

Place Names and Enregistered Identity of Michigan's Upper Peninsula

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A clever reward system for frequent catalogue shoppers of Zingerman's – a renowned delicatessen in Ann Arbor, Michigan – uses Michigan place names to indicate spending and reward levels. In favoring those of Michigan's Upper Peninsula (UP), the item participates in the process of enregistering UP dialect.

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Recently, I received my *Fall Buyer's Guide (FBG)* from Zingerman's, the deli in Ann Arbor, Michigan that I frequented as a student and still visit occasionally online. Times change. #28, Randy's Routine – the whitefish salad sandwich – is still on the menu, apparently, but #3, Grandma Belle's Best, once one of my favorites – warm brisket, chopped liver, onion, and schmaltz – is nowhere to be found. I wonder if they still make it if it's requested at the counter.¹

However, I can't visit Zingerman's very often, so I rely on the mail order catalog and website for my purchases and deli daydreams. I learned in the latest issue of the *FBG* that Zingerman's has established a "Frequent Foodie Reward Program" (Zingerman's 2017, 26). I haven't been ordering much, but I stopped to see what I could get if I spent more. It turns out that amounts spent correspond to something called "Latitude of Award," which translates into a gift card worth a certain amount. Each Latitude of Award is named for a Michigan town, and the list caught my eye because, if I were to spend \$500 to \$999, my latitude would be that of Paw Paw, in the southwest of the state, where I spent several formative years. Paw Paw's latitude is low, and so is the value of the gift card – just \$25. I'm trying not to take it personally.

Thus, the underlying pattern of this reward program is clear. Higher amounts correspond to higher latitudes. If you spend \$1000 to \$1999, you get a Bad Axe \$50 in return. If you spend further, \$2000 to \$2999, you rise farther on the Michigan map, to Menominee. Anywhere in the range between \$3000 and \$3999 takes you as far as Escanaba, while the next thousand dollars takes you all the way to Slapneck, and gets you a sweet \$200 gift card – though for the purchase of over \$4000 of deli stuff in a one-year period, it seems like you'd have earned more. If you're crazy enough to spend between \$5000 and \$9999 you get just \$50 more as your reward, and you've gone about as far north in

Michigan as you can – to Ishpeming. You can stretch a bit further without falling into Lake Superior, however, to Pine Stump Junction, where the prize is \$500. In other words, if you've spent \$9999, just spend the extra dollar, because that doubles the value of your gift card. Pine Stump Junction is so far north it's a place without being a town – it's in the forest wilderness of the Upper Peninsula (UP).

Paw Paw, Bad Axe, Menominee, Escanaba, Slapneck, Ishpeming, and Pine Stump Junction – they look arbitrary, but these names betray some language attitudes and ideologies, though it's not clear from the *FBG* text which attitudes and ideologies are in play. That depends on who conceived the reward program and chose the latitudes and their particularizing place names. The important issue is this: there's a lot of latitude between Paw Paw and Menominee, but *Bad Axe* is the only other Lower Peninsula (LP) name in the list – five of the seven latitudes have UP names, even though, until you reach Ishpeming, the spending increments are equal. Why the sudden leap to the UP, which has fewer named places and a narrower range of latitudes than the much more populous and extensive mitten?

It's interesting to wonder whether or not the author of the Frequent Foodie Reward Program is a Yooper – someone from the UP celebrating UP identity with UP names – or someone from the LP – a Looper – who might consider UP names like *Ishpeming* exotic, perhaps even fictional, like *Shangri-la* or *Whoville*.² As Remlinger (2017, 28) notes, “speakers” of any language – including Michigander English – “actively and consciously use language to signal who they are and they think others are – ‘us’ and ‘them,’ ‘insider’ and ‘outsider,’ ‘local’ and ‘transplant.’” Many features of Michigander English serve to identify Yoopers as simultaneously insiders and outsiders, but names are fully part of the “language” Remlinger has in mind. If you know there's a town named *Slapneck*, you're either a Yooper, someone with a UP connection, a frequent visitor to the UP, or you looked it up.

The UP names in the Frequent Foodies Reward Program participate in a process of social construction of meaning called “enregisterment” that originates in a theory of indexicality, developed by Silverstein (1976, 2003) and elaborated by Agha (2003, 2007). Dialects, like that of Michigan's UP, exist when listeners hear them as dialectal and when the listeners talk about other people's talk. If a Looper listener devised the Frequent Foodies Reward Program then the program is a form of Looper talk about Yooper talk – about how UP names are different and belong to a culture noticeably distinct from LP culture, according to those who live, listen, and talk in the LP.

