Say what?

You say **soda**, I say **pop**. She says **wish**, he says **weesh**. When it comes to speech patterns, Ohio is divided into three different dialects — which is why we **warsh** our clothes and **fill** full after a big **mill**.

It's like a bad episode of *To Tell the Truth*.

Remember that show? (Actually, I think the classic TV guessing game that's come and gone over the years is back on the air, but that's beside the point). The premise was simple: a group of three contestants all claiming to be the same person tried to fool a panel of celebrities by answering a slew of questions. The panel then had to determine which two were lying and who was telling the truth. Each game started with all three contestants identifying themselves by the same name.

In the bad episode that I'm envisioning, the start of the show goes something like this:

Contestant 1: My name is Bert Johnson, and I'm from Oh-hi-oh.

Contestant 2: My name is Bert Johnson, and I'm from Ah-hi-ah.

Contestant 3: My name is Bert Johnson, and I'm from O-hi-uh.

by **JEFF ROBINSON**
illustrations by **GABRIEL UTASI**

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You see, on this particular episode, there wouldn't be any imposters. Each contestant could pronounce the name Ohio the way he does and still be considered an Ohioan, a "local," if you will. By the same token, one contestant who doesn't hear a particular question could say "Pardon me?" while another could say "Please?" Again, neither would be lying if he said he was from Ohio.

We don't think of an Ohio accent the way we think of a New York or a Boston accent, nor should we. After all, we don't "tawk" like Barbra Streisand or "pahk the cah in the front yahd" like our New England friends. Instead, there are many different nuances to our speech. Rather than one dominating accent, we have more than a few distinct ways of speaking here, and how we phrase sentences and pronounce words can be attributed to the part of the state in which we live. So the guy in northern Ohio who puts his groceries in a "bag" may not relate to the woman in southern Ohio who has her groceries placed in a "sack." Likewise, the Cleveland woman wanting to check out the "speh-shel" sale at the mall would find it odd that a Portsmouth man buys flowers for a "spay-shul" occasion.

"The short answer for why things are the way they are relates to where the original settlers of a particular region came from," says Carl Mills, a linguist at the University of Cincinnati. "To oversimplify, the state falls into three zones."

Mills and other Ohio linguistics experts say those three zones are a northern dialect area, a north-midland dialect area and a south-midland dialect area, and the speech patterns of all Ohioans stem from one or a combination of these. The northern dialect area includes a strip of land that runs along Lake Erie and contains Cleveland and Toledo. "That area continues the same dialect that you find in upstate New York and the top of Pennsylvania," Mills says. Land on Lake Erie's south shore, typically referred to as the Western Reserve, was settled in the early 1800s by western New Englanders who came to Ohio via Pennsylvania and upstate New York.

In contrast, the very southern part of Ohio is where you'll find the south-midland dialect, which is influenced by migration from the Appalachian areas of Kentucky and West Virginia. "Words like 'poosh' (for 'push') and 'feesh' (for 'fish') seem to be of Appalachian influence," says William Lasher, associate professor of English at UC.

The north-midland dialect, which covers the middle part of the state, is influenced by the settlers who traveled west across Pennsylvania from the mid-Atlantic states. "In the central portion of the state, you'll hear (the dialect of) people from western Pennsylvania and northern West Virginia," says P.K. Saha, professor emeritus of English and linguistics at Case Western Reserve University. "By contrast, a native Clevelander will sound like someone from Connecticut while a Cincinnatian will have a Kentucky dialect."

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Mills says there are countless examples of the differences between the dialects. "Take a look at the words 'you guys,' which you'd hear in the north and central parts of Ohio — 'Come on, you guys.' In the south-midland areas, you'd hear 'you all' or 'y'all.' And in the upper parts of the Ohio Valley and Appalachia, you hear 'y'uns.'"

Steve Hartman Keiser, a Ph.D. candidate in linguistics at The Ohio State University, says a good way to gauge if someone is from central Ohio is to see how he or she uses the word "anymore." "Most constructions with the word 'any' in English are used in negative forms — 'I don't have any books.' 'I don't do that anymore,'" Keiser says. "But over much of Ohio, you have positive constructions — 'Anymore, the younger Amish speak English like their neighbors,' meaning 'these days.' That's less common in

Cleveland than Columbus. It's mainly (found in) the central part of the state."

Residents of Ohio's other regions can also be identified by their words and pronunciations. People from Dayton and points west are likely to pronounce "full" and "fool" the same way; while in Youngstown, you'll hear residents say their "hahses" (houses) are located near the "still mill" (steel mill). A rock to a southern Ohioan is a stone in the north, and if you're from Cincinnati, you may want to get a three-way coney for lunch before deciding that it's a great day for a grillout. If you're cooking indoors, most of Ohio uses a frying pan, but those down south prepare food in a skillet. A strong German migration to Cincinnati has also left some of the Old World dialect lingering in the Queen City's streets. "It's remarkable that people in Cincinnati always say 'Please?' when they don't hear or understand, instead of 'Excuse me?'" says David Raterman, a director of marketing for Hirebridge Internet Co. in Pompano Beach, Fla., who grew up in Cincinnati and lived there until recently. "In Germany, when they don't hear or understand, they say 'Bitte?' which means 'please.' This must have carried over from German to English."

