

Mountain Talk”:

Exploring the Culture of Western, North Carolina

Overview

North Carolina’s mountain region is rich with culture, and despite “hillbilly stereotypes,” Appalachian residents have maintained great pride in their traditions and identity. In this lesson, students will examine North Carolina mountain culture, with a particular focus on the unique language and way of speaking that is present in the region. Through readings from *Talkin’ Tar Heel: How Our Voices Tell the Story of North Carolina*, class discussion, engaging with audio/video clips from *Talkin’ Tar Heel’s* special features, and several interactive activities, students will gain a sense of Mountain culture and speech and its important role in North Carolina’s past, present and future.

Grade

8

NC Essential Standards

- 8.H.3.2 - Explain how changes brought about by technology and other innovations affected individuals and groups in North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.H.3.4 - Compare historical and contemporary issues to understand continuity and change in the development of North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.G.1.1 -Explain how location and place have presented opportunities and challenges for the movement of people, goods, and ideas in North Carolina and the United States.
- 8.G.1.2 -Understand the human and physical characteristics of regions in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. physical features, culture, political organization and ethnic make-up).
- 8.G.1.3 -Explain how human and environmental interaction affected quality of life and settlement patterns in North Carolina and the United States (e.g. environmental disasters, infrastructure development, coastal restoration and alternative sources of energy).
- 8.C.1.3 -Summarize the contributions of particular groups to the development of North Carolina and the United States.

Essential Questions

- What cultural elements are often associated with Appalachia/Western North Carolina?
- What stereotypes are sometimes attributed to Western NC mountain residents?
- What role does language play regarding the culture of an area?
- How has the physical geography of the NC Mountains impacted language and speech patterns in the region?
- Why do you think tourism has resulted in strengthening Mountain culture, rather than fading it?

Materials

- Excerpts from *Talkin’ Tar Heel: How Our Voices Tell the Story of North Carolina*, by Walt Wolfram and Jeffrey Reaser, attached
 - For information on purchasing the book *Talkin’ Tar Heel: How Our Voices Tell the Story of North Carolina*, as well as numerous audio and video features, go to <http://www.talkintarheel.com/>
- *A push to restore pride in the way Appalachians speak*, article & discussion questions attached

- Cultural Assessment handout, attached
- Mountain Talk Quiz, attached
- **Optional Resource:** For teachers interested in exploring North Carolina linguistics further, a multimedia dialect awareness curriculum, *Voices of North Carolina*, is available for free. Download the curriculum at http://www.ncsu.edu/linguistics/research_dialecteducation.php

Preparation

- Students should have a basic understanding of the regions of North Carolina, particularly the Western North Carolina mountains/Appalachia region.
- If students need a NC geography refresher prior to this lesson, see <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1670>, which contains a reading as well as geography lesson ideas.

Duration

- 1-2 class periods
- Lesson lengths will vary based on each classroom's level of discussion and use of optional activities.

North Carolina "Mountain Talk"

