Minnesota Dialect

A dialect, according to George Yule, “describe[s] features of grammar and vocabulary as well as aspects of pronunciation” (195). A dialect can be split into regional and social dialects. This paper will focus on regional dialects, which means that the dialect spoken is influenced by the location of the speaker. The Minnesota dialect, while not one of the first that comes to mind, as perhaps the Southern or New York dialects are, is one of the most recognizable and imitated dialects. This paper will delve into the history of the Minnesota dialect, the different aspects of the Minnesota dialect, and different cultural interpretations of the Minnesota dialect.

Minnesota was first settled by Native Americans and then fur traders and lumbermen. These loggers came “from Vermont and Maine, many via Wisconsin and Michigan. There were also a good number of Irish woodsmen” (Carver 82). By 1850, immigrants from Norway, Sweden, and Germany were settling in Minnesota and with them came their languages. In 1860, the first census to take into account origin of birth was taken. It showed that “the northern section of the Upper Midwest—Minnesota, Wisconsin and northern Michigan—had a higher percentage (30 percent or more) of its population born outside of the United States than most other parts of the country…the largest group of foreign-born settlers were Scandinavians (though Germans made up the largest single nationality)…” (Carver 83-84). In 1896, official election instructions were printed in nine languages, including German, Norwegian, Swedish and Polish, according to John M. Spartz.
In 1930, a study was done in Northern Minnesota that revealed that “probably more than half of the people are Norwegian, and in certain communities Norwegian is spoken as much as English” (Simley 469). Even up into the 20th century, many Scandinavian immigrants lived in Minnesota. Present day, many people who come from Minnesota have relatives and ancestors who emigrated from Scandinavian countries.

One of the most common features in the Minnesotan dialect is ending a sentence with a preposition which, interestingly enough, comes from the Scandinavian language patterns. In a dissertation written by John M. Spartz in 2008 exploring this curious sentence structure, it is discovered that the Scandinavian languages “consisted of constructions...similar to the come with construction that remains in Minnesota today. It is these people, speakers of these languages, who came into contact with speakers of English living in Minnesota over the course of several generations. Over time and through a change in their language varieties, come with and go with became part of the English language of this dialect” (57). Although this feature will be talked about later on, it is a great example of the sort of borrowing that has happened from the Scandinavian languages in the Minnesota area.

There are many noticeable aspects of the Minnesota dialect. One feature, like was mentioned above, is the sentence structure ending with a preposition. This type of phrase, while considered grammatically incorrect in other dialects, is a standard sentence in the Minnesota dialect. When speakers of other dialects hear a phrase such as “Do you want to come with?” they typically will ask “with whom?” or “to where?” In a lecture given at the University of Minnesota in 1978 by Harold Allen, he said “My first couple of years I was
here [Minnesota], my little girl came home from school . . . I was going somewhere. She piped up, 'I want to go with.' I said, 'Where did you hear that?' She just said, 'I want to go with'—She didn’t say it for long, but she did for a while” (Qtd. in Spartz 49). Spartz goes on to point out that “Allen mentions two issues of importance: The construction was, apparently learned by his daughter when they moved to Minnesota, and it exists (in his opinion) due to its existence in the grammars of speakers of Norwegian, Swedish, and German” (Spartz 49). This sentence structure was inherited by the Scandinavians who immigrated to this part of the country and only exists in and immediately around Minnesota. In a more personal note, my parents lived on the East coast, specifically in Connecticut, for a couple of years and while there, a friend of theirs was always annoyed with their sentence structures. My mother would say, for example, “I’m going to go put the baby down” and her friend would say forcefully “Down where?!” The fact that my mother never finished the prepositional phrases at the end of the sentence annoyed this friend who spoke in the New England dialect and therefore assumed that those sentences were wrong grammatically.

Many different terms exist for a carbonated beverage; here in Minnesota, it is commonly called *pop*. This term is found throughout the Midwest, but some identify it solely with Minnesota. “*Pop* may have originated deep in the Inland North; early quotes place it in Wisconsin (1882), Arkansas (1893), and in the ‘midwest’ (1920 in Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street*). The commercial distribution of the product and thus the name may have spread *pop* in an atypical way, but one that generally stayed within the cultural region, which to an extent corresponds to the economic and commercial region” (Carver 80). Although this term was not invented in Minnesota, it is heavily used here and is thus
identified with it. Personally, traveling in the southern states has proved that if one asks for a *pop* instead of a *soda* or a *coke*, they are immediately asked if they are from Minnesota, not just the Midwest.