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Our differing word usages and pronunciations didn't happen overnight; in fact, the hows and whys of our vocabulary are part of a continuous evolution that began with the first settlers. Experts say the first generation of settlers in Ohio spoke little English, the second was effectively bilingual and the third was well on its way to being monolingual in English. A founding population essentially starts a dialect, then there are ongoing changes.

Saha says similar backgrounds, more so than common nationalities or races, produce similar speech patterns. "People who do not spend time with each other do not talk like each other," he says. "If you take someone with a privileged white background in America and a less-privileged African-American background, those two people will talk very differently. But if you put those people in the same background — say they both went to a private school — they will talk alike. And change is inevitable as long as the language is living."

The experts agree that it's all about history. You can no more change Ohio's dialect origins — which have a direct impact on how we all speak — than you can change the color of your skin. And yet we're quick to say that those who don't pronounce a word the same way we do, or use the same word or term, are wrong. "I think that's just a symbol of our egocentric society," says Deleasa Randall-Griffiths, associate professor of communication arts at Ashland University. "It may not cause a huge misunderstanding, but people do notice when someone uses a term different than theirs, like 'tennis shoes' and 'sneakers,' or 'pop' and 'soft drink.' And they think their word is right."

"It's not about right versus wrong. It's just different," Keiser says. "But I know people who will regularly comment on how strangely people say things." Keiser, who grew up in Iowa, says he had to adjust to Ohiospeak when he moved east. "My wife grew up near Canton and said things like 'the floor needs swept,' Keiser says. "That was always weird to me, because I said 'the floor needs to be swept.'" But after living here for 10 years, I say 'needs swept.'"

While it seems easy to say that one way of speaking is no more right than another, Beverly Olson Flanigan, associate professor of linguistics at Ohio University, says it's our natural inclination to believe that our own way of speaking is the best. "Almost everybody thinks that the way his or her region speaks is the best one," Flanigan says. "But a particular region can't help its migration origin." Flanigan says Ohio's trans-Appalachian dialect follows a belt along the Ohio River from the West Virginia border all the way to Cincinnati. That area includes OU's hometown of

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Athens, and Flanigan says college towns tend to represent an infusion of the state's dialects. "The students from Cleveland, for example, might laugh at the way the locals talk here," she says.

So what do we do if we find ourselves living, working or going to school in a part of the state where the dialect differs from what we're used to? Do we adapt? Do we want to adapt? And if so, can we? "The question of 'Can you be bi-dialectal in the same way you can be bilingual?' is one that's being explored," Keiser says. "Some people are able to pass themselves off as sort of native (in an area) even if they haven't grown up there." Someone's ability to be bi-dialectal could depend on whether he or she has grown up at all. Our language tends to be learned at an early age, and the older we get, the more difficult it is to change our patterns of speech, no matter where we are. "Kids actually teach themselves the language," Lasher says. "Parents think they teach kids English, but they don't. Children are working it out themselves and are basing it on what they hear. Ultimately, their peer group has the most influence."

Mills agrees. "Children tend to acquire their dialects from their friends just before puberty," he says. "Up until then they're malleable and can change without problem. But once puberty hits, they're pretty well settled in."

While pronunciation may be picked up from our junior high peer group, Randall-Griffiths says the family has more of an influence on the vocabulary we use. "Kids will pick up junior-high slang from their peers, but if there's a paper bag on your kitchen table, your family has a larger influence on what you call it."

Flanigan says vocabulary is not as difficult to change as pronunciation as we get older. If our friends say "pop," we have a tendency to want to say "pop" around them, even if we're more accustomed to saying "soda." But it's more difficult to get used to saying a word like "fay-shun" if we're used to saying "faa-shun," (fashion) and vice versa. "Pronunciation is the hardest thing to change," Flanigan says. "And the hardest thing to (change) is the most stigmatized."

If there's any common ground to be found among the various Ohio dialects, it lies in the Americanization of our town names, which Mills says stems from a desire to make non-English pronunciations our own. That's why you won't hear someone say he's from LEE-mah; he lives in LIE-mah (Lima), you know, like the bean. Your in-laws don't live in Ver-SYE, they live in Ver-SALES (Versailles). And the same can be said for MYE-lan, not Mih-LAHN (Milan); BER-lin, not Ber-LIN (Berlin); RYE-O Grande, not REE-O Grande (Rio Grande); Meh-DIE-nah, not Meh-DEE-nah (Medina); and Bell-FOUN-tain, not Bell-fon-TANE (Bellefontaine). "At some point, these names were all Americanized," Mills says.

So what if you say Ah-hi-ah and I say Oh-hi-oh? It's part of what makes the state unique, and the alternative could be hundreds of thousands of Al Gore-sounding monotones. And that wouldn't be fun at all…raht? ◆