1. As a warm up, tell students you want to introduce them to a few people by playing two short (33 seconds and 1 minute) video clips. Position the video on the screen so that students can't see the video titles as a clue.) Tell students you want them to tell you where they think these people live, based on clues they gather from watching the clips. Instruct students to jot down their thoughts and clues observed and be prepared to discuss.
 - Mountain Pride – <http://www.talkintarheel.com/chapter/6/video6-10.php>
 - Maggie Valley – <http://www.talkintarheel.com/chapter/6/video6-5.php>
2. After students have viewed the two clips, ask them to first share their observations, noting them in a list on the board. Facilitate discussion by asking:
 - What did you see? What various things did you notice about each person's appearance?
 - What did you notice about their surroundings?
 - What did you notice about how each man spoke? (accent, words used, grammar, etc.)
 - What message was each man conveying?
 - Based on this information, what assumptions might you make about these men?
 - Do you have a guess as to where these men are from? What evidence makes you think this?
3. It is likely that some of the comments and observations will be stereotypical and/or negative. Ask students to review their responses noted on the board and to characterize which responses evoke stereotypes. Review student guesses as to where the men are from, and let the class know that they are from the mountains of Western North Carolina, also referred to as Appalachia. Ask students to share anything they know (or think they know) about Appalachia and the North Carolina mountains. Collect student thoughts on the board and ask students if anyone knows where the name Appalachia comes from. Explain:
 - "The U.S. Geological Survey defines thirteen Appalachian provinces based on geological similarities, including rock type and tectonic forces. Some of these provinces correlate with local definitions of geographical divisions and cultural groups, including, in North Carolina, the Piedmont and Blue Ridge, Roan, Brushy, Great Balsam, and Smoky Mountain Ranges. Culturally, the Appalachian region is generally restricted to parts of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, the whole of West Virginia, and a small slice of southeastern Ohio. Ironically, the name "Appalachia" comes from well south of the range. In 1528 a Spanish expedition encountered an American Indian village near present-day Tallahassee, Florida, that they transcribed 'Apalchen' or 'Apalachen.' This term was briefly used to denote all lands north of Florida, but by Hernando de Soto's 1540 expedition, the name, now with the modern spelling, was restricted to the mountains themselves

and began appearing on Spanish-made maps. The later British exploration and settlement gave the mountains a competing moniker: the Allegheny Mountains. By the mid-nineteenth century, the older Spanish name had won out, at least in the southern regions of the range.” (*Talkin’ Tar Heel*, p. 132)

- If students need a North Carolina geography refresher, see <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1670>, which contains a reading as well as geography lesson ideas.

4. Play the following video (20 seconds) and ask students to consider the following questions.

<http://www.talkintarheel.com/chapter/6/video6-6.php>

- The Appalachian region of North Carolina is considered by many to be “rugged.” How might this impact the variance in speech?
- What other characteristics would contribute to different ways of talking? How about gender? Class? Ethnicity? Age? Background? Socioeconomic status?
- The speaker talks about the use of language varying even between the counties in the North Carolina mountains, why might people in the same region talk in different ways?

Mountain Culture

5. Next, ask students to explain their understandings about culture. Ensure students understand a common definition of culture, such as:

- Culture: a way of life of a group of people; the behaviors, beliefs, values, and symbols that they accept, generally without thinking about them, and that are passed along by communication and imitation from one generation to the next.

6. Pass out the attached handout of excerpts from *Talkin’ Tar Heel: How Our Voices Tell the Story of North Carolina* and instruct students to pair up to read, think about and discuss the two short quotes using the questions provided. After students have had time to read and talk, come back together as a class and further discuss:

- What do you think the culture of Appalachia is? What do you associate with people in western NC? (Encourage students to consider music, art, clothing, food, beliefs, values, etc. Some of this information can be inferred from the clips they have viewed.)
- What can language say about the culture of an area?
- What do the authors mean by the obvious cultural differences that exist between the Piedmont region and the mountains in North Carolina? What are some of these differences?
- Based these excerpts and your prior knowledge, what stereotypes exist about people who live in the mountains and the culture there?
- Why do you think such negative stereotypes are sometimes attributed to mountain people? How much does their way of speaking contribute to this? Is it reasonable that their way of speaking contributes to these stereotypes?
- Aside from language, what other cultural traits do “outsiders” use to form a perception about a person? A community? A region? Why might these perceptions be wrong?
- Since language is constantly evolving, even if it exists in isolation, can the same be said about the culture of an area? Do you believe that culture and language evolve at the same rate? Or, does the evolution of one rely on the other?
- How do you think language and culture might be influenced by “outsiders” (tourists, etc.) coming into an area?
- Why do you think tourism has made mountain culture stronger instead of diminishing it?

