

mil·talk·ee

**Listen once,
hey. Here in the
Cream City,
we have a
dialect all our
own, aina?**

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exhibit a: bub·bler

A drinking fountain. The term's origin is disputed but many attribute its wide use in eastern Wisconsin to a model made by Kohler Co. in the early 1900s.

If you're looking for the perfect speaker of Milwaukee-ese, you might want to listen to Lynn Plevak. The lifelong South Sider and current St. Francis resident uses the whole nine yards of our unique dialect. She goes *by* Grandma's house, not to it. If she requests your presence, it's not just "c'mere," but "c'mere *once*." Like many of us, she drinks from a *bubbler* occasionally. For something fizzier, it's *soda*, not pop. *Bakery* is both a place and what's sold inside.

But Plevak also uses the Teutonic-tinged pinnacle of Milwaukee-ese: *aina*. It's what linguists call a tag question, meaning "isn't it so?," asked to get somebody to agree with your statement. "The weather's nice today, *aina*?" It's a word that used to be an icon of Milwaukee speech, and like so much of the city's identity, it has Germanic roots – a contraction of *ain't* and *ne*, a short form of the German *nicht*, or *not*, according to Wisconsin folklorist James P. Leary.

Plevak, 56, in fact says *aina hey* – an additional flourish – and estimates that 80 percent of the people she knows use *aina*. That took me by surprise, because I spent more than a month searching for someone who uses it, and one expert on Wisconsin language told me *aina* and other Milwaukeeisms were as outdated as leaded gasoline.

In 1997, writer Rick Horowitz went looking for *aina* for an article in this magazine and couldn't find it. When I told my friend and Milwaukee historian John Gurda I was looking for it again, two decades later, he said, "I think Milwaukee-ese has pretty much gone the way of the ethnic proletariat." Among the places I struck out were Graingers Pub & Grill at 35th and Loomis in Greenfield and Tomato Patch, a bar on the other end of 35th, in the North Milwaukee neighborhood. With its paintings of Dean Martin and other movie stars and its photos of old cars, Mazos Hamburgers, on South 27th Street near Oklahoma Avenue, does seem to be a time capsule from 1959, when the ethnic working class still ruled the South Side. While I heard no *ainas*, I do recommend the burgers.

I finally struck paydirt at St. Ann Center for Intergenerational Care on East Morgan Avenue, a day care center for kids and adults. Plevak runs the kitchen there. But I wondered if, like me, she's kind of winking when she says *aina* – using it tongue-in-cheek? "No, it just comes out," she says. "To me, none of this is accent or un-normal; it's just the way we talk."

The way we talk, our dialect, is something we share. It's

something that links us to thousands or millions of people we don't know and identifies us – to ourselves and others – as inhabitants of the place we live, or where we're from. It's one reason we can't stop watching "Making a Murderer," with its thick patois of northeastern Wisconsin; or *Fargo* and its not-far-from-here *okay-thens*; and "Manitowoc Minute," full of Charlie Berens' *real-quick-onces*, *holy cows* and *yets* that in most places would be *stills*.

A•bout 10 years a•go,

Joe Salmons was at home in Madison, reading the morning paper with Wisconsin Public Radio on in the background, when a word caught his ear. Salmons pays more attention than most to the way people talk. He's a linguistics professor at UW-Madison, director of the university's Center for the Study of Upper Midwestern Cultures, and one of three editors of *Wisconsin Talk*, a collection of essays on the many ethnic groups that contribute to the speech of the state's residents. He'd noticed that a new pronunciation of *bagel* was turning up around the state. Where most of us say the word with a long "a," making it sound like *baygel*, some people had begun saying it with a short "a," *baggle*. And that was what Salmons heard on the radio, from a new announcer who was hosting for the first time.

"She said, 'Morning Edition, brought to you by Baggles Forever,'" Salmons recalled, and he told himself, "Oh my God, I've got to record this." It seemed to be a case of a nonstandard pronunciation suddenly going mainstream, and as such it was worth documenting. He forgot to record the next day's broadcast – a Friday, and another *Baggles* – but was prepared the following Monday morning. "I'm sitting at my computer ready to record and I'm listening to it, and she comes on and says 'Morning Edition, brought to you this morning by Baygels Forever.'" He bursts out laughing: "Somebody had corrected her."