Alternatively, if someone from the UP invented the reward program, it may reflect in-group awareness of out-group talk about in-group talk – in other words, talk about talk about talk. Members of the culture under scrutiny – in this case Yoopers – may figure out ways of reifying that awareness in novelty products from folk dictionaries, like *Sam McCool's New Pittsburghese: How to Speak Like a Pittsburgher* (McCool 1982; see also Johnstone 2013, 159–61), to T-shirts and other stuff – for UP examples, see Remlinger (2017, 100–14). As Remlinger (2017, 113) puts it:

In the Upper Peninsula's linguistic landscape, economic and ideological processes have come together both to claim and to sell the idea of local dialect and identity. We have seen that dialect, identity, and place are marketing tools and commodities, though only because they are linked through enregisterment and therefore recognizable and valuable

Silverstein's (1976, 2003) third-order indexicality (see also Adams 2009; Beal 2009; Johnstone 2013, 173–95). Almost subversively, in a Looper commercial context, a Yooper copywriter would commodify Yooperness worldwide – or at least in the continental United States (US) – by using recognizably UP names as latitude markers in the reward program.

They're recognizably UP names even for those who don't know much about geography, because the chart that corresponds amounts spent, city name as latitude marker, and gift card value is accompanied by a caricature map of Michigan which clearly shows that most of the names listed belong to the UP. Of course, some of the amounts spent are outlandish and require outlandish latitudes with outlandish town names, like *Slapneck*. But in the middle distance, as far south as *Menominee*, an upper Looper name would serve as well as a lower Yooper name. In other words, whether the UP or the LP is privileged, or whether their contributions to the reward system are balanced, depends on the scale devised to represent relative expenditure and relative rewards. One could devise a reward program using only Van Buren County town names to much the same effect – *Decatur*, *Lawton*, *Paw Paw*, *Covert*, *Breedsville*, *South Haven*, *Lacota* – though admittedly, for evocative quality, *Breedsville* is no *Ishpeming* and *South Haven* no *Slapneck*. Because many imagine the UP as a magical northern wilderness, where walleye and whitefish leap from the glory of Lake Superior into your lap, a place populated by elk, wolverines, and a few people – its names carry a cultural prestige that Van Buren County lacks.

So, to construct the reward program, the author or authors had to settle on a scale – a specifically onomastic scale. How much North America, or how much Michigan, would provide names to signify reward latitudes – and if all of Michigan, then distributed in what fashion? It is in this decision that language ideology intrudes into the project – deliberately or accidentally, the names designate cultural difference and identity. Which names are more interesting, those from the UP or those from the LP, and why? To what extent is the answer a matter of linguistic identity or of brand identity?³ How intimately do Zingerman's commercial interests and attitudes about Yooper Talk and Looper Talk – not to mention Looper talk about Yooper Talk – intertwine? Names like *Paw Paw* and *Slapneck* end up signifying a lot more than latitudes and rewards.

In fact, they indicate big cultural differences in very particular terms, a particularity emphasized by how well names contribute to the enregisterment of a variety of American speech. Enregisterment acknowledges “dialects of English of places with particular histories, particular socioeconomic profiles, and specific material and commercial cultures” (Adams 2009, 116). Like a metaphor, a place name is a shortcut to surplus meaning. True enough, most people shopping in the *FBG* don't know the history behind *Ishpeming* or *Slapneck* or *Ishpeming* or *Slapneck*, but they know intuitively that there's a history there – that the places and names are embedded in a factually sedimented context, and that context is a Yooper context. In this respect, a caricature map is a lot like a T-shirt featuring supposedly typical Yooper talk: “Dere's a lot of value in da Yooper place names, like *Ishpeming*, eh?” I agree that no one would buy that T-shirt. Though there's not a whole lot in the place called *Pine Stump Junction*, there's probably something called a *sauna*, that is, a sow·na – the pig pronunciation, rather than what comes before you reap – not a saw·na (see Remlinger 2017, 59–60, 96–7, 107–9; Rankinen and Albin 2018). Zingerman's participates in the enregisterment of Yooper talk by proposing a social value for Yooper place names. It could go a step further by writing catalogue

copy that had Yoopers eating its signature coffee cakes in the sauna,⁴ dwelling on the authentic pronunciation of the Finnish loanword *sauna*, which would work, except that no self-respecting Yooper would be caught dead eating coffee cake in the sauna.

