or Jim Cramer and you'll hear it leeward (loud) and clear. "Jackass" star Bam Margera, who is from nearby West Chester, has it. So does Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, his Philly-flecked American English a vestige of his childhood years in suburban Cheltenham.

Philadelphia characters often sound like New Yorkers - think Rocky Balboa - perhaps because Philly's nasal twang is tougher for non-natives to mimic. In last year's "Silver Linings Playbook," Robert DeNiro hung out with an uncle of co-star (and suburban Philadelphia native) Bradley Cooper to get the dialect down, though his wife played by Australian actress Jacki Weaver comes closest to nailing it.

The generational shift in the dialect was evident during a recent school event at The Franklin Institute, a science museum. Labov and several graduate assistants conducted hands-on demonstrations including one that asked, "Does Mad Rhyme With Sad?" Most of the youngsters answered yes, as in "mahd" and "sahd," while many adults said no, pronouncing "mad" with what linguists call a "tense a" - sort of like "meeyad."

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"I don't know how they can rhyme," said Betty McGonagle, who was on a field trip with students from the Harbor Baptist Christian Academy in Hainesport, N.J. "You're mad (meeyad), and you're sad (sahd)." For her teenage students, the words rhyme.

Mia Weathers, a freshman at the city's Science Leadership Academy, tried with some difficulty to pronounce "mad" as McGonagle does naturally.

"That is just, wow. That's strange," she said with a laugh.

Now the researchers' goal is answering what Labov calls "the most important and most mysterious" question about language change.

"How is it possible that people in every neighborhood in Philadelphia are moving in the same direction?" he said. "We don't have the answer yet."

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