Understanding St. Louis' Love for *Hoosier*

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While the American English demonym *hoosier* refers to Indiana residents, it means 'poor, rural, white trash' in St. Louis, Missouri (Murray, 1987). This paper uses discourse analysis of several texts across a range of registers and formalities to explore why its use persists despite less-localized alternatives (*redneck,* etc.) and why it has become enregistered (Agha, 2003) as a feature of the local dialect. Findings show *hoosier* is used to police the behavior of the target. Unlike similar slurs, its use requires knowledge of St. Louis' social geography. *Hoosier* allows speakers to demonstrate localness while positioning themselves and St. Louis as cosmopolitan compared to the derided target. As such, *hoosier* asserts positive values for St. Louisans who use it.

Keywords slurs, enregisterment, localness, demonyms, St. Louis

Introduction

In General American English, a common demonym for residents of Indiana is *Hoosier*. Indiana is known as the *Hoosier State* (Metcalf, 2017), and the Indiana University athletic teams are known as the *Hoosiers*. It is unclear what the exact etymology of the demonym is, although Graf (2000) summarizes several theories—among them, that the term derives from the phrase 'Who's here?' or a regional dialect term meaning 'rustic, country bumpkin.' The latter possibility appears, however, to be derived from the demonym, rather than providing a source. As will be discussed in this paper, *hoosier* is commonly used in the local dialect of St. Louis (STL), Missouri, as a slur that means 'poor, Southern, rural, white trash.' According to the *Dictionary of*

American Regional English, the use of *hoosier* to mean 'a rustic or countrified person' is concentrated in Missouri, with 10/33 speakers using this term native to the state, and the rest scattered across the United States (Cassidy, 1996). This suggests that the St. Louis usage may have been highly localized for some time. Etymologists local to St. Louis claim the usage derives from union struggles during which non-union workers from Indiana were brought to the city during strikes (McGonigle, 2015). However, this is as unverifiable as the source of the demonym itself. The focus of this paper will be on the use of *hoosier* in St. Louis, rather than its etymology.

Hoosier has become enregistered (Agha, 2003), that is, given social meaning, as a feature of STL English, at least among middle/upper-middle class whites. For these groups, *hoosier* strongly indexes STL. Such enregisterment is seen, for example, in *hoosier*'s prominent position in the title of Merkel's (2010) local-interest book *Hoosiers and Scrubby Dutch: St. Louis's south side*. Use of *hoosier* is salient enough that sociolinguistic studies of STL often refer to it as a motivation for phonological changes to the dialect (Murray, 1986; Murray, 1987; Goodheart, 2004). In this view, phonetic features that *hoosiers* use are stigmatized enough that speakers actively avoid them. This focus overlooks two related questions. First, why would STL need *hoosier* when other slurs with similar connotations (*hick*, *redneck*, etc.) are available? Secondly, why would this linguistic feature become enregistered in the first place? In her study of how the enregisterment of dialect features local to Pittsburgh has led to the commodification of those same features as 'Pittsburghese,' Johnstone (2009) observes a sense of local pride in them. Most Pittsburghese features, like monophthongized /aʊ/, as in *downtown* (Johnstone and Kiesling, 2008), index local identity while remaining neutral in semantic content; however, these features

also include the slur *jagoff*. Like *jagoff*, *hoosier* is certainly not neutral—why would a slur inspire local pride?

This paper probes the use and enregisterment of *hoosier*. Middle/upper-middle class whites, who are the speakers who use and are most affected by a classist slur, are the focus. Discourse analysis of four texts will show that to use *hoosier* appropriately, the speaker must be intimately familiar with STL. Speakers use the slur to police behavior in the area, casting STL as a cosmopolitan city that is cultured and sophisticated in comparison to its surroundings. Besnier (2002) observes that although 'locality' is frequently defined in opposition to traits like 'cosmopolitanism', these are combined as often as they are not. In his study of performances in the transgender Miss Galaxy pageant in Tonga, he finds that use of English is used to position oneself as cosmopolitan, within both local and non-local contexts. Similarly, it may be argued that the combination of locality and cosmopolitanism enables the enregisterment of *hoosier*. While derogatory toward the addressee of the slur, *hoosier* reflects a positive identity and set of values toward the city.

