BIG RED
The Holland Harbor Lighthouse
YOOPER TALK

By Kathryn A. Remlinger

(Image of U.P. map within title text courtesy of the Michigan State University Map Library. Background photo of Pictured Rocks courtesy of Pixabay.)
Michigan residents are often surprised to learn that “Yooper” is not a widely known word outside of the state. Yet “Yooper” has been used on the trivia game show Jeopardy! three times since 2003, and lexicographer Ben Zimmer explains that it was not until 2014 that a nationally recognized dictionary, the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary, included “Yooper” as an entry.

Given the U.P.’s geographic isolation and the relative recent history of English being spoken in the region, it is unsurprising that “Yooper” is not more widely known. In fact, it was not until 1975 that the term “Yooper” existed in print, discovered by Jo DeYoung-Patrie at the Marquette Historical Society. However, it existed well before that in spoken language, for words are typically used in everyday conversation before they appear in print.

The history of the English language in the Upper Peninsula is relatively recent compared to other varieties found throughout the United States. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that English speakers regularly visited and then inhabited the region. The people who have immigrated to the Upper Peninsula, the areas they settled, and the languages they speak have ultimately shaped the dialect.

Four major factors have been significant in the development of U.P. English: geography; historical events such as immigration and settlement; economics, including mining and tourism; and language attitudes, or what we think is “good” and “bad” English.

The Roots of a Dialect

The roots of U.P. English do not reach deep into the history of the region, but they spread widely across languages of Native-American inhabitants; varieties of American English spoken by settlers from the Eastern and Midwestern United States; and the languages of emigrants from the British Isles, western and central Europe, Scandinavia, Finland, Russia, and China. As people settled in the Upper Peninsula, their languages came into contact with others, affecting the sounds, words, and phrasing of English.

While the Native Anishinaabek have lived seasonally in the Upper Peninsula since time immemorial, the area was not regularly visited by French missionaries, French-Canadian voyageurs, and European explorers until the seventeenth century. Over the next century, expeditions were made to investigate rich iron and copper deposits, which led to a determined effort to
mine the region. Historian Larry Lankton describes how the world’s largest deposit of native copper in the Keweenaw Peninsula drew thousands to that area. From 1840 through the early twentieth century, the Keweenaw region was a booming timber and copper-mining area, boasting a population of 80,000 in 1900. Soon, it became known as the Copper Country.

At that same time, the entire Upper Peninsula recorded a population of 175,000. Most adults were in some way connected to the mines and mining industry. The majority of those who came to work in the mines and related industries, such as timber, and who settled near Marquette and in the Copper Country were Finnish, Cornish, Italian, French, Swedish, Croatian, German, Irish, and Slovenian. While some folks settled in rural areas, others were attracted to towns with the promise of prosperity earned from businesses and shops. Collectively, industry, agriculture, and commerce were needed to sustain the burgeoning population.

**An Accented English**

With immigrants came many languages, which were maintained by social organizations and church services. Arthur Thurner’s histories of the Copper Country provide evidence of a multilingual environment. In the early 1900s, Houghton-Hancock-area newspapers were printed in six different languages, and Calumet school records from 1908 show that there were more than 40 nationalities among the students. Because the majority of settlers were not native English speakers, they learned an accented English from other non-native speakers. As those folks mixed and mingled and their languages came into repeated contact with English, a new variety slowly took shape—what we today recognize as “Yooper talk,” or U.P. English.

The Finnish language has had a significant effect on English in the northwestern Upper Peninsula, for Finns were one of the last ethnic groups to immigrate there and, by far, the largest group to settle in the area. While most other immigrant families were bilingual in English and their native language by the second generation and fully English monolingual by the third generation, Finnish families typically maintained their language over four and five generations, in part because Finnish was not related to English and it was therefore more difficult for Finnish immigrants to learn English.

