

Connecticut

Section 14



Jud Guittenua

Accent? What Accent?

Bahston Up Nahth, Noo Yawk to the South.
Connecticut's Voice Is Difficult to Classify.

By GARY SANTANIELLO

It isn't as recognizable as the soft drawl of the Deep South, the twang of Texas or the sing-song cadences of Minnesota, but, yes, there is a Connecticut accent.

Or, more precisely, there are several accents.

Connecticut, as it is so often reminded, is between New York City and Boston, geography that does more than create confusion for which baseball team to cheer. Over the centuries, both cities have influenced the way Connecticut residents talk, although no one in the state pshks the cah in Hahvahd Yahd or goes to Noo Yawk. The Connecticut accent is subtler and further influenced by regional differences.

New Britain residents have a distinct way of speaking that can be traced to the Polish immigrants who settled there beginning mostly in the late 19th century. In Bridgeport and Middletown, the Italians had an influence. And in Fairfield County, there's a little New York in there, but no one sounds like Thurston Howell III, the oh-so-rich character from the 1960's TV show "Gilligan's Island," or William F. Buckley Jr., who was raised in Sharon.

"In my household growing up we watched William F. Buckley Jr. on 'Firing Line,' and to me, that was the Connecticut accent," said Kirk Varner, the news director at Channel 8 in New Haven, who grew up in South Carolina. "The sense was that people in Connecticut spoke in a much more precise kind of way, almost like they were trying to sound erudite, even if they were not."

So, how do we sound?

Vicki MacKenzie, M.A., CCC-SLP, is an accent reduction specialist and corporate speech trainer with Accent on Communication in Stamford (www.accentfairchester.com). She said residents have a neutral-sounding accent, compared to speakers in the rest of the United States, which can be heard in how they pronounce certain sounds.

"In the Connecticut accent, the 'r' is pronounced much more frequently than in New York or Boston," she said.

"Bostonians and New Yorkers tend to drop their final 'r's,' as in 'mothuh' or 'doctuh'."

"Bostonians and New Yorkers also pronounce their 'o's' and 'a's' differently from each other and from Connecticut."

Ms. MacKenzie said "forest" and "orange" are pronounced FORE-ist and OR-inge in Connecticut, but as FAR-ist and ARE-inge in New York. And unlike in Connecticut, the letter 'o' in Boston is pronounced with an 'aw' sound, as in Bawb for Bob and frawg for frog.

Then come the regional differences.

The Hartford area accent is distinctly different from Boston's, particularly the sound of the letter 'a,' said Nancy Morgenstern, M.A., CCC-SLP. She's an adjunct faculty member at University of Connecticut Medical School, a communication coach and workshop leader, who owns SPEAKBEST in Avon (www.speakbest.com). Numerous Connecticut residents use the Standard American English pronunciation of the letter 'a,' which she likens to the 'a' sound in the word "allocate".

"The 'a' used in Hartford sounds like the 'ai' in air or the 'ea' in yeah," she said. "You can hear the accent in words like Gary (GAIR-ee), ferry (FAIR-ee) and charity (CHAIR-it-ee)," she said. "In Boston, the 'a' in bath sounds like 'ah.'"

The New Britain accent is much more distinctive, even in the way residents pronounce the name of their city: "New BREH-en."

"It's called a glottal stop," said Patricia Gomola, Ph.D., CCC-SLP, a speech pathologist at the Speech and Language Institute in Middletown (www.speechdr.com). "It's not a 't' sound. You say it in the back of your throat, as in the middle of the expression 'uh-oh'. It's the same thing when they say double-t words like cattle or bottle." In New Britain, such words come out as "CAH-uhl" or "BAH-uhl."

Ms. Morgenstern attributed this sound to New Britain's large Polish-American population. "They don't enunciate their consonants as much," she said.

"The funny thing is, you go into the next town, and you don't hear it," Dr. Gomola said.