Methodology

Hoosier is treated here as a key expression (see Duranti, 1997) whose study may lead to a broader insight into STL. The context, intended meaning, and work performed by the term is examined within several texts. Blommaert's (2007) theorizing of sociolinguistic scales, in which layered complexity in linguistic features is related to differences between levels of scales, will be used to flesh out the lexical meaning of the slur. Particular attention will be placed on who or what is being targeted by *hoosier*, both in terms of identity and message. At the same time, it will

be useful to note what the speaker is conveying about her- or himself in addition to his or her target.

As *hoosier* is ubiquitous within STL, four text types were chosen to reflect a range of registers and modes of discourse:

1. A sociolinguistic interview with Mary S., a highly educated young white woman who grew up in a suburb of STL, represents casual conversation. This conversation centered on Mary's attitudes toward STL.

2. Sixty-three articles, representing formal writing, from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the main newspaper of the region, and its subsidiary papers were collected. Archives are available from 1874-1922 and 1988-Present. All uses of *hoosier* are from the latter archive, appearing regularly in opinion columns and quotes. Given the genre of newspaper writing, even columns and quotes constitute a formal environment.

3. The song 'Hoosier Love,' by the local ska-punk band MU330, represents a text that is performed and mediated. That is, such speech is performed for an audience and may be highly stylized as a result.

4. The radio segment *Headline Hooshe* ([huʒ]), a derisive 'weird news' segment that appears daily on the local alternative rock station, is a performance as well, albeit less planned. Like musical artists, the radio hosts are performing for their audience. On Monday through Thursday, the segment mocks one story from around the United States. The Friday edition (analyzed here) recaps the week's stories and solicits listener votes on the most *hoosier* story. In this way, the performance is somewhat interactive: while only the hosts give their opinions on air, the listening audience's collective opinion is also given representation.

The newspaper articles were coded for explicit references to *hoosier*'s definition, specific locations, etc. The person, thing, or action described as *hoosier* was also labeled. The other texts were transcribed and the sections surrounding use of *hoosier* were extracted for analysis.

St. Louis and its vicinity

In focusing on the use of *hoosier* in discourse, it is helpful to consider the regional context in which it appears. STL and the rest of Missouri have traditionally maintained a strong urban/rural divide. For example, in Goodheart's (2004) study of phonological change in the St. Louis area, she finds that most of her interviewees identify with STL, but not the rest of Missouri. In the sociolinguistic interview conducted for the current study, Mary S. illustrates this when she describes where she would say she was from if asked. Note that she never claims to say she is from Missouri:

> Mary: Generally I say St. Charles unless I'm out of state and then I just say St. Louis […] It's all respective to where I am at the moment. Like if I am out of the country I say the US. If I'm you know, over in New Jersey, I tend to say St. Louis.

In some respects, this suggests that for St. Louisans, the urban/rural divide is such that 'Missouri' is a place that is exclusive of STL. The divide has persisted despite dynamic change along the urban/rural border. Suburbanization, spurred by 'White flight', has drastically reshaped the landscape in the metropolitan area surrounding STL. As a result, formerly rural towns and counties are now well-developed regions of urban sprawl. This process decimated the city itself and resulted in STL's population decreasing by 60% since 1950 (see Gordon, 2008).

Results

The previously described connotations of *hoosier* are often made explicit in the *Post-Dispatch* (Table 1). As such, issues of class, race, and regional identity are wrapped together by definition in *hoosier*.

Table 1.