Moreover, Finns tended to be literate while many other immigrant groups were not. Because of that, the Finnish language was sustained through reading and writing. Finnish was also preserved through rural and social isolation, since many Finnish families settled in rural areas rather than in towns. Finally, Finns were often socially ostracized because of linguistic differences, their political perspectives, and labor tensions of the early twentieth century. All those factors contributed to creating a prolonged language
contact situation resulting in Finnish affecting what is recognized today as a U.P. dialect. The influences of the Finnish language are mainly evident in vocabulary and grammatical structures, but several pronunciations remain significant. The pronunciation of the word “sauna” as “sow-na” instead of “saw-na,” for example, demonstrates the strong influence of Finnish on English, especially in the northwestern Upper Peninsula. Another characteristic phonological feature of U.P. English is a result of contact between English and immigrant languages. One example is the use of a “d” sound for “th,” which makes “there,” “them,” and “those” sound like “der,” “dem,” and “dose.” That substitution is a result of languages that do not use “th” sounds coming into contact with English.

Vowels also provide evidence of language contact. Sociolinguist Wil Rankinen has found that vowels in the Marquette region are similar to those of Canadian English and states that Canadian English has had the strongest effect on the sounds of U.P. English. Other features of the U.P. dialect that are similar to Canadian English—such as “chook” for “toque,” a knit winter cap, and the use of “eh” at the end of sentences—support his claim. That similarity is not surprising given the close proximity of the Upper Peninsula to Canada and, more important, the similar social and linguistic histories of the two regions.

The Origins of Kowsit Lats

The dialect’s phonology is a clue to the area’s social and linguistic history, but those connections are not always recognized, even by locals. The street name “Kowsit Lats” is one example. The street is located near the Quincy Mine Hoist, north of Hancock, which was in full operation from 1846 to 1945. Ed Yarbrough, former manager of the Quincy Mine Hoist Association, described how miners and their families lived in company-owned housing that skirted the mine and many families had their own cow. Cows grazed at the communal pasture, which was jokingly called “Kowsit Lats,” or “cowsh** flats.”

In the 1980s, Wilber “Wimpy” Salmi, who lived in the area, unofficially named the street “Kowsit Lats” by posting a sign at the corner the road and US-41. At the time, streets did not have official names and instead were known by geographical features, homesteads, mining locations, or town names. Salmi approached the Quincy Township Board to request that the road be officially named Kowsit Lats. In 2001, when the emergency telephone number 9-1-1 was established in the area, the township named the road Kowsit Lats.

In addition to learning its history, understanding the meaning behind the street name Kowsit Lats relies on recognizing local linguistic features. The pun is a result of language transfer. Finnish does not have the “sh” sound, so people whose first language is Finnish, often substitute “s” for the “sh” sound when speaking English. Similarly, the consonant cluster “fl” is not a part of Finnish phonology, so the “f” might be omitted as a result of language contact and transfer.

The Kowsit Lats street sign not only reflects the sociolinguistic history of the area—and, more specifically, the result of contact between English and Finnish—but also provides evidence of language change that has taken place since the 1980s. Few, if any, speakers in the Upper Peninsula today substitute “s” for “sh” sounds. While that substitution would have been spoken by people whose first language was Finnish, there are very few native speakers of Finnish who live in the area today. The resulting language change can give the impression that the dialect is dying.

Converging Dialects in the Upper Peninsula

In addition to the dialect’s sounds, vocabulary also provides a window into the Upper Peninsula’s sociolinguistic past and the various languages that have come into contact in the area. A few examples include words for food borrowed from Finnish: “nisu,” a sweet
cardamom bread; “sauna makkara” for “ring bologna”; and “juustoa,” a kind of baked cheese. Contact with the German language resulted in the use of “bakery” for baked good items rather than the building, and contact with Slovenian produced the word “povatica” for a rolled pastry filled with nuts.

Other examples include “sisu,” from Finnish, which means “perseverance in the face of adversity.” The use of “yah” for “yes” is most likely a borrowing of “ja” from the German and Swedish languages.

Place-names provide some of the best evidence of an area’s social and linguistic history and the languages that have come into contact over time. For example, the name Negaunee comes from an Anishinaabemowin word nigani, meaning “foremost,” “in advance,” or “leading.” “Nigani” was determined to be the closest translation meaning “pioneer,” and Negaunee was chosen as the town’s name because the first pig iron furnace, Pioneer Furnace, was located there.

Contact with the French language is reflected in the place-names “Presque Isle” and “Isle Royale.” The U.P. dialect also includes terms such as “choppers,” possibly stemming from the Anishinaabemowin word minjikaawan for “mitten”; “swampers,” a waterproof, rubber boot, often with leather uppers; “make wood” for the act of splitting and piling wood, which is a direct translation from French; “camp” for “cabin” or “cottage”; and “pank” for “pat down” or “make compact.”