Mountain Pride

7. Point out to students that despite the stereotypes, some people who live in the North Carolina Mountains (like people who live elsewhere) are proud of who they are, where they live, and their culture. Tell students to reconsider what they heard in the clips at the start of class and to consider:

- Why are many people in the mountains proud of where they come from, even in the face of these stereotypes?
 - Jim Tom Hedrick said: “Everybody hears about Graham County, don’t they? How good the people is. How they’ll help you. I’ll run into people I don’t know, I’ve never seen ‘em in my life and I help them any way I can. Somebody once said, “you’ll get knocked in the head.’ I said, ‘Well, if I do, I’m just knocked.’ They’re just good-hearted. Everybody you meet, just 99 percent of ‘em. If I didn’t live here, I’d move, wouldn’t you?” What message is he conveying about mountain culture and why is he so happy to live there?
8. Explain to students that researchers are finding that those who speak with a Mountain/ Appalachian accent and dialect are finding a renewed sense of pride in the way they talk. Have students read the attached article entitled “A Push to Restore Pride in the Way Appalachians Speak” either individually or in pairs. Once students have had a chance to read, ask them to consider the provided discussion questions together in partners. Allow class time for partners to report out their thoughts to the entire class.
9. **Optional:** Ask students to complete the attached Cultural Assessment handout (individually or in pairs.) This activity will challenge students to think about the defining characteristics of the culture in their community, county or region. Additionally, it will challenge them to consider the perceptions of their area from an “outsider’s” perspective, forming the foundation for a discussion of the importance of tolerance and respect of culture. Teachers should devote class time for students to discuss together their work and understanding of cultural tolerance.

Culminating Activity: Mountain Talk “Quiz”

10. As a culminating activity, distribute the attached Mountain Talk quiz handouts and have students break into partners or small groups. Remind students that many of the differences in the dialect of the Appalachian region can be attributed to the geographic isolation of many mountain communities. Thus, some of the words used in the North Carolina mountains may be words residents in other places have never heard of. On the quiz, groups will have to decide how to pronounce the provided words, their definitions and correct use in a sentence. Students should have fun with this activity, but also make an honest effort to figure out what they think the word may mean. (Students should not use technology to uncover the true meaning of the words.)
11. Once groups have completed their “quiz” (provide around 15 minutes) go through each word and have a student volunteer from one or two groups share their thoughts. After discussing, tell students you are going to show them a 4-minute video that will provide the answers to their “quiz.” Play the clip at <http://www.talkintarheel.com/chapter/6/video6-9.php> and afterwards allow students to comment on their interpretations verses the actual use of the words. The western use of the words are:
- Sigogglin: crooked, not plumb
 - Jasper: someone you don’t know
 - Peckerwood: someone you don’t like
 - Poke: a bag, often a paper bag
 - Plumb: all the way or very
 - Airish: a little chilly, or windy
 - Dope: a soda
 - Boomer: red squirrel
 - Scald: poor land that won’t grow anything
 - Gaum: cluttered, a mess, or clogged”

Name: _____

Excerpts from *Talkin' Tar Heel: How Our Voices Tell the Story of North Carolina*

Excerpt 1

"It is obvious to native and nonnative North Carolinians that Piedmont residents are culturally different from those who live in the highland Appalachian region. Less obvious are the differences within the highland region, though these do exist. Picking up on a core of social and linguistic similarities, many popular portrayals of Appalachia have presented a relatively uniform cultural region with the image of the 'hillbilly' at the center." (p. 132)

- What do you think the culture of Appalachia is? What do you associate with people in western North Carolina? (Encourage students to consider music, art, clothing, food, beliefs, values, etc. Some of this information can be inferred from the clips they have viewed.)
- What do the authors mean by the obvious cultural differences that exist between the Piedmont and the mountains in North Carolina? What are some of these differences?
- The excerpt mentions the image of the 'hillbilly.' What stereotypes exist about people who live in the mountains and the culture there?
- Where do such stereotypes come from and how are they perpetuated?