Baggle shows how words are always evolving here – in this case an example of the vowel in *bag* to be pronounced like *vague*, Salmons says. Asked to lay out the basics of the Wisconsin dialect, Salmons listed the pronunciation of words like *bad*, *had*, *mad* – we say them with an "a" that is harder than it's pronounced elsewhere: *bayud*, *sayud*, *mayud*. And some of us have a tendency to pronounce the "s" at the end of words like "s," instead of the "z" sound in standard English: *His* may sound more like *hiss* than *hiz*. And there's *dem*, *dere* and *dose* for *them*, *there* and *those* – a stereotype of Wisconsin, and a usage that Salmons says is "clearly receding in some ways" but remains a major marker. It owes to immigrant languages such as German that don't have a "th" sound, and also explains why we also have *a-couple-two-t'ree* here. In his 2016 book *How to Speak Midwestern*, Edward McClelland notes that Midwesterners in general also tend to omit vowels when they talk, as in *steak 'n' ptayta*, or, around here, *M'waukee*.

But a dialect is more than just the way we say words; it's also what we call things. "When you get beyond pronunciation, things tend to get messier and more variable," Salmons says. "But I think stuff like *once* [as in Lynn Plevak's *c'mere once*], a *scissors* [vs. a *pair*



exhibit b: ba•gel

In Wisconsin, most of us pronounce this bakery item *baygel*, with a long "a." But some people use a short "a," making it sound like *baggle*.

the
Mil·wau·kee
Glos·sa·ry

A few terms heard around town – some now, and some long ago



exhibit c: soda

In eastern Wisconsin we tend to say *soda*. In western Wisconsin and most of the rest of the Midwest and West, it's usually *pop*, though the St. Louis area and the Southwest are also *soda* islands.

Down South, they usually say *Coke*, even if it's Pepsi or ginger ale.

aina

A “tag question” seeking affirmation of a statement along the lines of *no?* or *right?* A contraction of English *ain't* and German *ne*, itself a shortened form of *nicht*, meaning *not*.

bakery

Not just the building, but the sweets inside it. Used in German settlement areas.

by

Replaces *to* in some uses, such as “I’m going by Grant Park,” based on the German preposition *bei*, meaning *at* or *next to*.

come with

The extraneous *with* appended to phrases like “Can I come?” is a relic of a common construction in Germanic languages.

fall downstairs

Get a haircut. Based on the German expression *die Treppe herunterfallen*, which apparently refers to the rough look of some home haircuts.

once

Appended to a request or command,

such as “come here *once*.” It comes from the German *mal*, or *einmal*, which is used when you’re asking somebody to do something. The Dictionary of American Regional English reported in 1981 that its use was spreading from Milwaukee to the rest of the state, and that younger people were more likely to use it than older people.

parking ramp

Parking structure. Also widely used in Iowa and Minnesota.

schnibble

A small piece. A German grandmother who was cutting up meat or vegetables might call it *schnibbling*.

schnickelfritz

In German, a mischievous little boy.

squad car

Police car. It has scattered use around the country, but most widely in Illinois and Wisconsin.

yah hey

Used as an affirmation, greeting, or attention-getter, not just in Wisconsin but in Minnesota and Michigan, too.

beyond

Milwaukee's

White' Eng'lish

Milwaukee-ese

is not the dialect spoken by everybody in Milwaukee.

"When we talk about Milwaukee English," says Steve Hartman Keiser, a linguist at Marquette University, "it tends to be seen as only white English."

In a racially segregated place such as Milwaukee, African-American English can be quite distinct from white dialect and can be spoken also by whites and Latinos who grow up in largely black neighborhoods, according to Thomas Purnell, a UW-Madison linguist and author of *Wisconsin Talk's* chapter on black English. He points out that African-American speech has its own rules and sounds and "constitutes a linguistically

legitimate variety of American English and not a bastardization or 'dumbing down' of English."

The south-to-north migration patterns of African-Americans since the middle of the last century have created dialect maps with patterns that run primarily north-south, as opposed to the largely east-west patterns of white speech. "So Milwaukee, Chicago, Memphis and Mississippi tend to share features that are different from New York, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia," says Hartman Keiser.