Explicit references to *hoosier*'s meaning in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles

Explicit Description	Articles Referring
Rural	3
White	2
Trash	4
Poor	3
Synonymous Slur	
Redneck	2

Although intersectional, these properties may be accessed relatively independently from one another. It is thus useful to conceive of the meaning of *hoosier* using the family-resemblance approach to category membership that Croom (2013) suggests be applied to slurs. That is, an item is a member of a category (C) if it shares some properties (P_n) with a prototype. For *hoosier*, this yields the following:

C. H(*hoosier)*

$P_1.$ *X* is poor (POVERTY)

$P_2.$ *X* is from a rural area (RURALITY)

$P_3.$ *X* is Southern (SOUTHERNESS)

$P_4.$ *X* is white (WHITENESS)

$P_5.$ *X* is trashy (TRASHINESS)

Under this conception, if some nominal *X* may be described with some or all of the above properties, it may be described as *hoosier*. That some properties are highlighted at the expense of others is illustrated in the *Headline Hooshe* segment, which emphasizes SOUTHERNNESS. In it, Patrico, one of the radio hosts, imitates a Southern accent through /aɪ/ monophthongization:

> Moon: I have this visual picture of these two in a cop car speedin' away and him
>
> goin' 'Yeah Amber, whoo-hoo!'
>
> Patrico: Yeah and her goin' '[a] got you baby! [a] love you so much!'

RURALITY is also easily accessed, as the conversation with Mary reveals:

> Dan: What's your opinion of the more rural parts of the area?
>
> Mary: Like the hoosier parts?
>
> D: Yeah. [laughs]
>
> M: Does that sum up my ideas? […] Oh rural Missouri. There's corn and racism
>
> and tornadoes. And I don't want to be there.

Of course, the above excerpts do not purely refer to one property of *hoosier,* but multiple properties. Accessing these properties, as shown below, is not done haphazardly. Rather, the properties of *X* necessary to be labeled *hoosier* vary with the locality of *X*. This is interpreted here in terms of sociolinguistic scales. In an effort to help sociolinguists better analyze language use in a globalizing society, Blommaert (2007) theorizes that linguistic phenomena display layered complexity as one moves between levels of a scale. Such a scale ranges from local/micro levels to global/macro levels. Blommaert's insight is that shifting meanings and indexical relations of linguistic phenomena are accompanied by a shift in level on a scale. That is, at any particular level of a scale, the meaning is more fixed. Using a scale based on locality, we find that *hoosier*'s meaning displays the layered complexity discussed by Blommaert. The relevant

scale here has the following levels: STL ↔ Missouri ↔ the US.[1] Within each level, different

properties of *hoosier*'s meaning are highlighted or diminished. Consider Mary's use of it with

respect to Missouri. Here, RURALITY is strongly brought to the forefront. Because Mary knows

that rural Missouri is predominantly POOR, WHITE, and SOUTHERN, these properties are

secondary. Compare this with the *Headline Hooshe* segment, whose stories come from around

the US and generally involve low-level criminal acts. As such, the foremost properties of *hoosier*

at this level are POOR TRASH. Because these negative properties index SOUTHERNNESS among the

hosts and audience, this is secondary and made explicit as a result. When used at the level of

STL, *hoosier* again highlights POOR TRASH; however, the secondary meaning changes. This is

due to where in STL *hoosiers* are described as being from. 'Hoosier Love,' for example, refers to

"South side city hoosier love" in the refrain. Similarly, Table 2 shows that the most prominent

place explicitly attached to *hoosier* in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* is South STL. This area is

predominantly white due to hypersegregation (see Massey and Denton, 1989), and speakers

know this. Thus, *hoosier* takes on WHITE as a secondary meaning with respect to STL.

Table 2.

Place associations of *hoosier* in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles

Referent	Articles Referring
South St. Louis	4
Missouri	2
Arnold, Mo.	1

Dong and Blommaert (2009: 4) observe that moving across levels of a scale "presupposes

access to particular resources, and such access is often subject to inequality". We see this

especially when moving to the level of STL. The speaker needs a detailed knowledge of the

social geography of STL. It is not enough to know that *hoosiers* are POOR and WHITE; one has to

know where poor whites live in STL in order to wield *hoosier* appropriately. In essence, this

means only a St. Louisan can use *hoosier* appropriately. Therefore, use of *hoosier* represents a

claim of being a St. Louisan.