Other terms exist that are used specifically in and around Minnesota. Two that are found centered in Minnesota are *biff* or *biffy* and *boulevard strip*. According to Craig M. Carver, a *biff* or *biffy* is a toilet and a *boulevard strip* is the grass strip between the curb and sidewalk (84). Other terms that are recognizable as Minnesotan were names for specific pastries. They are “the *long-john*, which is an oblong deep-fried cake usually with a frosting, and the *bismarck*, which is a deep-fried cake but with a filling of jelly or custard” (Carver 85). Other terms were mentioned, but some were ambiguous as to what part of the Midwest they were from and therefore will not be mentioned. On another personal note, a professor who moved from a different part of the country once commented on the fact that Minnesotans call dessert treats “bars”. She didn’t understand the term and also poked fun at the way the vowel was drawn out in the middle of the word. It was a shock to learn that the term was not used in other places.

When speakers of other American English dialects come into contact with a native Minnesotan, often they ask the Minnesotan to say words to hear the vowels being drawn out, even simply to say “Minnesota.” The Minnesota accent is one that many try to imitate, but not very successfully. One example is of the movie set in Minnesota that is inaccurately titled *Fargo*. The Minnesota accent in that movie is laid on very thick, at least according to native Minnesotans. The dialect coach for the movie *Fargo*, Frances McDormand, took all the actors from that film to North Dakota to work on the accent. She said they “couldn’t
believe people really did speak that way” (Qtd. in Randall). When Charlize Theron appeared in the film *North Country*, according to an article by Chris Hewitt in the St. Paul Pioneer Press, she asked Minnesotans what she should do to make it a good movie. They told her to make sure the movie told the truth of the story it was portraying and to not overdue the accent. In the same article, Theron admits that “It’s the hardest accent [she’s] ever had to do” (Hewitt). She also comments that she understood once she got to Minnesota that the reason Minnesotans speak with a nasal sound and with their mouths not very wide is because of the cold. On this topic, the Pioneer Press also quotes Larissa Kokernot who was an actress and dialect coach on the movie *Fargo*. She states that “the Iron Range accent which, like British accents comes from the front of the mouth, not the back of the throat, is a holdover from the cold-climate countries Rangers come from here” (Hewitt). This is an interesting take on the way Minnesotans speak. The Scandinavians evolved their way of speaking to take into account their cold climate and when they moved to Minnesota, where a similar climate existed, they passed on these ways to generations of Minnesotans to come.

Another interesting way to look at the Minnesota dialect and the Minnesota accent is the book *How to Talk Minnesotan* by Howard Mohr, who used some of the material on *A Prairie Home Companion*. The book is a tongue-in-cheek look at the Minnesota dialect and mannerisms. Everything it offers, however, are true aspects of speech here in Minnesota. It contains handy phrases like “You bet”, “That’s different”, and “Whatever” followed by lessons in where to use these phrases once in Minnesota. One of these lessons that is drawn from real life is the one on the phrase “oh, for”. This “construction is used mostly by women to describe a person, thing, or animal, including oneself. For example, if a kitten climbs into someone’s shoe, you would say *Oh for cute*” (Mohr 70). While even Minnesotans can read
this and laugh, it comes from the knowledge that this is a common phrase here. This book also delves into behavior in Minnesota, such as how to start a car in the winter, only accepting food on the third offer, and the Minnesota long goodbye. These are more mannerisms in Minnesota, but the dialect plays in with the various conversations that are modeled in the book in each section. While taking in the humor of *How to talk to Minnesotan*, it is hard to ignore the factual side of these aspects of Minnesotan speech.

The Minnesota dialect is an interesting one because of its rich history, the different aspects involved in it, and the rich cultural interpretations of it. The wide amount of Scandinavian immigration in the area influenced vocabulary and sentence structure. It also influenced the very way Minnesotans talk, with a narrow mouth and from the front of the mouth instead of the throat. This way of talking still proves vital in the cold winter months of Minnesota. Not only are there differences in vocabulary from other dialects, the Minnesota dialect also contains a Scandinavian based sentence structure where the sentence ends with a preposition. Other dialects may consider this grammatically incorrect, but it has come up lately that it is just a quirky part of the grammar in Minnesota. Movies such as *Fargo* and *North Country* attempt, sometimes unsuccessfully, to show the Minnesota dialect. There is even a sarcastic book teaching those who wish to visit *How to Talk Minnesotan*. The Minnesota dialect is a very interesting dialect when taking into mind the history and climate of the area. According to the preface of *How to Talk Minnesotan*, “Minnesota is a pretty good deal, mostly—depending” and the dialect falls right in with that (Mohr ix).
Works Cited


Spartz, John M. *Do you want to come with?: A Cross-Dialectal, Multi-field, Variationist Investigation of with as Particle Selected by Motion Verbs in the Minnesota dialect of English*. . Purdue University, 2008. 49-57.