CCHA Program: Voices of North Carolina

The Chatham County Historical Association sponsored a well-received talk on Sunday, October 7, 2018, by Dr. Walt Wolfram, head of the Language and Life Program at NCSU. Dr. Wolfram's presentation, Voices of North Carolina: The Legacy of Tar Heel Talk, was both informative and entertaining for the large audience, which represented many linguistic traditions.

Wolfram noted that while North Carolina celebrates many traditions—such as art, music, literature, and food—its language and dialects are often ignored as important traditions. He observed that there is discrimination based on language and that linguistic profiling is something many people do without realizing it.

Language is a historical artifact based on the circumstances of where we learn language. Wolfram remarked that speech patterns are largely set before we reach puberty and change little after that even if we move to a location with very different language traditions. Children learn their language and accents mostly from interaction with their peers—so there is inter-generational change in speech patterns. This also accounts for changes happening in the urban South where Southern speech is losing its regional character due to the mixing of various traditions.

Wolfram's Language and Life Project has collected thousands of hours of video and audio recordings of various dialects across North Carolina and made these available online on its website—www.languageandlife.org. His book, Talkin' Tarheel, describes the richness of regional and ethnic dialects across the state, and includes special codes that can be scanned with a smart phone to view clips of 130 interviews that illustrate these speech patterns. Dr. Wolfram illustrated his lecture with several of these clips.

The audience participated in guessing the meaning of several words used by various North Carolina language groups. These included "sigogglin"—meaning crooked, "Jasper"—stranger, "poke"—bag, "airish"—chilly, "boomer"—red squirrel, and "gaum"—mess up. More familiar to many were "bless your heart" and "fixin' to."

Wolfram's group will be at the North Carolina Fair this month handing out buttons and talking to visitors to try to determine the difference between the way North Carolinians use the terms "y'all" and "all y'all." Y'all be sure to stop and talk to them!

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