Normative use

Any stigmatized thing, behavior, or preference can be described as *hoosier* (Table 3). As such,

the social judgments in these uses of *hoosier* serve a normative function.

Table 3.

Non-personal stigmatizing uses and examples of *hoosier* in *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* articles

Modifies	Examples	Articles Referring
Thing	hoosier weeds; hoosier hot tub	17
Behavior	leaving Christmas tree up all year; supporting George W. Bush for President	5
Preference	hoosier rock; selecting Branson, MO for vacation spot	2

It appears that this normative function of *hoosier* extends to policing inappropriate behavior. The

Headline Hooshe segment illustrates this when the hosts debate which of four stories is the most

hoosier:

1. A woman stole a police vehicle while her husband was being arrested for a DUI.

2. A man wrapped his home in tinfoil to protect himself from aliens.

3. One man threw a barbequed beef brisket at another during an argument.

4. A woman attacked her boyfriend with a poop scoop during an argument.

The hosts' debate centers on whether some stories are actually *hoosier*:

Jeff: To me it's easy, it's number one for me because you have the DUI, you get arrested, your wife comes to free you, and steals a cop car? That's hoosier all over the place, number two there's just something going on in the guy's head with the foil-wrapped house. And uh, number three and number four, I mean, they're just arguments to me. That's just my opinion.

Moon: Two horse race for me, uh, between the uh, the alien guy because not only is that hooshe, but he's made his entire neighborhood hooshe now

J: Yeah but I think he's just something wrong in his head.

Rizzuto: If somebody, if one person could lower the property value in a neighborhood. If one person and it's a-, he foil-wrapped his house cause he's afraid of an alien attack that gets my vote.

M: That's pretty good. But I am actually voting for number one.

R: I thought that'd be in last place.

Patrico: No honestly to me that's what I would go for.

Strikingly, they debate whether the man's actions in (2) are actually *hoosier*. As Moon notes, decorating one's house such that property values decline is indeed socially unacceptable behavior. However, Jeff claims that such unacceptable behavior is excused, as it results from mental illness. In other words, only one who *intentionally and competently* engages in socially unacceptable behavior can be *hoosier*. The man in (2) was not capable of this. This argument leads Moon and Patrico to join Jeff in believing story (1) to be the most *hoosier*. The audience

agreed when given input; story (1) received a plurality of votes. In short, it is not merely the stigma of certain behaviors that makes them *hoosier*, rather, one's behavior is *hoosier* if it can be corrected. In this way, use of *hoosier* polices behavior in STL. In this light, 'Hoosier Love' may be seen as a cautionary tale when the narrator, speaking as a *hoosier*, proclaims,

> We don't need no high school
>
> I think we're too cool
>
> We'll have kids at seventeen
>
> Getting laid at Dairy Queen

These behaviors, the band says, are unacceptable. As such, the song not only makes fun of people who engage in such activities, but warns the listener not to as well.

A claim to cosmopolitanism

Thus far, use of *hoosier* appears to fall into the first of three categories of use—paradigmatic derogatory use, non-paradigmatic derogatory use, and non-derogatory in-group use—that Croom (2013) distinguishes for slurs. This section problematizes such categories by considering what usage represents with respect to the speaker. Although *hoosier* is clearly used in a derogatory manner that Others the intended target, by derisively asserting that behavior is socially unacceptable, *hoosier* also asserts that the user conducts his- or herself in a socially acceptable manner. It seems that the uses of *hoosier* described above promote the speaker as cosmopolitan in comparison to the derided target. Consider *hoosier*'s use in policing preferences, for example. A speaker maligning *hoosier* music, for instance, presumably likes and listens to non-*hoosier* music. As such, using *hoosier* indexes the speaker's own claim not just to acceptable behavior, but acceptable *taste*. A cosmopolitan person is the opposite of a *hoosier*. Use of *hoosier*, then, is

a performance which "create[s] images of the self and the other" (Pagliai, 2003: 48). By recognizing and pointing out *hoosier* behavior or taste, the user elevates their own social standing. This function of the slur is not one described in Croom's (2013) categorization of slurs.