Excerpt 2

"Despite the expansion of roads and the construction of vacation and tourist sites that have led to the appearance of new residents, tourists, and half-backs (northerners who have moved to the South, particularly Florida, during the winter and then move halfway back to the mountains during the summer months), Mountain dialect is not endangered as is the brogue along the Outer Banks of North Carolina. It is changing, and some of the more traditional dialect forms are fading, but there is still plenty of dialect to distinguish those whose families have been connected to the mountains for generations from those from the outside – foreigners, halfbacks, outsiders, flatlanders, jaspers, and others." (p. 131)

"Unlike the Outer Banks, where tourism has diluted local culture, tourism in the mountains has sometimes had the opposite effect, resulting in an overt intensification of local cultural attributes as a means of meeting outsiders' preconceived notions of the region. Antiques and antiquated lifestyles became profitable commodities, as did local lore and, sometimes, linguistic mythology." (p. 136)

- How do you think language and culture might be influenced by "outsiders" (tourists, etc.) coming into an area?
- Why do you think tourism did not lead to a fading of mountain culture, and instead, has made it stronger?

A push to restore pride in the way Appalachians speak

By JONATHAN DREW, Associated Press

Source: <http://www.wral.com/a-push-to-restore-pride-in-the-way-appalachians-speak/14769628/> (source link not working, however, it can also be found here

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jul/13/a-push-to-restore-pride-in-the-way-appalachians-sp/>)

PINEVILLE, W.Va. — In a county beyond the reach of any four-lane highway, a young couple chuckles and swivels in their chairs as they start telling for posterity the story of how they met.



"You want me to tell the story, or you tell the story?" asks Pete Culicerto, 20, who's seated next to his girlfriend before a pair of black microphones.

"I'll tell it, because you'd make it all cheesy," says 17-year-old Ginger Smyth, each of her syllables snaking through a black cable into a high-end audio recorder ticking the time off on a green digital screen.

"Cheesy's good," says West Virginia University linguist Kirk Hazen, encouraging a relaxed conversation that allows the accents and speech patterns of their mountain community to flow unhindered by the self-consciousness that sometimes keeps them in check.

Hazen, who's spent two decades recording dozens of interviews around West Virginia, is among a new wave of scholars seeking to put to rest "Beverly Hillbillies"-style myths and stigmas about Appalachia.

In southwest Virginia, English professor Amy D. Clark has held summer workshops for 15 years for rural teachers to help them teach students to write effectively without shaming them about their speech. The same message runs through teaching units on dialect for schoolchildren in North Carolina and West Virginia. Proponents say reducing stigmas about speech has resulted in victories such as last year's decision by the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in East Tennessee to cancel classes aimed at reducing workers' accents.

"You're trying to get across the idea that all language varieties are legitimate. There's not one that's somehow damaged and then others that are just fine," Hazen said. "They're all just fine."

The first step in changing perceptions of mountain speech is documenting how contemporary Appalachian residents talk, which is why Hazen, who started the West Virginia Dialect Project in the late 1990s, has invited Smyth and Culicerto to a borrowed conference room on Pineville's main street.

In a loosely organized conversation, Hazen and another researcher ask questions about Culicerto and Smyth's families and their community, such as whether parents are generally involved in teens' love lives. The answers themselves are routine, but it's the underlying sounds the researchers are most interested in. The recording will later be fed into software that allows researchers to analyze one syllable at a time, then catalog each word for further study.

Despite what Hazen's research shows, many outsiders still have negative impressions of people who speak with a mountain accent, sometimes based on outdated speech features. It can take decades for perceptions about language to change.

The tone in the conference room grows more serious when questions turn to whether outsiders comment on the way Smyth and Culicerto talk.

"I think they look at me and they're like: 'Oh my gosh, she lives way back in the holler ... and is so redneck!'" she said. "They think lower of me."

The researcher working with Hazen on the interviews, Pineville native Jordan Lovejoy, said she was made to feel self-conscious about how she talked from a young age and worked until recently to change it.

