

Document Sample **Baltimore's Dialect: North or South, Hon?**

Envision Maine lobster, Philly cheesesteaks, Maryland crab cakes, New Orleans gumbo, and Texas barbecue. Besides being mouth-watering, each of these items represents an unique taste of regional cuisine. Like food, language also varies by location. Northern cities like Boston and New York have very different dialects than the twang and drawl of Virginia and Georgia. What about Baltimore?

“How do you like Merlin so far?” If you were from Baltimore you would know Merlin is a *Bawlmerese* phrase that stands for the seventh state admitted to the Union. Most people agree the Baltimore dialect is distinctive. But, is it a more Northern or Southern dialect? Both locals and linguists (people who study languages) disagree. Many would say it is both.

You would expect the state that forms the Mason-Dixon Line to have Northern influences in its speech. Like Philadelphians, Baltimoreans have a Germanic heritage that influence how they pronounce the soft “th” sound in *this* or *them* as *dis* or *dem*. “How ‘bout *dem* O’s, hon?”

Both cities have a tendency for what linguists call the fronted long “o,” as in “Cal Ripken’s two *h-eh-owe-me* runs. Yet, if you listen closely to Bawlmer’s fronted “o,” you will hear extra sounds you won’t hear anywhere else. That is the Southern influence at work – encouraging us to stretch out a word by adding more sounds. More specifically, we are adding *schwas* or vowels to create diphthongs (a speech sound made by blending from one vowel sound into another to form a third sound). For instance, consider the “o” in ocean, as in the familiar phrase “*Goin’ downey owe-shin.*” Folks who have a light Baltimore accent put a little “uh” in front of the “o” in ocean. Those with a thicker accent put an “eh” in front of the “o” sound, forming a diphthong. For those with a heavy accent the “o” becomes “eh-oh-oo” to form a triphthong.

Since adding those extra sounds is more Southern than Northern, Baltimore’s geography is borne out in its accents: those who live in South Baltimore generally sound more Southern than those who live in North Baltimore. As well, the fondness for flattening sounds is apparently a Southern *thang*, too. Is that a fire truck? No, indeed. It is a *faar* truck. And, Baltimoreans don’t boil crabs in old Bay, we *bawl* crabs.

So, is the Baltimore dialect Northern, Southern, both or neither? Like the city itself, it defies labels. The next time you hear *Bawlmerese* spoken by a native, celebrate the region’s unique blend of sounds and rhythms. There’s *n-eh-owe* place like *h-eh-owe-me*. Got *dat*?