

"You \$#^%?*&@ Hoosier!":

Derogatory Names and
the Derogatory Name
in St. Louis, Missouri

Thomas E. Murray

In a recent dialectological and sociolinguistic survey of St. Louis, Missouri, one of the questions I asked of 480 informants concerned their preferred terms of derogation for four demographically defined groups of people - members of the same race (black or white) and gender as the speaker, members of the same race but opposite gender, members of the opposite race but same gender, and members of the opposite race and opposite gender. Distinct patterns of usage for such terms emerged according to the respondents' socioeconomic class, age, and gender, but perhaps the most striking pattern was the nearly universal preference for *hoosier*, especially with reference to white males. What I would like to do in this brief essay is document and discuss the general results of this survey question, exploring in greatest detail the use of *hoosier* by Gateway City speakers. More specifically, I will address the following questions: (1) What patterns exist among St. Louisans' preferences for terms of derogation? (2) What exactly is a "Hoosier" to residents of St. Louis (i.e. with what images do they associate the term)? (3) What is the history and probable future of the term?*

I

St. Louisans seem never to be at a loss for a derogatory name to call someone, though each demographically defined group has its own preferences. Of 120 white males that I surveyed, all cite *hoosier* as their first

* For Sections I and II, extensive tabular representations of the data are available on request from the author. The tables will appear in Murray (forthcoming).

choice when referring to other white males. The same is true of 120 white females when referring to other white females, with one exception: one elderly (between the ages of 60 and 80) middle-class woman prefers *hillbilly*. Among blacks, the choices are more diverse. Although *hoosier* and *nigger* are the clear favorites among both males and females - *hoosier* especially among those respondents who are over the age of 40 and male, or upperclass and female, *nigger* especially among those respondents who are under 40 and male, or middle- or lower-class and female - *spook* and *bitch* each make progressively stronger showings as one descends through the male and female social classes, respectively. *Coon* and *hillbilly* also occur sporadically among both black males and females.

The 120 white females in the survey all prefer *hoosier* exclusively when referring to white males, though 120 black females are divided in usage between *hoosier* (preferred among those respondents over 40 years of age in each social class) and *nigger* (preferred among those respondents under 40 years of age in each social class) when referring to black males. As for an equal number of males surveyed, those whites under 40 use *bitch* and *hoosier* when referring to white females; white respondents over 40 much prefer *hoosier*, however. Among black males, *bitch*, *hoosier*, and *nigger* are all popular when referring to black females: *bitch* is most popular with those respondents under 40 (and especially between the ages of 20 and 40), *hoosier* with those over 40, and *nigger* with those under 20.

And how do St. Louisans refer derogatorily to members of the same gender but opposite race? Of 120 white males surveyed, most under the age of 40 in each social class refer to black males as *niggers*; *hoosier* runs a close second, however, and is the favorite among most respondents over the age of 40. *Coon*, *hillbilly*, and *spook* occur sporadically and with no discernible pattern. Usage among the 120 black males surveyed is similarly divided; those over 40 prefer *hoosier* for white males, while those under 40 often use a different term - in this case *hillbilly*. *White trash* also occurs sporadically and infrequently among blacks over 40. As for the 240 females questioned, blacks prefer *hoosier* when referring to whites, with *bitch* enjoying some popularity among speakers under 40, *white trash* among speakers over 40, and *hillbilly* among a small number of speakers aged 40 to 60. Whites, on the other hand, largely prefer *bitch* if they are under 40, *nigger* if they are over 40; they use *hoosier* steadily at all age levels.

Finally, St. Louisans also have preferred terms of derogation for members of the opposite race and gender. Black females use *hoosier* exclusively to refer to white males; white females are divided between *hoosier* and

nigger when referring to black males, the former used especially by respondents over 20, the latter especially by those under 20. Among males, the patterns of usage are more diverse but no less interesting. The preferred term among all blacks is *hoosier*, though *bitch* also occurs (especially in those under age 40), as does *white trash* (sporadically among those over 40, and with increasing frequency as one descends the social scale). For whites, *nigger* dominates among those under 40, *hoosier* among those over 40, *bitch* and *spook* occur consistently but weakly, and *coon* appears very infrequently among the eldest of the middle and lower classes.