She recalled going to New York as a teenager and feeling embarrassed when a hotel clerk couldn't understand her request for a pen. On a student government trip to the northern part of West Virginia, other students made fun of how she stretched out the vowel sound in "bill."

"It's upsetting," she said.

A turning point for the recent West Virginia University graduate was taking a class taught by Hazen about the history of dialect in West Virginia. She learned that a Pineville accent "wasn't necessarily a bad thing ... so I try to be a little more natural now," said Lovejoy.

It's this kind of breakthrough that educators around the region are hoping for as they experiment with novel ways of teaching grammar. Traditional "right and wrong" approaches to grammar turn off many kids in the mountains, Clark said.

"Kids don't understand it. They just think they're speaking a broken English," said Clark, one of the editors of the book "Talking Appalachian."

Lizbeth Phillips, a middle-school teacher in southwest Virginia who's worked with Clark's project since 2004, assigns her students to keep journals of how adults in their community switch between formal and casual ways of speaking. Educators say the approach, known as code- or style-switching, allows students to preserve the way they speak at home and improve their writing without feeling ashamed.

Phillips said her approach has helped students' scores on standardized tests, and she was recently asked to work with another English teacher to expand her approach to all eighth-graders at her school.

"If you're marching out the red pen ... you're really criticizing their culture and their family heritage and other things. It's not just about standardizing the language," she said.

"I tell these children all the time: Do not forsake your culture. Do not forsake your spoken language, your home language. Keep that. It's special," she added. "But understand: when you're sitting for an interview at U.Va. or sitting at a job interview, you might not want to say 'y'all,' 'you'ns' and 'a-going.'"

For middle school students in West Virginia and North Carolina, Hazen and Walt Wolfram of North Carolina State University have worked with colleagues to develop teaching units that emphasize the history of each state's dialects.

"It gives them a sense of pride," said Wolfram, who recently spent a week working with kids in a mountain school system. "They think it's cool. And it also makes them special. It contributes to the sort of cultural capital of kids who want to be from someplace, who want to have a strong heritage and want to be grounded."

Wolfram believes that Appalachian culture is in the midst of a renaissance in which people are more aware — and more proud — of their heritage.

"There's a kind of re-appropriation of things 'hillbilly,' which were once considered to be a negative stigma, and embracing it and turning that around into something positive. So people will say, 'Yeah, I'm hillbilly, and proud of it!'" he said.

William Schumann, the director of the Center for Appalachian Studies at Appalachian State University, said the trend is demonstrated by larger number of young adults learning how to play traditional mountain instruments.

"What 20 or 30 years ago was uncool, is cool again. It's sort of hipster to be into the banjo," said Schumann, one of the editors of "Appalachia Revisited," due out next year.

Speakers in the region may purposely use vernacular expressions to show they belong to a group of family or friends. In his article about the word "ain't," Hazen notes that all West Virginians are conscious of how the word is perceived, and that for the past three decades, its use has been "a choice of social identity."

Last summer when the Oak Ridge National Laboratory canceled optional accent reduction classes after some employees complained, the headline in the Knoxville News-Sentinel read: "ORNL bows to Southern pride." The speech coach slated to teach the class, Lisa Scott, said she's noticed a "strong divide" between people who are very proud of their accents and those who want to change them.

Scott said most of her accent reduction clients are foreigners who want to speak English with less of an accent, but that she also has many clients from the South, including a woman who recently called her in tears after being mocked at work.

To Smyth, such tensions are frustrating but very real: "I don't see anything wrong with me having an accent."

In the conference room, the late afternoon sun shines through the windows as the interview stretches to nearly two hours. When the topic turns to the planned construction of a new highway, the couple differs on whether the growth would be a good thing for the county. But they agree they wouldn't want to grow up anywhere else.

"I like it being a small town. Everybody knows everybody," Smyth said. "I couldn't ask for any other place," Culicerto adds. "I couldn't imagine growing up in New York City, Atlanta or Charlotte."