Another way to assert that one is cosmopolitan through use of *hoosier* is to deny that one is a *hoosier*. This is far more dangerous for the speaker, because a vehement denial gives the impression the speaker is defending some behavior that is likely *hoosier*. Done well, it conveys that one is indeed cosmopolitan. However, failure to substantiate the claim risks the speaker's being branded a *hoosier*. Two *Post-Dispatch* articles illustrate this. In the first, a well-off neighborhood in STL's suburbs drafted regulations targeting a new resident, who owned two pit bulls among smaller annoyances such as not having garbage cans of the same color as his neighbors (Shinkle, 2001). In the course of being interviewed for the piece, the resident claimed that he was not a *hoosier*. However, in the context of the piece, such an assertion merely draws attention to the list of his perceived misdeeds, inviting the reader to evaluate this claim themselves. By contrast, a column discussing the growth and development of STL's suburbs in St. Charles County, Missouri is more successful at claiming cosmopolitanism. While the author begs the reader to "spare us the *hoosier* treatment, and stop telling us to put the rifle in the rack in the truck and clean the dog crap off our boots" (Sonderegger, 2005), he also makes an effort to do extra work at asserting cosmopolitanism by offering several ways in which he believes the county is cosmopolitan. What these examples show is that unlike how directing *hoosier* at a target constitutes a speaker's unassailable claim to cosmopolitanism, denying that one is *hoosier* requires proof of cosmopolitanism. Even when offered, there is no guarantee that the proof will be accepted—and therein lies the danger for the speaker.

One final use of *hoosier* worth considering here is its role in self-deprecation. Speakers will sometimes claim to be a *hoosier* themselves or profess to like *hoosier* things. A reasonable understanding of this would be to read self-described *hoosiers* as constituting a counter-public (Warner, 2002) in which such speakers recognize their subordinate status, yet at the same time communicate an anti-cosmopolitan identity. Such use of *hoosier* might then be treated as non-derogatory in-group use of the slur (Croom, 2013) and analyzed as an instance of appropriation (following, perhaps, the analysis proposed in Bianchi, 2014). I suggest, however, that this is not the case. Speakers claiming to be *hoosiers* in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* include a local artist, the editor of the newspaper's lifestyle section, and a tenured archaeology professor. Far from being *hoosiers*, these speakers are clearly cosmopolitan. As such, speakers who claim to be *hoosiers* or admit to *hoosier* behavior are not members a counter-public and engaging in non-derogatory in-group use. Rather, their occupations suggest that they are authoritatively cosmopolitan. Instead of appropriating the slur, these speakers are claiming that they are *so cosmopolitan* that they are allowed to engage in *hoosier*-like behavior.

Discussion

We have seen that *hoosier* is derogatory, layered, and normative. What does this tell us about STL and *hoosier*'s persistence and enregisterment? Consider that *hoosier* strongly indexes localness. Using it correctly involves managing the complex intersectionality of several stigmatized groups across a scale of regionalness. Doing so requires intimate knowledge of the social geography of STL. The user then must be a native St. Louisan or long-lasting transplant. As such, *hoosier* is tied to locality in STL more deeply than a second- or third-order indexical relation, which Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) describe as arising from speakers correlating a

linguistic feature with a place. Rather than merely correlate with STL, *hoosier* encodes STL into its pragmatic content. In this way, *hoosier* acts as a verbal symbol (Cavanaugh, 2005) of STL. This suggests that *hoosier* persists because its seemingly viable alternatives are not as viable as they first appear.