There are also grammatical structures that have transferred from other languages. One characteristic in the Upper Peninsula is the dropping of the preposition “to” when it indicates movement to or toward a location. For example, Yoopers might say “let’s go mall” or “I’m going post office.” That feature is a direct result of language transfer from the Finnish language, since Finnish does not use “to” as a separate preposition before a noun like English does. Another significant grammatical feature has its roots in Irish English—the use of “yous” to refer to the plural “you” in the Upper Peninsula, where speakers in the Lower Peninsula tend to use “you guys.”

**Shifting Economies**

Although the Upper Peninsula began attracting tourists as early as the 1860s, it was not until the mid-twentieth century that the idea of a regional dialect emerged. Dialect features that can be heard today and are associated with the Upper Peninsula—such as “da” for “the” and “yah” for “yes”—previously signaled overlapping immigrant and working-class identities.

During that same time, the tourism industry reframed the Upper Peninsula from an agricultural area to a land for leisure and recreation. Tourism steadily grew during the postwar boom of the 1940s as incomes expanded, mobility increased, and social values shifted. Midwesterners were able to afford cars for more convenient travel to the Upper Peninsula, and U.P. residents more readily vacationed beyond their family camps. With the building of the Mackinac Bridge in 1957, which connected Michigan’s Upper and Lower Peninsulas, tourism was further developed as a major industry.

The role of tourism in the developing U.P. dialect was even more pronounced with the merging of mining and tourist industries. After mining production came to a halt, mines such as the Arcadian Mine in Hancock and Delaware Mine near Copper Harbor opened in the 1940s as tourist attractions, allowing visitors to ride rail cars into the mines and learn about mining techniques.
Those changing economic and social factors brought local speakers into contact with speakers of other varieties of American English and third-generation members of immigrant families who typically did not speak a family's heritage language. Thus the dialect became recognizable as something different and unique to the Upper Peninsula.

It was not until the 1980s that dialect features came into play as a marketing tool in the U.P.’s tourist industry. A prime example is Jack Bowers’ bumper sticker, “Say yah to da UP, eh!,” which was created in 1983 and continues to be popular today. Certain dialect features, such as the pronunciation of “sauna” as “sow-na,” “you betcha,” and “eh” have become so recognizable and meaningful that they are used as advertising tools. When dialect features are used for marketing, they can sell not only souvenirs—including coffee mugs, buttons, magnets, hats, flags, license plates, and T-shirts—but also ideas about the U.P.’s dialect, residents, and locations.

Effects of Language Attitudes

The stereotype of the Yooper as independent and fiercely proud has deep historical roots growing out of class, ethnic, and language differences in the Upper Peninsula. That stereotype has become more positive over the past 20 years and is, in part, a result of the tourism industry, where positive associations about Yoopers and the region’s dialect are represented in a range of products, song lyrics, plays, and films.

However, attitudes about “good” and “bad” English continue to shape ideas about the U.P. dialect, its use, and the people who speak it. One example comes from a university student’s essay, in which the writer describes a class where a professor talked about Yoopers and said, “When they are giving [presentations], I always feel so sorry for them.” The essay continued that, “The class chuckled, agreeing that Yoopers sound funny, and showed sympathy. About 10 minutes later, I left the class and almost left [the university].”

That example demonstrates how language attitudes can and do affect the dialect itself by shaming people into not using it—so much that students drop classes and consider dropping out of college. Linguistic prejudice and related language attitudes have real and lasting effects, especially for those who are labeled with speaking “bad English.”

The more one understands the history of a dialect; the languages that have come into contact to create it; and its effects on sounds, words, and grammatical structures, the better one can come to understand that dialects are actually rule-governed and a result of numerous social and linguistic processes. As with any dialect, many sounds, words, phrases, and sentence structures combine in unique ways to create U.P. English, or “Yooper talk.”

Kathryn A. Remlinger, professor of English at Grand Valley State University, was inspired to investigate the “Yooper” dialect while living in the Copper Country and attending Michigan Technological University. Her publications include the book Yooper Talk: Dialect as Identity in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula (2017).