Although New Britain and Bristol are neighboring cities, speech patterns in Bristol are different, traceable to half a century ago, when an automobile manufacturing company, New Departures, recruited many workers from Quebec.

"There ended up being a lot of French-speaking Canadians who stayed in the area," Dr. Gomola said. "Their influence infiltrated into the language. Each language has its own pronuncia-

tions and intonations, and the French tend to end a sentence with an upward tone, even though it is not a question," citing the example: "You are going to the store?," instead of "You are going to the store."

Likewise, she said, Middletown and Bridgeport have the influence of its large Italian-American population, many of whose relatives emigrated from Sicily. The distinctive sound is heard in the pronunciation "idear" for "idea." "It's mostly the Sicilians in Middletown who put the 'r' at the end of some words Italians who aren't from 'off the boot' don't do it."

Part of Mr. Varner's job as news director of Channel 8 is deciding which voices and accents will be acceptable to Connecticut listeners, so he counsels new hires in the proper pronunciation of Connecticut names. "Wuhl-cut" for Wolcott and "HEE-brun" for Hebron, for example.

"There are a lot of 'o's that sound like 'u's in Connecticut," he said. "We want people who know the correct way to say town names. You don't have to be from New Britain to say New Britain correctly."

Whereas Connecticut's sound has been influenced by the influx of people from Boston, who bring along their broad vowels, and people from New York, who bring their hard consonants, it has also been influenced by mobility.

"People are so much more worldly now," Dr. Gomola said. "There are people in the Bronx and Queens who've never been to Manhattan, so their accents remain strong. But you're not going to find someone from Greenwich who hasn't been all over the world. The upper class tends to lose its accent because they're more likely to travel. And because they want to lose it."

Dr. Gomola calls the perception of an upper-class way of speaking "the Auntie Mame accent," after the blue-blooded character portrayed by Rosalind Russell in the 1950's play and film. "That really doesn't exist anymore," she said. "It's more a stereotype of the upper-upper-upper class in Fairfield County from days gone by."

"Another strong influence on speech patterns is education," Ms. Morgenstern said. "Accent variation is not as prevalent in a well educated population," she said. "They're more cognizant of the way they speak."

Consequently, the New York accent doesn't extend too far into Connecticut before losing its influence.

"It doesn't usually extend into wealthy pockets like Greenwich, Darien or New Canaan," Dr. Gomola said. "It can wiggle around the tracks, because that's where the poorer pockets are, even as far as Bridgeport."



Dr. Patricia Gomola, a speech pathologist from Middletown, is shown here working with a client from northern Italy.

Speech patterns in the eastern half of the state, particularly farther up the I-395 corridor, resemble those of Boston. On the Sunday morning "Radio Flea Market" on Norwich station WCTY (97.7 FM), listeners can hear callers seeking buyers for "camp-uhs," "trail-uhs" and "Nov-ah Supe-ah Sports."

"I'm from Wisconsin originally, so it's been kind of challenging for me," said Jimmy Lane, the station's program director. "One time I asked someone to spell their name for me and he said it was Martin. It sounded like MAH-tin. I'd have never guessed that's what it was."

Speech patterns develop early in life. "Most people acquire the accent of their peers, typically from ages 3 through 7," Ms. MacKenzie said. "Once children reach puberty, the wiring in the brain becomes more rigid, and therefore, it is

more difficult to acquire a native sounding accent in a second language."

After puberty, reducing or changing an accent often depends on a strong desire to do so, practice, and training with an accent reduction specialist.

"Some people are reluctant to modify their accents, but if they're motivated to change it, they can," Ms. Morgenstern said. "But some people don't want to lose their accent because it defines who they are. It depends on how important it is to someone."

Although Mr. Varner is attuned to accents, particularly those in Connecticut, he finds categorizing his own accent confounding.

"People up here say I have a southern accent," he said, "but when I go home to South Carolina, I hear 'Where are you from?' So who the heck knows?"