

Accent's on cleaning up the language

By William E. Geist

New York—"Jeet?"
 "Nah. Oi could shuwah usea slice-a pizzer anna soder."
 "Theh-sa staw acwossa stweet."
 "Scoopa."

It is 7 p.m. and it is New York, a time when students up on East 76th Street are taking a 10-minute break from the first meeting of their adult evening course: "How to Lose Your New York Accent."

Marilyn Rubinek, the instructor, is in the business of curing New York accents—a real-life Prof. Henry Higgins, who refashioned Eliza Doolittle in "Pygmalion" and "My Fair Lady." Rubinek, who describes herself as a speech consultant, can pull the drawl out of a Southerner like a cork out of moonshine and can as easily exorcise a rural Middle Western twang.

She helps immigrants overcome their accents, but, mostly, Rubinek exterminates New York accents—pests of proper speech. This is becoming something of a growth industry these days, she being just one of many offering such a course as well as private sessions. The afflicted come in droves, from Brooklyn, of course, and Queens, as well as Staten Oi-land, da Bronx, Joisey, Long-Giland and Uppuh Manhattan. None yet from Toidy-toid and Toid.

Each wants to shed a New York dialect, which they say makes them sound dumb and holds them back professionally and socially. These accented Americans say they are victims of discrimination, passed over for promotions and passed by in singles bars, and told they sound like taxi drivers or members of the "Saturday Night Fever" cast. It grows tiresome.

"People today," Rubinek says, "want to sound like they are from nowhere in particular."

"People cringe when I say, 'Hello,'" said Howard Belasco, a class member from the Bronx. "That is not good."

"I don't want to sound like the Lords of Flatbush anymore," says Gale Cantor, a student from Brooklyn. "I want my speech to reflect my education. That's just good packaging."

Stuart Jacobs, one of Rubinek's clients, talks too fast and grew tired of people saying, "What? What?" to him all the time. "New Yorkers," Rubinek said, "speak too quickly. Life is so fast-paced, we feel we have to get out the information quickly or we are holding things up."

Other New Yorkers come to her with such problems as pronouncing "oi" for "i," as in "Froiday"; removing their "r's" and putting them back in the strangest places, as in "lawryuh" [law-er]; substituting "d's" and "t's"

for "th," as in, "Let me tink about dat," and mispronouncing such other vowel sounds as "bawss" for boss.

Consultants acknowledge that even if the accent is eradicated, a New Yorker's vocabulary remains to be dealt with: standing on line rather than in line, schlepping, schmoozing, ordering a schmear and all the rest.

To some, there seems an implication in this corrective therapy that something is suddenly wrong with being from New York. "No," says Dorothy Sarnoff, who performs extraction of New York accents and other "speech cosmetics" at her company, Speech Dynamics, in Manhattan. "It's just like singing out of tune." The speech consultants describe a New York accent as being monotone, nasal and staccato.

Laura Darius, who runs the Center for Speech Arts on 57th Street and claims to have originated therapy for New York accents four years ago, says her success would never have been possible a generation ago. "New York is changing," she said, "becoming more 'upscale,' and the people want to sound that way." She suggests the old dialect is being replaced throughout the city just as boutiques are replacing older stores.

"This is the age of image," Darius said, "and also a time when television is moving us toward a standard general American speech."

Students and clients acknowledge that with the loss of their accents, so too goes some of the philological flavor of this polyglot city—where the mixture of immigrant dialects combined to form the accent in question. "We don't have to talk like clones," said John Girolomo, a client of Rubinek's from East Harlem. "But speech reflects your background, and I don't want mine reflected."

Rubinek works with the class, which meets at the Robert F. Wagner Junior High School and is offered by the Learning Annex, using mirrors, tape recorders and mouth and throat diagrams.

But it is a frustrating process.

"How," asks Belasco, "can we tell we are doing something wrong if it sounds right to us?" That is: Can a course in New York on how not to speak like a New Yorker be any more effective than a class for fish on how to breathe on dry land?

"It's so easy to slip back," says Elizabeth Alpert, a Brooklyn client of Rubinek, "when you're with family and friends."

"It's a touchy subject with them," she said. "You are saying the way they speak isn't good enough. I feel like an alien when I go home, afraid to speak properly."

Indeed, Alpert speaks like a standard general American now, from nowhere in particular. "I was on the train platform with a friend of my sister," she said, "and she says: 'What are you talking that way for? You don't say the word 'bawss,' 'boss.' You're all wrong.'"

"I looked at her and I said, 'No, Rose, believe me, you are.'"