

Finding our voice: A primer on the Manitoba dialect

GOT A BOOTER BUMPER-SHINING TO THE LC, YOU SAY? YOU MUST BE FROM MANITOBA

By: David Sanderson

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Open wide and say "ah." Now say "ooh," now "oh."

Thirteen years ago, Winnipegger Sky Onosson was teaching English in a small town in South Korea.

Onosson and his wife had a television set in their rented apartment but the unit only picked up two English-language stations — one that ran Hollywood blockbusters 24/7 and a second that aired National Geographic specials.

One evening, the couple was watching the latter channel when a documentary about Churchill came on. The moment Onosson heard people from Winnipeg being interviewed — men and women who had travelled north to witness polar bears in their natural habitat — he burst out laughing.

His wife, who didn't grow up in Manitoba, asked him what was so amusing.

"I told her the people speaking had such a strong accent that it really stood out to me," Onosson says. "It was just so much different from all the other English I'd been hearing (in South Korea) and I guess the best way to put it is it sounded like home."

"Sounds like home" is a pretty fair description of what Onosson, now a linguistics student at the University of Victoria, is currently focusing his attention on. For the past few months Onosson has been sitting down with life-long Winnipeggers, ages 30 and up, in a bid to gather research for his PhD — a project the father of two has tentatively titled Study of Manitoba English.

To put it simply, Onosson believes people from this area have a dialect all their own. And while he admits our accent is less obvious than what you'd hear in places like Texas or ("Fuggetaboutit!") New York City, Onosson intends to prove we pronounce particular words and sounds differently than anglophones from other parts of the continent.

"These are not unique things; people have written about the kind of stuff I'm studying before," says Onosson, a founding member of '90s rock band the New Meanies. "Except when experts in this field talk about Canadian English-speakers as having distinctive accents, they're usually referring to people from southern Ontario or Newfoundland. Winnipeg and Western Canada as a whole haven't been looked at too extensively so that's what I'm attempting to do."

'Nobody thinks they have an accent'

Onosson chuckles when a reporter recounts a story about a person he dated, years ago.

Tammi-Jo was from Iowa, the writer says. And whenever said scribe visited her in Mankato, Minn., where she attended university, Tammi-Jo would call her friends into the room to listen to "the funny way" her Winnipeg beau spoke.

"Nobody thinks they have an accent; everybody is convinced that the way they speak is, as you put it, perfectly normal. But it really is universal."

-Sky Onosson

"Say 'couch,'" she'd implore him to the delight of her buddies, who also hailed from the American Midwest.

"But I just said it — and it sounded perfectly normal," he'd protest, before being interrupted by somebody begging him to "say 'doubt' or 'pout,' again, please?"

"That's the thing," says Onosson, whose interest in the field can be traced to his teen years, when he became fascinated with the made-up languages J.R.R. Tolkien employed in *The Lord of the Rings*. "Nobody thinks they have an accent; everybody is convinced that the way they speak is, as you put it, perfectly normal. But it really is universal. I know francophones from Winnipeg who go to Quebec and get made fun of because of their French."

Because any supposed Winnipeg dialect is subtle at best, Onosson is focussing his attention on diphthongs. In plain language, a diphthong refers to two vowel sounds that occur within the same word or syllable, such as 'ow' or 'oy.'

"If you go to the U.K. or Australia or South Africa, it's the vowel sounds that are going to be different, not the consonants," Onosson explains. "The vowels in English have moved around quite substantially, which is why our spelling is so difficult to learn."

"Presumably, the words 'doubt' and 'tough' would have sounded roughly the same hundreds of years ago — and most likely, neither sounded the way each one does nowadays."

The way we say 'aw' is changing

Dr. Nicole Rosen is a linguistics professor at the University of Manitoba. Rosen grew up in Winnipeg, but moved away when she was 17 and spent the next 25 years living and working in France, Ontario and Alberta.

While Rosen was teaching at the University of Lethbridge, she conducted a study similar to Onosson's, only hers focused on people from the prairies in general, as opposed to just Manitobans.

"This field of research is easier — or easy-ish — if you're dealing with the U.S.," Rosen says. "You can definitely tell if somebody's from New Jersey versus the deep south but in Canada it's not as obvious. Newfoundlanders definitely have an accent all their own, as do English-speaking people from Quebec, but when so-called experts were originally trying to put together a map of North American English, they lumped Ontario, the prairies and B.C. together — even though there are a few distinct subtleties among those three (areas)."

When Rosen was in high school, her family would occasionally host exchange students from Minneapolis. Rosen recalls an instance when, at dinner-time, a guest asked her if she liked to play "hackey."

"I was so confused," Rosen says. "'Hackey-sack is like so five years ago,' I said. Then I realized she was talking about hockey. And that's exactly the sort of difference that's been going on: in certain regions, the 'aw' sound is moving more towards 'ah,' while here in Manitoba, the way we say 'aw' is moving in the opposite direction."

Rosen says a number of factors are involved in order for accents to take hold. Cultural backgrounds are key, she says, as are geography and political boundaries. For example, while the cities of Toronto and Buffalo, N.Y., are less than 200 kilometres away from one another, it's fairly easy to tell residents of each apart, she goes on, by their speech pattern.

In addition to studying vowel sounds, Rosen has also spent time analyzing conversational language and how it differs from region to region.

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"For example, what I heard a lot of in Alberta - and what I'm also hearing here - is people who say 'I seen,' as in, 'I seen that movie,' or 'I seen that game.' People will say, 'Oh, that's bad English,' but when a linguist hears that, we don't think a person is speaking poorly, necessarily. We think he's simply talking the same way people in his circle or community talk - that it's a natural progression of language."

'Everyone thinks the way everyone else talks is odd'

Onosson's study works like this: he and his subject are seated in front of Onosson's laptop. After Onosson explains a few rules — speak clearly, don't rush, pronounce the words you see the way you would in everyday conversation — the session begins.

For about 10 minutes, words ("ride, right, lied, light, gouge, mouth, loud, lout, sighed...") appear on the laptop, one at a time.

Subjects are recorded and the results are transferred to a spectrogram, which offers Onosson a visual representation of what each person is saying. In time — Onosson has seven years to complete his PhD, he says with a laugh — he will compare his findings with people from other parts of the country, to show differences and similarities.

"In the end you have to generalize because you can never be 100 per cent definitive about what you're saying when it comes to language," he says. "I won't write this in my thesis but what it all boils down to is everyone thinks the way everyone else talks is odd."

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Dave Sanderson was born in Regina but please, don't hold that against him.

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The Manitoba dialect

In addition to accents, Sky Onosson says it is often easy to tell where a person is from by the words they use.

"I've had this discussion many times; there are a lot of terms that, when you start thinking about it, you go, 'Oh yeah, nobody else says that,'" he says. "You see these things go around on Facebook and people go, 'I don't know that was a Canadianism,' or something only Winnipeggers say.

The word 'parkade,' for example, is very local to Winnipeg. It's maybe used in one other place in Ohio but not anywhere else, from what I can tell."

Here is a list of words Onosson says are tell-tale signs the speaker is probably from Manitoba.

booter ("as in, 'I stepped in a big puddle and got a booter...'"")

social ("for a couple getting married...")

dainties ("those fancy sandwiches...")

presentation ("at a wedding...")

pickereel ("apparently known as walleye elsewhere...")

bumper-shine ("a local sport...")

LC ("short for liquor commission...")

boulevard ("referring to the grass between a sidewalk and a roadway...")

vendor ("where beer is purchased...")

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