This brings us back to the question: who wrote the catalogue copy – Loopers or Yoopers? I was interested enough to contact Zingerman's, and a fellow named Brad Hedeman responded to my query on 23 October 2017. According to Hedeman, “a few years back” Zingerman's marketers “wanted to give our Frequent Foodie more interesting level names than ‘1st Level, 2nd level, etc.[.]’” and that's when they settled on “little known town names in Michigan.” They intended the feature to be “sorta funny.” In Hedeman's words: “We figured some folks might think we made them up, and a very small percentage of folks might actually live in those towns or know where they are. Either way, we'd laugh about it.” This philosophy covers all the names – including Loopers like *Paw Paw*.

Why more Yooper than Looper names, though? Here Hedeman and I interpret the evidence somewhat differently, as reasonable people sometimes will. I think there's a dose of language attitude implied in the imbalance, whereas Hedeman believes the following:

It was a happy accident that most of the names we liked were in the UP. As a matter of fact, we had to make a conscious effort to select towns in the LP so it didn't look like the UP had all the fun. They've got great names up in the UP (personal communication with Brad Hedeman, 23 October 2017)

This isn't the part I'm disputing – *Ishpeming* and *Slapneck* are indeed great names – but I wouldn't call liking the Yooper names an accident, however happy the choice may have been. Part of their greatness from a Looper perspective is that they sound like they come from another place, from another people – which, of course, they do. If you're from the LP, *Petoskey* and *Hamtramck* are familiar – read “normal” – whereas *Ishpeming* and *Menominee* are exotic – read “unfamiliar” – by comparison, but coming from the UP it could be the other way around. This is, needless to say, all a matter of perception – but perception counts in socio-onomastics.

The situation in the Zingerman's marketing department complicates enregisterment a bit. It sounds as if Hedeman, who “produced a list of 20 or so towns [he] thought were fun” was indulging in standard talk about talk, even when he presented the list to the marketing group, which “decided upon [the] seven names [they] liked the best.” Everyone in the marketing group is from Michigan, he reports, so they “had a little bit of personal skin in the game.” One was from Traverse City, for instance – but that carries an LP perspective. Here's the unexpected twist: “another one of our group had family in the UP and spent a lot of time up there. That member of the group also happens to be the co-founder of Zingerman's Mail Order, so we had to throw him more than a few bones on this one.”

The co-founder wasn't personally from the UP but was connected by family to UP culture – he can probably pass as a Yooper. The marketing group knew that, because of this connection, the exotic names would please the boss. When the boss approved the plan, was it almost in-group reappropriation of the names, perhaps not an act of third-order but rather two-and-a-half-order indexicality? The commercial process that produced the latitude-driven Frequent Foodie feature – directly or indirectly – subsumed more than one Michigan identity.

Place names figure in the construction of those identities. First, as (Helleland 2012, 99) puts it succinctly, “[p]lace names, like other names, are an indispensable part of human language.” Further, “[p]lace names contribute to the feeling of belonging to an area and to a social group within that particular area” (Helleland 2012, 109). Thus, you can take the boy out of Paw Paw, but you can’t take Paw Paw out of the boy, because *Paw Paw* conveys ineradicable associations. For those who hail from the place called the *UP*, the names of towns not even one’s own – *Slapneck* to an Escanaban, *Ishpeming* to a Menominee – nonetheless signify Yooper identity. That’s the in-group perspective, anyway, before one takes enregisterment into account.

Agha (2007, 272) writes of enregistered identity “that the idea of a ‘group of persons’ cannot be a fundamental (or analytically ‘primitive’) concept for any social theory. It is a dependent concept, a name for an effect achieved through semiotic activities,” such as the construction of Yooper identity by means of a chart and map in which place names play a primary role. Agha (2007, 275) argues further that such “formulations comprise metapragmatic constructs” (more Yooper than Looper names), “made tangible through text-artifacts” – the *FBG*’s chart and map – “made public through their transmission” – in a mail-order catalogue – “made into elements of everyday ritual practices” – eating and shopping – “and thus into signs implicitly communicable to others, and, finally, into models presupposable in behavior by some (but never effectively by all) who are exposed to them.”

