



HOW TO TAWK NOO YAWK

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After living some twenty-five years in Michigan, I thought I had adopted enough such regionalisms as “the Tiges” (Detroit Tigers), “pop” (soda), and Vernors (a type of Michigan-brewed spiced-ginger ale), so as to sufficiently disguise my East Coast roots. While I never will be able to say “Will Jaack come baack on Saaturday?” with enough of an “a” sound to convince a downstater or U.P.er of my native Michigan sonship, I had hoped for at least some non-regional recognition. Alas, I was unmasked by a banquet-table companion on the occasion of my fifty-year college reunion. What gave me away, in her hearing, was my saying that I “wanna visit the liberry before I go back home.” It was my native New York (Noo Yawk) coming through, loud and clear.

Since I have travelled the length and breadth of the country, I have been exposed to all sorts of accents. You can’t travel New England without “pahking a cahr in Hahvard Yahd” or hearing someone refer to the area as “Gawd’s country.” In Pittsburgh, you have to be ready for “yuns”, as in: “Are *yuns* going to the company picnic?” Usually, you’ll get a reference somewhere in the course of a conversation to the “don ton”(downtown) area. South of the Mason-Dixon line, besides the all-pervasive “Y’all”, you have to be ready to do “biness” (business). And in California, conversations are interspersed with an over abundance of “O.K. like” or “hot,” and everyone

seems to be “doing a deal.” In fact, if you’re not “doing a hot deal”, you’re probably not main stream California. A friend once pointed out to me that in doing business in California, you better be sure that both parties are agreeing on the same day and week for the completion of a task. If you want something on a Friday, you’d better heed the advice of Michigan-born comedian Lilly Tomlin who once opined, “I always wanted to be somebody, but then I thought I had to be more specific.”

But for me, it seems, the streets *of* New York will always peek through in my conversation and in some of my attitudes. What trips me up in this mid-west Mecca are certain expressions which mark me forever.

New Yorkers can’t say “coffee” without giving themselves away. It always seems to come out sounding like a tough demand, rather than a gentle request—“Gimme a cup-a-cawfee” and, you are almost tempted to fill in, “or else”. But, despite the New Yorker image of gruffness, most of their less desirable characteristics are imposed by the hurried and harried environment in which they live. The worms in the Big Apple are mostly for show.

As a public service for those who are planning a visit or those who would like to visit but are held back by the fear of Manhattan-mayhem, here is a language primer to help you pass yourself off as at least a Long Islander.

Master the following basic vocabulary, and you stand a chance of temporarily assimilating yourself into the largest of all melting pots:

awfiss = a place to work

bawss = the person in charge

cawfee = a hot, mostly morning brew

chawklit = a brown flavoring substance used in candy, cake, etc.
One can become a “chawk-a-holic” through over indulgence.

dawg = a canine

erwatt? = an overused N.Y. ending to a question—it actually could be more a rhetorical question as in “Am I being unreasonable, erwatt?”

figh = it follows four

gimme = hand over

how cum? = why?

hun = ten times ten

wanna = to desire, to seek to

wawk = to move toward an object or destination, to perambulate

Two conversational gambits are expected to sort of grease the skids of a New York conversation. One is to throw in a meaningless punctuation statement—a kind of breather that allows the speed talking New Yorker to let the mind catch up to the mouth. A good one to try is: “Tell me about it, huh!” The other is to do what most East-siders do—the pervasive double-question gambit. Ask permission to ask a question of the person you are talking to—and then ask the question. “Can I ask you this? What time is it?”

When the opportunity comes to impress a bonafide New Yorker of your nativeness, and be aware that this jaded species isn’t easily impressed, memorize and deliver as matter-of-factly and disinterestedly as possible, the following script:

“You wouldn’t believe the awfiss I work in. My bawss drinks about a hun-figh cups a cawfee a day, and when he’s not doin dat, he’s munchin on some chawklit. Tell me about it, huh! He’s really sumthin, ya know. When I wawk into to see him, he treats me like a dawg. He won’t gimme a break. Sometimes I wanna kill him. Can I ask you this? How cum he’s like that and does working there make sense, erwatt?”

If you try this approach, let me know the outcome. The probability of getting mugged in Manhattan is greatly exag-

gerated, but I suppose an outlander could consider a visit a rewarding experience if he or she survives at all. Maybe learning to talk “Noo Yawk” will enable you to fake it there—and “if you can fake it there . . .”—well you can fill-in the rest!