Among the many conclusions to be drawn from this discussion, one especially begs to be noticed: with very few exceptions, *hoosier* is the preferred term of derogation among St. Louisans, and especially so when the object of derogation is white or, even more specifically, white and male.

II

When asked what a Hoosier is, St. Louisans readily list a number of defining characteristics, among which are "lazy," "slow-moving," "derelict," and "irresponsible." As Crinklaw (1976:60) further points out, St. Louisans tend to associate *hoosier* with a "displaced country man who moves into a city neighborhood and tears it up." The example of usage that Crinklaw provides is also telling: "First the Hoosiers moved in, then the blacks." Moreover - what neither the descriptions given above nor Crinklaw's definition makes clear - few epithets in St. Louis carry the pejorative social connotations or the potential for eliciting negative responses that *hoosier* does. It may not be an overstatement to claim that Gateway City *hoosier* is the equivalent of a seriously spoken *bastard* or *son of a bitch* in other parts of the country (although those terms are of course also used in St. Louis, often in tandem with *hoosier*). Nor is *hoosier* reserved only for undesirable whites who move into a neighborhood and "tear it up," as Crinklaw says. If the driver of another car swerves in front of a St. Louisan who is also driving, the person who swerved is a Hoosier. Similarly, if someone attends a social event or even merely appears in public and is inappropriately underdressed, that person is a Hoosier. In short, any person whose behavior is perceived as nonstandard by a St. Louisan in any way is a prime candidate for Hoosier status.

Thus is *hoosier* defined in the Gateway City. To discover more precisely with what images St. Louisans associate the term, however, I have collected data from subjective reaction tests - tests designed to elicit listeners' responses to various social levels of speech and the many speech

variants associated with them. The tests that I used consisted of responses to sixty 30-second tape recordings - five male and five females from each race representing speakers from each of the three major social divisions investigated - which were played in a random order for each of the 480 informants used in this study. The recordings were typically answers to a query concerning childhood games, food items, or some other aspect of life in St. Louis, and the speakers were all people who, through preliminary interviews, had been eliminated from consideration for further use in the larger dialectological/sociolinguistic study from which many of the data for this essay are taken. After listening to each of the tapes, the informants were asked to complete the following brief questionnaire:

- (1) If you had to characterize this person in a word or two, what would the one or two words be, and would you consider that characterization positive or negative?
- (2) If you had to guess, where would you say this person was probably born and raised, and would you consider that place positive or negative?

Answers to the first question were tabulated into three groups: those containing the word *hoosier*, all of which were marked negative and many of which contained a choice modifier or two (e.g. "some damn Hoosier"); all other responses marked negative; and all responses marked positive. Answers to the second question were also tabulated into three groups: those marked negative that specifically mentioned southern Missouri or the Ozarks or both; all other negative responses; and all positive responses.

An analysis of these responses reveals several interesting patterns. First, the vast majority of all St. Louisans have little or no trouble distinguishing upper- from lower-class speakers, and display little or no hesitancy in labeling them as such. There is slightly more disagreement concerning attitudes toward the speech of the middle-class - which is perhaps to be expected - but these people are much more often perceived as positive than negative. Second, most of the people whose speech leads them to be perceived negatively are characterized as Hoosiers: this is true of just over half of those members of the middle class who were judged negatively, and over three-fourths of the lower class. Curiously, male speakers tend to elicit the Hoosier label more often than female speakers, though female judges are a bit freer in assigning the stigma than their male counterparts. Regarding the independent variable of age, there seems to be a

positive correlation between increased age and willingness to call someone a Hoosier; the correlation is especially strong for judges between the ages of 60 and 80. Third, white speakers are perceived as Hoosiers more frequently than are black speakers, and white judges seem more liberal in their use of the term than black judges. And finally, there is only slight disagreement among the various social classes concerning which speakers receive positive and negative labels and how often those labeled negatively are called Hoosiers. Apparently the lower-class judges, many of whom would undoubtedly also receive pejorative labels - *hoosier* among them - are either unaware of how they sound when they speak or willing to admit that they too use Hoosier-sounding language.

The responses to the second question are equally revealing. Most telling, perhaps, is that over half of the respondents who judged a speaker negatively believed that person to have been born and raised in the Ozarks region of southern Missouri. There is clearly a correlation in the minds of these judges between the "nonstandard" linguistic habits of a Hoosier and the stereotypical Ozarkian speaker. And we must note that it does not matter whether Ozarkian speakers *actually* have any speech traits in common with St. Louis Hoosiers; what is salient here is that Gateway City residents *believe* the two groups share a similar if not identical language.