That is, some who peruse the *FBG* won’t find much cultural significance in the catalogue’s representation of the reward program – and that’s okay. Nevertheless, and however deliberate, the reward program’s reliance on Yooper place names is both an act of cultural appropriation or reappropriation – depending on who’s doing the appropriating – and cultural recognition, if not outright cultural appreciation, even admitting the possibility that the commercial act in question depends somewhat on stereotype, exoticism, and parody. In any event, it’s a tidy example of socio-onomastics that suggests the value of names within theoretical frames – like enregisterment – from which hitherto they have been mostly absent. Place names participate in the enregisterment of dialects like all other indispensable parts of language.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

¹ You can imagine my relief when, on 23 October 2017, Brad Hedeman informed me that the old sandwiches are still available for the asking.

² Deciding what to call those living in the LP isn't easy. *Yooper* is well attested for citizens of the UP and has been reappropriated by Yoopers in a blatant act of second-order indexicality. LP folk, arrogating the normative position, see no reason to name themselves, and Yoopers refer to them as *trolls* – that is, people who live under the bridge, in this case the Mackinac Bridge, which connects the two peninsulas (see Houston Hall 2014, s.v. “troll,” “Yooper”). Sympathetic as I am to Yoopers, I am nonetheless from the LP and uninterested in reappropriating *troll*, so I felt the need to invent a term, in the interest of dispassionate onomastic discourse. After reading an early version of this article, Kathryn Reminger suggested on 28 October 2017 that while she likes the moniker *Looper*, she doesn't think it's quite right, because *Yooper* is founded on *UP*, and *Looper* can't similarly be formed on *LP*. She's right, of course. She proposed *Lopper*, instead, but that can be read as a forestry term more appropriate to life and industry of the UP (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “lopper” *n*¹). I tried out *Loper*, picking up the first syllable of *Lower*, which makes structural sense but also carries irrelevant connotations having to do with rope- and cabinet-making and dancing (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “loper” *n*¹). In the end I returned to *Looper*, formed not on *LP* or *Lower Peninsula* but on *Yooper*, as a mark of respect for the people of the UP and their bold reappropriation of what was no doubt meant originally by Loopers as a derogatory name. In other words, if Loopers don't like *Looper*, they have only themselves to blame.

³ The linguistic and brand identities are not necessarily distinct or competitive – they would overlap and cooperate in brand identities given by Yoopers to products or services identified with UP culture – but the Frequent Foodie Reward Program may serve both masters without overlap, even admitting a residual Yooper interest in the design of the catalogue feature: “Branding adds a dimension to products that was absent from the marketplaces of the past –

‘cultural meaning’ which in semiotics is known more specifically as ‘connotative meaning.’ And the more of such meaning that can be built into a brand, the more likely it will become itself socialized (spread into the social mindset). The cultural meanings of brands can hardly be pinned down exactly. They can only be inferred. They are, in a phrase, ‘mental constructs.’ These can be defined simply as the culturally shaped images that come to mind in relation to a specific brand” (Danesi 2006, 22). The brander in this case – Zingerman's in the interest of *Zingerman's* – shaped Michigan – part of its brand identity as an Ann Arbor (that is LP), Michigan corporation – into a humorous take on what it means to be a Michigander, tilting towards the UP and its otherness within the Michigan context. The cultural meanings represented in various forms of enregisterment thus support cultural meanings in the construction of a brand identity and brand community, instantiated in the agency of Brad Hedeman and his marketing colleagues at Zingerman's and in the readership of the *FBG*, a sort of meta-semiotic representation that Silverstein (2003) calls a “double arrow of indexicality.” When the readership participates in the construction of cultural meanings transactionally – by consuming and receiving rewards for consuming – Zingerman's through the *FBG* inscribes those meanings on members of its brand community as well as on the brand itself.

⁴ Zingerman's sells Sour Cream, Hot Cocoa, and Lemon Poppyseed coffee cakes, among others, for \$55 in a box, \$65 in a crate. If you join the Coffee Cake Club for six months, it costs \$230, so you spend \$460 if you want a coffee cake every month of the year (Zingerman's 2017, 29–30). You can see how quickly one arrives at the latitude of spending marked by *Paw Paw*. If you spring for enough Reuben Sandwich Kits to feed everyone at the tailgate – one kit at \$200 serves eight (Zingerman's 2017, 13) – then *Bad Axe* is soon in sight. They have tailgate parties up there in the UP, but not in the sauna, where crumbs are unacceptable and one should focus on the pleasures of the sauna itself, without gustatory distractions. Well, beer is allowed.

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