The locality encoded in *hoosier* also impacts its normative use. Through its encoded locality, middle/upper-middle class whites use *hoosier* to proclaim what unacceptable behavior is *for a St. Louisan*. Likewise, it asserts that the speaker is or wants to be perceived as a cosmopolitan *St. Louisan*. Implicit here is the claim that STL itself is a cosmopolitan city and as such, use of *hoosier* makes a proud, positive claim about STL. For its users, *hoosier* is thus a verbal symbol of the local, associated with positive values. While derogatory, it is used proudly to strengthen the speaker's identity. This differs from the reclamation or appropriation of slurs for in-group use (see Croom, 2013; Bianchi, 2014; *inter alia*), as it remains derogatory. This observed use and valuation of *hoosier* may explain its enregisterment, but also raises the question as to why STL, or any group within it, needs to assert itself as cosmopolitan. Here it is useful to consider STL's relationship with the surrounding area. The urban/rural divide persists despite the fluid urban/rural border introduced by suburbanization and sprawl, which introduces new questions for residents: Who is urban? Who is rural? How do the suburbs fit in?

Modan (2007) observes that the changing social geography of a Washington, DC, neighborhood triggers the contestation of place in the neighborhood. In particular, she notes how the moral geography, or linking of a moral framework to a geographical area, of the neighborhood, is contested. She observes how values are assigned to the "city" vs. the "suburb," and how residents creatively position themselves in this moral space through discourse. The changing landscape and social geography of the STL metropolitan area may be viewed similarly.

This relates to the need that middle/upper-middle class white St. Louisans feel to position themselves as cosmopolitan.

At the turn of the twentieth century, STL was the fourth largest city in the US, meaning its sophistication, grandeur, and urban values went unchallenged. This has dramatically changed: the city has roughly 318,000 residents and is not even the largest city in Missouri. It is an open question, then, whether STL has maintained its prior status. Their use of *hoosier* indicates that this is not an idle question for middle/upper-middle class white St. Louisans, who are fighting to claim relevance and sophistication which they once took for granted. In discussing how the Bergamasco dialect of Italian is perceived as uneducated and hardworking despite the middle-class status of many Bergamascos, Cavanaugh (2005: 142) observes, "a Bergamasco accent can also symbolize the disjuncture between who Bergamascos think they used to be, and who they think they are—and want to be—now." We see the same disjuncture in STL's use of *hoosier*.

At the same time, the blurred urban/rural distinction makes it less clear who a St. Louisan is, now that once rural towns could possibly stake a claim to urbanity. As such, STL is wrestling with the politics of place and who an authentic community member is.[2] *Hoosier* offers a way to separate central members from more marginalized members (Modan, 2007): it asserts who is and is not an authentic St. Louisan, and proclaims that there are standards to achieving this. It gives cosmopolitan suburbanites a way to become viewed as authentic St. Louisans, while writing off those who do not conform.

Conclusion

In many respects, this paper explores why *hoosier* is, as a *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* editorial observed (Editorial Board, 1998), "the last socially acceptable classist thing you can say" in

STL. The study focuses on how middle/upper-middle class white speakers use *hoosier*. This is important to emphasize; the approach taken above lends itself to overgeneralization when done carelessly (Duranti, 1997), and as such, while broader insights may be drawn from how these speakers use the slur, the results may not extend to other groups. As has been shown through its use in discourse, for the group in question, locality is encoded into *hoosier*. Despite its derogatory, normative use, *hoosier* asserts a positive identity and values for STL. Given this, it is not surprising that locals have such an affinity for it. Depletion of the urban core through 'White flight' to the suburbs and urban sprawl in general changed the social geography of STL, and residents are in a position of grappling with the politics of place. As long as that continues, we can expect *hoosier* to maintain its salient position in local speech.

Notes

1. This is not meant to suggest this is the only possible scale, nor, for that matter, that the relevant scale for *hoosier* only has these three levels. One could conceive of the scale having more local levels—the neighborhood, for instance—or more global levels. The given levels are those that emerge based on the texts analyzed in this paper.

2. This, of course, is putting aside the fact that the St. Louis area has a large African American population, in addition to other minorities. Because *hoosier* predominantly concerns whites, I have done so as well in this paper. However, the 2014 events in the suburb of Ferguson show that such issues in St. Louis extend far beyond class or an urban/rural divide. Ethnicity is clearly one more arena in which St. Louis is wrestling with these questions.

Acknowledgements

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Notes on Contributor

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