Culicerto said he finished high school with a perfect 4.0 grade point average. Now an accounting student at Marshall University, he has plans for a master's degree. He knows that the stubborn stereotypes outsiders have of people like him can run both ways.

"The way they look at us, we might look at them the same way, like: 'Oh they have a city accent.' But really, we're all the same."

Associated Press writer Allen Breed contributed to this report.

Name: _____

Discussion Questions for *A push to restore pride in the way Appalachians speak*

1. The article mentions that there are “Beverly Hillbillies myths” that persist about people from Appalachia. What does this mean? What do you think of when you hear the term “hillbilly?”
2. When asked about how people react to the way she talks, one of interviewees said “they think lower of me.” Why do you think people “think lower” of someone based on how they talk? Have you personally experienced or witnessed this? Explain.
3. The author states that “it can take decades for perceptions about language to change.” Why do you think this is the case? What does it take for perceptions and stereotypes about language to change?
4. Were you surprised to hear that there are classes to teach people to reduce their accent? Why do you think such classes exist and do you think these classes should be required? Explain.
5. What type of work is being done in schools to help students be proud of their accents? Do you think teaching about language in this way is important? Why or why not?
6. The author discusses use of the word ‘ain’t’ and that those who use it do so as a “choice of social identity,” despite a consciousness of “how the word is perceived.” Why might someone use a certain word or phrase when they are fully aware of its negative perception?
7. The article says, "There's a kind of re-appropriation of things 'hillbilly,' which were once considered to be a negative stigma, and embracing it and turning that around into something positive. So people will say, 'Yeah, I'm hillbilly, and proud of it!'" What do you think it takes to reach this level of pride? Can you think of any similar examples where someone has taken something others view as negative, and embraced it as a positive despite stereotypes?
8. What do you think of the teacher’s message to her students: “Do not forsake your culture. Do not forsake your spoken language, your home language. Keep that. It's special...But understand: when you're sitting for an interview at U.Va. or sitting at a job interview, you might not want to say 'y'all,' 'you'ns' and 'a-going." What message is she trying to convey to them?
9. Culicerto states, "The way they look at us, we might look at them the same way, like: 'Oh they have a city accent.' But really, we're all the same." Why do you think so many people don’t recognize that despite difference, humans are in many ways “the same?”
10. Why is language tolerance important? How can you personally make sure you are being language tolerant?

Name: _____

Cultural Assessment

Complete the following Cultural Assessment of your local area. You can complete the assessment based on your local community, county or region. Be prepared to share your group's assessment with the class?

Area of Assessment (Circle): **Local Community** **County** **Region**

1.) How would you define the culture of your area? (Remember to think about as a whole, what music, art, crafts, foods, activities, beliefs, traditions, ways of speaking and acting, etc. are popular where you live.)

2.) What is your perception of the way(s) people talk in your area?

3.) What do you think visitors would say about the culture and ways of talking in your area? What stereotypes might be attributed to the culture and ways of speaking in your area?

4.) Does your area attract a lot of tourists? **Yes** **No** If yes, what do you they do? (e.g., visit historic sites, amusement parks, shop, etc.)? Do they influence the culture in your area (in positive and/or negative ways?)

5.) Have you or your older family members witnessed any cultural shifts (changes in your community) in the years you or they have lived? Explain.

6.) Why are cultural stereotypes dangerous?

Name: _____

Mountain Talk Quiz

Complete the following quiz by providing what your group believes to be the correct pronunciation, definition and usage of the word in a sentence. Please see example below.

Ex. **Cattywampus**

Pronunciation: (ka-tee-wom-puhs)

Definition: Askew; out of order

Use it in a sentence: That building is leaning to one side; the builder made it all cattywampus.

Sigoglin

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Jasper

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Peckerwood

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Poke

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Plumb

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Airish

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Dope

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Boomer

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Scald

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Gaum

Pronunciation:

Definition:

Use it in a sentence:

Are there words that you, your family or your friends use that people living in other regions of North Carolina might find strange? List the words/phrases and their meanings below: