

“*Yah* for *yes* is ok”:
Ideological Functions and Meanings of *Yah* [jɑ:] in Two Heritage Language Communities

Kathryn Remlinger, Grand Valley State University
Elizabeth Peterson, University of Helsinki

This presentation explores a ubiquitous yet curiously under-investigated variable feature in North American English: affirmation markers, or in other words, particles that express the semantic meaning ‘yes.’ At this point in our study, we compare and contrast two different US speech communities which both exhibit variation of the forms *yah* (pronounced [jɑ:]), *yeah* ([jæə]) and *yes*. Our main research question concerns the ideological functions and meanings of *yah*, particularly in relation to regional identity and processes affecting varying levels of its enregisterment.

The communities under investigation are Sanpete County, Utah, and Houghton County, Michigan. The European/White settlement of Sanpete County comprised a majority of immigrants from Denmark and other Scandinavian countries, who displaced mostly Ute/Paiute people. About 25,000 Scandinavians migrated to Utah from about 1850 to 1920, with the highest density per capita settling in Sanpete County. Prior to European and white settlement, the population was mostly Paiute and Ute peoples. Likewise, the indigenous Ojibwe population of the County was displaced by Finnish, German, Italian, Cornish, and French Canadian immigrants as well as settlers from the Midwest and East Coast of the U.S. From the mid-1800s to the 1920s, Houghton County was a multilingual community with newspapers printed in six different languages. Today, however, the community is primarily monolingual English. Both regions exhibit use of *yah* as a means of expressing agreement, among other discourse functions.

The focus of this presentation takes a qualitative approach to our data and data collection, primarily relying on linguistic landscape, sociocultural linguistics, and sociolinguistics methodologies. The main theoretical approaches we apply to the study are language ideology (Gal and Irvine 2000) and enregisterment (Agha 2003). Data has been obtained through sociolinguistic interviews (with 21 individuals in Sanpete County and 75 in the UP), photographic documentation in both locations, as well as archival and historical written data.

So far, our work has indicated varying levels of enregisterment in the two locations. In the UP, *yah* has emerged as an important marker of local identity, commodified on bumper stickers and various tourist items. At the same time, it retains its use as a productive feature of everyday spoken discourse. In Sanpete County, *yah* is at earlier stages of enregisterment, for example being a topic of conversation about local identity, but it is not commodified.

By combining and comparing findings in two distinct locations, we aim to add to our understanding of the ideological functions of enregistered features, in particular, those that mark local and ethnic identities, identities that often, but not always, overlap. Future research includes an examination of the different pragmatic and discursive functions of *yah* and an apparent age-graded change among the three affirmation markers.

Agha, Asif. 2003. “The Social Life of a Cultural Value.” *Language & Communication* 23 (3): 231–73.

Gal, Susan and Judith T. Irvine. 2000. Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation. In *Regimes of Language: Ideologies, Politics, and Identities*, edited by Paul V. Kroskrity, 35–84. Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.