

LET'S GO BY WISCONSIN

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Persons who grew up in Wisconsin don't always realize the profound yet subtle influence European languages have had on the English currently spoken there. Many of the idioms, colloquialisms and linguistic patterns in use in the Badger state are descended from similar ones found in many European tongues. One scholar once remarked that language patterns found in New York City and Wisconsin are the same, except in Wisconsin farmland separates the various ethnic neighborhoods.

The largest city, Milwaukee, has almost every European nationality, as well as African Americans represented. Most smaller cities and towns trace their origin to one of several immigrant roots, the most numerous being Norwegian, German, Polish, Italian, Irish and Swiss. Descendants of each of these groups have preserved various cultural elements, as might be expected. What many persons often overlook, however, is many cultural artifacts from original linguistic traditions carry on, but do so *in English*. As a result, it's common for people not necessarily descended from a particular group to use terms and linguistic peculiarities of that group, often oblivious of the ethnic origin of what they're saying.

For example, many times in good natured fun, people jokingly threaten to kick someone else's hind end, or to warn a mischievous child of an impending spanking. However, the synonym for backside often used is *dupa* (pronounced DOOPA), a noun from the Polish language. If it's a warning given a naughty child, one is apt to hear that punishment might be administered by *Bousha* and *Jaja* (Grandma and Grandpa). In a happier vein, a group of folks preparing to watch their beloved Packers on TV are likely to enjoy a snack of *kielbasa y piva* (sausage and beer).

Sometimes chance similarities between an English word and a European language one, resulting in a false cognate, will lead a speaker astray. For instance, the German language preposition *bei* (pronounced BY and meaning to), leads persons preparing to embark on a journey to declare in English that they're going by, rather than to some place. Add this to the inevitable placing of a linking verb at the end of the sentence and often a disdain for pronouncing the "th" sound, and one could almost be in Hamburg or Berlin, were it not for the fact he or she was speaking English.

Another European influence on English results from inflexion and accent differences. For example, all four Scandinavian languages, Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Icelandic, have influenced Wisconsin English. All four of these tongues from northern Europe share a different inflexion pattern than that found in German, Romance or Slavic tongues. A pronounced tendency found among many non-Scandinavian Wisconsinites is to apply this melodic up and down syllabication pattern to multi-syllable English words, including the proper noun "Wisconsin" itself. The influence of past European political events, as well as pronunciation peculiarities, have also influenced many Wisconsin residents who, despite being ignorant of these historical happenings, have picked up on the accompanying sloganeering. For instance, a rallying cry of the Norwegian revolution to overthrow Swedish political control lives on in the form of good

natured fun-poking by persons many of whom are neither Swedish nor Norwegian, “All through the forest, and into the weeds, two Norwegians chasing three Swedes!”

Another ethnic-based political distinction that also lives on in form of good-natured Badger ribbing, is the division of Belgian-Americans into descendants of Dutch speaking Flemish and French speaking Walloons. In the Old Country, this dichotomy had serious governmental implications, but in Wisconsin, it's more apt to lead to a round of drinks in some Fox Valley area bar. Yet not all past European strife has led to contemporary merriment. For instance, the Thirty Years War back in the Seventeenth Century bitterly divided the German people, pitting the Roman Catholic Rhineland and Bavaria in the south against the largely Lutheran central and northern German states. Today, there's little animosity among Wisconsin German-Americans over Catholic/Protestant differences. Yet, there's still a hushed seriousness when the topic of the bitterest and longest war in European history is discussed, despite the fact it ended in 1648.

Italian immigrants to Wisconsin brought many new words to the English vocabularies of their various American neighbors. This phenomenon isn't restricted to Wisconsin, but is especially prevalent there, due to the large numbers of persons of Italian descent. Given the Italian penchant for gourmet cooking, and love of music, especially opera, a whole host of culinary and operatic terms have found their way into Wisconsin regional dialect. Words like *cannoli*, *ravioli*, *ministroni*, *bougiloni*, *aria*, *basso profundo*, *fortissimo* and *impresario* have taken their place in a regional dialect alongside terms like *white tailed deer*, *extra sharp cheddar*, *butter fat content*, *pilsener*, *taconite*, and *cranberry*.

As European immigrants to Wisconsin acquired command of the English language, many time honored sayings and maxims from various languages took on a new identity as English ones. Naturally, these expressions were acquired and used by peoples of all different ethnic origins, who were often oblivious of original linguistic source, or cared little if they did know it. As a result, many European terms and expressions, many centuries old, live on in Wisconsin, but in a new language. Many of these sayings and idioms contain wise advice, being based on hundreds of years' collective wisdom. Others, while equally interesting, may not be quoted here, due to matters of good taste and decorum.

So what then is the Wisconsin regional dialect? The term “melting pot” comes to mind, but it is hackneyed, old fashioned, and politically incorrect. Suffice to say, Wisconsin language usage is the result of almost 180 years of interaction among many great linguistic traditions. The beneficiaries of this resultant melage are certainly the better for it.