

### It's a subject of scorn and parody, but do we really have an accent?

By JULIET FLETCHER, Staff Writer, | Posted: Sunday, July 19, 2009 | Press of Atlantic City

[\(video clip\)](#)

Every workday, Helene Vaspoli dons her rollerskates and cruises across the floor at Boogie Nights nightclub.

The lights overhead flicker blue and orange. Or, as locals might say, "Awwrange."

At the bar, she watches a guy tell a girl she's "byooduful" - can he buy her a drink? But the girl's tired, and drinking just "wooder."

Vaspoli - well-known around these parts as the club's Roller Girl - hears a word cloud of different accents. But among them, the local New Jersey dialect stands out.

At work was where Vaspoli first noticed and reacted to the local tone. A proud native of these parts, she doesn't just defend her accent - she likes to own it.

"Cawfee," she says. "We don't say 'coffee.'"

New Jersey voices have carved their own special place in pop culture.

They are the gruff tone of the tough-guy, or perhaps the dolled-up but feisty girlfriend.

But beyond caricature, the source of a local dialect is complex, growing out of the area's immigrant roots. And in the face of summer out-of-towners' uncute jokes about local pronunciations - "tomaters" and "t'ree," "Iggles" and "attytood" - New Jerseyites themselves should retort with this bombshell.

There is no "New Jersey accent." Not exactly.

C'n we explaiyn?

Draw a map of the state. Hint: it has the shape of a wiggly, slanted S.

It's not a myth: The north and south ends of the state sound different.

Each half of the state is overwhelmingly influenced by its nearest neighbors, according to Lois Spitzer, a linguist and member of Richard Stockton College's education faculty.

"When we talk about the New Jersey accent, we're talking really about two different geographic areas: The north, which is affected by New York, and the south, which is closer to Philadelphia," she said. "There's just some crossover."

Translation: Anyone from New York or Philly who comes down and rips the Jersey accent bears some responsibility for how it sounds.

Dr. Carmen Fought, a linguist at Pitzer College in California who studied at the University of Pennsylvania, agrees. "When we think of a Jersey accent, we shouldn't generalize," she says.

The accent grew out of the new arrivals who flooded the East Coast, especially throughout the 19th century.

Italians, Scottish and Irish immigrants poured into New York and eventually moved into New Jersey. Italians brought soft "g" and "l" sounds, while Scots and Irish brought a variety of broguish rolled "r"

sounds. All of that piled on top of the existing sounds used by Dutch settlers - characterized by a long "oo," as found in "stoop."

Closer to Philadelphia, the Italians were a more prominent group, having a great effect on South Philadelphia dialects. The Philadelphia accent also owes a debt to German immigrants, who used swishing "sch" sounds in many words.

In the middle of the state, there's no clear dividing line for these two dialects. Just a twangy gray area.

But key sounds have their distinct origins. The word "huge," let loose by a North Jerseyan, might become "yooge" - while the "h" may stay in place more down south. And that wiggly "S" shows up in the speech down south, where locals might refer to the Springsteen song as "The 'Shhtreets' of Philadelphia."

There's one word that forces itself into the conversation - and the accent wars - in the summertime.

When Theo Foltz, 18, of Northfield, walked into a Miami restaurant a few months back, he couldn't make himself understood.

"I wanted a glass of water," he said. But, as Spitzer points out, to Florida ears Foltz's request sounded like "wooder."

That word is pronounced in unique ways from Boston to Baltimore, Fought explains. Even here, the pronunciation is more "wooder" in the north, and "wuder" in the south. In Baltimore, the word sounds more like "warder," while Boston says "Wahdeh."

So there's more to the singling out of Jersey for its funny accent than just the odd pronunciation.

"In stereotypes ... we don't treat the accent as high status," Fought says. "New Jersey isn't seen as an exciting or appealing place to live."

While other accents from other places may convey more status, Fought says, voices from places such as New Jersey have actually become cooler.

"They become associated with a kind of working-class authenticity," explains Spitzer. And those voices ring out in places where people have fun - whether in local diners or on reality shows, attached to oversized personalities.

That may be why Vaspoli, 31, struggles with how much to show her accent. She is happy to drawl "cawfee," but at work, where she wants to get ahead, she resists using local abbreviations.

"I talk to a bunch of people all day, and I can't come off looking like, 'You want t'ree tickets?'" she says. "I'm really good at controlling my speech."

Gone are the local acrobatic vowels. Back in place are the once-dropped word endings.

Dan Higbee thinks he's a good example of the same trend.