Still, Milwaukee's variety of African-American English is distinct from that in the South – for example, speakers here are more likely than those in the South to pronounce their "r"s, and the

common "ah" pronunciation of the pronoun *it* is less common here. And, says *Wisconsin Talk* editor Joe Salmons, "African-American populations often selectively pick up pieces of local white vernacular. As far as I can tell, black people raised in Milwaukee say *bubbler*, just like everybody else."

Shannon Kilsdonk, principal of Milwaukee Public Schools' Hartford University School, can confirm the bit about *bubbler*. The mostly African-American kids in her East Side school use it. Same at bilingual schools such as Hayes Bilingual School in Milwaukee – at least in English, says Tania Delgado, a secretary at the school. In Spanish it's *fuente de agua*, or *water fountain*.

of scissors] and *bubbler* are part of the package – all characteristic of eastern Wisconsin more than the rest of the state, though all are found across the state."

Salmons, a native of North Carolina, notes that while the dialects of the South, Texas and New England get a lot of attention from linguists, our neck of the woods is often overlooked. "Aside from people like the DARE folks," he says, referencing the Dictionary of American Regional English project based at UW-Madison, "there has been very little systematic attention to the Upper Midwest. It turns out that the Upper Midwest is more interesting than just about any place in the country, for all sorts of reasons."

Why? For one thing, Wisconsin is home to three different English accents, as described in *How to Speak Midwestern*. The Inland North accent (*cat* sounding like *cayet*; and *box* sounding almost like *bahx*, and *bag* like *bayg*) is shared across the Great Lakes region from western New York to Madison and Green Bay, and is spoken by about the southeastern third of Wisconsin. The North Central accent (the one exaggerated in *Fargo*) is spoken in northern Wisconsin, all of Minnesota and most of the Dakotas. The southwestern corner of Wisconsin speaks with an accent called Midland, which is spoken from Pennsylvania through Kansas and Nebraska; one key feature is what McClelland calls the intrusive "r" – saying *worsh* for *wash*, for example.

For another thing, dialect around here is dynamic. There's something called a Northern Cities Vowel Shift, a phenomenon discovered by linguists in the 1960s and best exemplified by the "Super Fans" skits from "Saturday Night Live," who besides talking about "da Bears," pronounce *Bob* as *Bahb*. It's part of the Inland North accent, but Salmons sees the vowel shift fading in Milwaukee, and even in Chicago. Then there's what's called the *cot-caught* merger, a tendency to pronounce both those words (and such words as *don* and *dawn*) the same. It's been sweeping across the West for years and more recently has been heard in far northwestern Wisconsin.

What's now Wisconsin's dialect, Salmons says, is something that evolved over many years. Until the middle of the 20th century, he feels, there was no such thing. The German-influenced words and phrases we love about Milwaukee-ese were not common to enough of us. "When you have a new community of English speakers form," Salmons says, "it takes several generations for a dialect to sort itself out. In southeastern Wisconsin and up Lake Michigan, you don't even have predominantly English-speaking communities for generations. Well into the 20th century, huge numbers of people were speaking Polish and German and Dutch. ... So a real Wisconsin accent is new."

Salmons believes pieces of what's become our dialect developed by the 1960s, or perhaps earlier. He and two other researchers found evidence of its existence in a study that required listeners to identify which recorded speakers – speaking no well-known Wisconsin words – were from the Badger State. Many could. "It's insanely difficult to say when a fully formed dialect is really 'a thing,'" he says. But "when people can identify speakers without any obvious stereotypes in there, it's an established dialect."

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Mil·wau·kee·ese

may not have enough of its own identity to be a standalone dialect, but it's an interesting subset of Wisconsin's.

I mined it regularly about 10 years ago while writing for a blog by *Journal Sentinel* copy editors. Every couple weeks, between my other duties at the paper, I'd look up a local word in the Dictionary of American Regional English and call Luanne von Schneidmesser, a DARE editor, and ask her how the word derived. Usually it came directly or indirectly from German, as in the case of *aina, by* ("I'm going down by Schuster's") and *da boduvum* (the both of them without the "th-" sounds that German and related languages lack).