III

The question of the history and probable future of *hoosier* is not an easy one to address. The actual linguistic origins of the word, as Baker and Carmony (1975:72) point out, are shrouded in mystery:

The origin of Hoosier has been much disputed, and a number of legends, anecdotes, and theories have arisen to explain the nickname. According to the most widely held account, pioneers in Indiana greeted visitors at the doors of their log cabins by calling out, "Who's 'ere?" Another anecdote holds that a Louisville contractor named Samuel Hoosier preferred hiring Indiana men, and his employees were known as "Hoosier men" or "Hoosiers." Other sources maintain that there was a lot of fighting in early Indiana taverns, and the frontiersmen scratched, gouged, and bit - often biting off noses and ears. Frequently following a fight a settler found an ear on the sawdust floor of a tavern and asked, "Whose ear?"

Two other accounts agree that early settlers or Ohio River boatmen were vicious fighters and were called "hussars" because they fought like those European soldiers or "hushers" because they could hush any opponent. Other theories hold the term comes from the French's *houssières*, "the bushy places," or from an English dialectal word, "hoose," for roundworms. Apparently this disease of cattle caused the animals' hair to turn back and gave their eyes a wild look, as Indiana

frontiersmen in their coonskin caps appeared to others. Still other explanations are that the nickname comes from *hoosa*, an alleged Indian word for maize, from "huzza," an exclamation of early settlers, or from "hoozer," a southern dialectal word meaning something especially large.

Although Baker and Carmony are here speaking of the nickname of the state of Indiana, it is certainly no accident that *Hoosier* and derogatory St. Louis *hoosier* should be phonologically and orthographically identical, so their comments can be extended to the latter as well. For the record, it may be worth noting that *Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary* lists only the last-named of Baker and Carmony's suggestions as a possibility, and cites 1826 as the date of the first recorded occurrence.

More certain is the geographic origin of the term. Baker and Carmony (1975:72) again provide a useful point of departure:

Field records for the Linguistic Atlas of the Middle and South Atlantic States ... reveal that in the southern states Hoosier is a derogatory epithet connoting uncouthness and is synonymous with hick, hayseed, and hillbilly. Probably the term first was applied to early settlers in southern Indiana, themselves from southern states, who were considered uncouth rustics by their cousins back home in more established states.

Not coincidentally, the southern states were well represented in St. Louis by heavy migrations after about 1900. It takes no stretch of the imagination to conclude that these settlers brought *hoosier* to the Gateway City with them, where it has remained largely intact as a term of derogation ever since. (*Hoosier* also occurs in the argot of circus workers and pickpockets - in each case with negative connotations - but these specialty languages almost certainly acquired it from the South rather than the other way around.)

Regrettably, no source that I have seen addresses the question of precisely why *hoosier* should have acquired pejorative connotations in the first place (spoken in Indiana, the term is either neutral or, more often, positive). One possibility - and at this point it is purely conjecture - is that between 1865 and 1900, when natives of Indiana migrated in large numbers to the South and West and tension between pro- and anti-slavery factions still ran high, neither Hoosiers nor their abolitionist philosophy were welcome in any state that was sympathetic to slavery - which, of course, included the Middle and South Atlantic states and even Missouri. It would be only natural for the established residents of these states to look upon these Hoosier immigrants as intruders, whereupon the creation of pejorative *hoosier* would also be natural and even expected.

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As to the future of *hoosier* in St. Louis, we can only speculate. Because my data suggest that the term is sometimes more common among people over the age of 40 than under, a logical conclusion is that the epithet is waning and will eventually die an ignoble death at the hands of Father Time (which death may be hurried along by the continued use of positive *Hoosier* not only within the state, but by national sportscasters when referring to Indiana University's sports teams as well). Certainly terms such as *bitch* and *nigger* are alive and well and growing in popularity among younger Gateway City speakers; no doubt succeeding generations will find attractive and adopt entirely new derogatory language. In the meantime, however, *hoosier* remains alive and well in St. Louis, occupying as it does the honored position of being the city's number one term of derogation.

Ohio State University

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