"I probably lost much of my accent when I moved to the mid-West," explains the Dorothy resident, who finds himself back here in retirement, fishing off the dock in Mays Landing.

With stints across the States and studying in France, Higbee fits the profile of one who typically loses a strong accent.

"As levels of education rise, accents disappear," Fought says. But Higbee still revels in exaggerating certain words. "Youse," he says, rolling the contracted word around his tongue.

Fought says a melting-pot environment means accents can cross racial and ethnic barriers, where they mix with inherited and learned patterns of speech.

Young second-generation immigrants, in particular, act out that pride in an obvious way, picking up hyper-local pronunciation from school friends but mixing it with elements of their parents' tongue.

"If the patterns in New Jersey's Mexican and Puerto Rican communities follow those I've tracked in California," she says, "I'd think you'd hear younger people say words like 'orange' -'awwr-anch' - with the 'a' sound at the front very Jersey, and the ending 'ch,' like in the Spanish word, 'naranja.'"

For every new speaker who has a lifetime to learn the local speech patterns, there's someone trying to pick it up shorthand.

Take Nicolas Cage.

Joel Goldes, a Los Angeles-based speech coach, got a call from the California-born actor in November 2007. Movie executives working on "The Wrestler" wanted him to try out as a possible replacement for Mickey Rourke. Cage called Goldes in to help him brush up on his New Jersey accent.

"I had about an hour with him," Goldes remembers. The accent is one he frequently teaches, he says, because few actors do it naturally, and because the vowels are tricky.

"We did a very quick script line reading. And all I could do was brush up some of his more obvious sounds. Like dropping the 'r' in mother, and rounding out the vowel in 'time,' to be 'toime.'"

If the result sounds like it might not fool a Folsom fifth-grader, Goldes says the technique is not to shoot to be authentic.

"Remember, the client still has to have time to act," he says. "What you always go for is just enough of the sounds people associate with New Jersey. Just enough to give an impression."

Cage, of course never stole the part from Rourke. But even if he had, Goldes says it would still fit a limited spectrum of mainstream roles for New Jersey speakers.

"Whenever I teach this accent," he says, "it seems to be for gangsters or mobsters - or suburban housewives."

Think James Gandolfini's Tony Soprano, or Danielle Staub, star of "The Real Housewives of New Jersey" - with a voice kindly described by Vaspoli as "nasal."

For Spitzer, the Stockton linguist who grew up on Long Island, the authentic sounds of Jersey are a delight.

"I find this accent, and every accent, fascinating," she says. "When everyone sounds the same, that one person who sounds different makes my ears perk up."

Still, she can't deny linguistics point to just one famous candidate as best capturing a southern New Jersey accent - and he's a fictional Philadelphian voiced by a guy who grew up in New York City.

"When I think of a classic South Jersey accent, I always think of Rocky Balboa," she laughs.

From a linguistic expert, that's ammunition Jerseyites can keep in their back pockets for the next time a shoobie slights their speech.

But for Goldes, the beauty of New Jersey remains the real-life caricatures. You know, the ones who can't help but take it to extremes.

"Watching 'The Real Housewives of New Jersey,'" he concludes, "I actually heard one of them say, 'Sangwich.'"

"I had to rewind it and check, and yes, she did. That's just gold."

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## A New Jersey glossary

While pronunciations can be shaped by everything from family to mouth shape, some words clearly show the sounds of New Jersey.

**Boddle:** The "tt" in "bottle" is turned into a "dd."

**Byoodeeful, Gradeetewde:** Both words, "beautiful" and "gratitude," have the middle "i" sound stretched to an "ee."

**Cawfee, Awn:** The "o" sounds in "coffee" and "on" become stretched out.

**Iggles:** The "e" in "Eagles" frequently gets shorter, closer to an "i," that rhymes with "giggle."

**Shhtreets:** The "s" in "streets" becomes a "shh," sound, known as a "palliative s."

**Tomader, Casiner, Winder:** The last syllable of "tomato," "casino" and "window" gets easily dropped.

**Tree:** The "h" sound in the word "three" can disappear.

**Vegg, Plegg:** The "a" and "g" in "vague" or "plague" become abrupt, dispensing with the soft "ue" at the end.

**Wooder:** The definitive word for parody, "water" changes its "t" sound to a "d," and its "a" sound to an "oo" further north, or "u" sound closer to southern New Jersey.

**Yooge, Yooman:** The "h" sound in "huge" or "human" might softly disappear in southern New Jersey accents, while northern New Jersey speakers turn the "h" into a strong "yoo" sound.