Salmons finds that, though *aina* and other German expressions are fading out, a number of them still can be found – and some might even be expanding, all these years after we were America's German Athens. For example, a cousin of his wife's who grew up in Milwaukee imitated Milwaukee women talking about washing their *hairs*, with the "s" pronounced as such (an unvoiced "s," as linguists call it). Both referring to hair in the plural and the softer, almost hissing "s" sound come from the German language, he said. Though the plural *hairs* has pretty much disappeared, Salmons talked to a linguistics class about the "s" plural sound, and one of his students – from Muskego, he thought – said, "I think a buddy of mine does that." She went home and recorded her friends in conversation, Salmons says, and sure enough, "it was just pervasive. ... It turns out if you start looking phonetically at what people are doing, what we hear and what people are actually saying match up very badly."

Other bits of Milwaukee-ese have been documented by his student researchers. One found some speakers in the Milwaukee area who referred to the thing you cut paper with not as *a scissors* – or *a pair of scissors*, as Salmons says it – but as a *scissor*, without the "s" on the end. Salmons' impression is that that's from German, too, as scissors in that language is the singular *die Schere*. Another student went home for break and asked his friends and family how they pronounced the name of the biggest city in the state, the one they were all from. All

of the young ones said *M'waukee*, and the older ones generally pronounced the "il."

While our dialect is unique, aspects of it are found elsewhere, and some terms within it vary from place to place. Steve Hartman Keiser, who teaches linguistics at Marquette University, wrote a journal article about the various terms for stepping in front of somebody in line – terms often top of mind with grade school kids. *Cutting in line* is understood most places, he says, but other terms are place-specific. In Milwaukee, where his family has lived for 15 years, the term is *skipping*, but out toward Madison it changes to *butting* or *budging*. "If you get up toward the Twin Cities, it's solid *budging*," he says. His wife comes from central Ohio, and in Columbus, the term is *ditching*, or sometimes *dishing*.

Hartman Keiser, an Iowa native, and his wife both grew up in the Midland accent area but raised their kids here in the Inland North, and he tells of the kids coming home from school in Greenfield with the local accent, pronouncing *bag* and *drag* as *bayg* and *drayg*. "It used to drive my wife crazy," he says. "She'd be like, 'The kids sound like they're from Wisconsin.' Breaking news, your kids are from Wisconsin." Now his daughter is a senior in college in Indiana, back in the Midland accent area, doing student teaching. Recently, she was reading a student a list of spelling words, and she pronounced *brag* the Milwaukee way, *brayg*. "The kid wrote b-r-e-g. The kid's ears were spot-on. They were hearing something different, so she had to say, 'Oh, I'm sorry. I can say that word differently. Let me try it again.'"

Do you speak like a

Milwaukeean? If so, how do you feel about it? I asked those questions outside Leon's Frozen Custard, where Jenny and Eric Sobczak and Phil Maier, all of Milwaukee, were enjoying cones on one of the first really warm days in late April. Some of their words sound distinctively Wisconsin: *No, boat* and *go* with monophthongal "o"s – pure vowel sounds, not diphthongs that sound like there's another vowel in there. "I always say *hey*," Jenny volunteers. →

Mil·talk·ee

All three are Milwaukeeans who have lived in other places, and all three have stood up for the way they talk. The Sobczaks lived for a while in San Antonio and were teased about the way they talked. “You’ve got to stick up for it,” says Jenny. “I always gave it back to them: ‘Have you listened to the way you talk?’” Maier lived in North Carolina for a while – “People loved the way I said *Wiscahnsin*.”

One reason Eric feels proud of Milwaukee-ese: “It’s recognizable when you meet somebody else [in another place], you can tell they’re from the same location.”

**I tell my students,
know your dialect.
Love your dialect.
Be proud of it.**

— Steve Hartman Keiser,
Marquette University linguist

Hartman Keiser is a lover of language. He speaks English, French and some Pennsylvania German, and has studied Chinese, Arabic, Swahili and even Xhosa, a click language of southern Africa. His field of linguistics expertise is Pennsylvania Dutch, and he’s beginning to study Native American languages of Wisconsin.

“I tell my students, know your dialect. Love your dialect. Be proud of it. It’s part of who you are, because really there’s very little that is tied into, woven into our sense of identity, [more] than our voice,” he says. “As soon as we do this amazing thing and open our mouths and let the breath flow and we start making noises with our body, literally, there’s this very unique sound, that this is the sound I produce so you recognize me as an individual, but at the same time, you find out all sorts of things about me.

“It’s your responsibility to love your dialect and to use it, because it’s both who you are and where you’re from and it’s its own structured, rule-governed language variety.” ●

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