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Why Pittsburghers add an 'S' to the end of words

Do you – or your parents – call it Aldi's or Giant Eagle's?



There's no "s" on the end of these words, but that doesn't stop Pittsburghers from adding one. MIKE MOZART / FLICKR; RANDOM RETAIL / FLICKR; MIKE MOZART / FLICKR

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In Pittsburgh, a trip to the grocery store means a visit to Giant Eagle's or Aldi's ... despite the fact that the signs at those stores call them Giant Eagle and Aldi.

You've probably heard somebody around here say Panera's instead of Panera or Penney's instead of J.C. Penney.

There's a peculiar Pittsburgh penchant for adding a possessive "s" (or sometimes just a plural "s") to words when it's not actually a part of the name.

So what's up?

"Like many of the things that people associate to Pittsburgh, it's something that harks back to the past," said Barbara Johnstone, professor of English and linguistics at Carnegie Mellon University who researches Pittsburghese.

"I think that this habit comes from the days when shops were named after their owner, so the name of a shop would be the name of an owner, with a possessive after the name."

Think of Little's Shoes, Orr's Jewelers, Kaufmann's, Mineo's, Macy's – all family names.

The concept of adding a possessive generalizes to other shop names even when they aren't family names, she said. It's especially true when the city's most beloved brands are family names.

"There are a lot of local names – we've had a history with things like Isaly's and they're really institutions, Primanti's (too)," said Scott Kiesling, a University of Pittsburgh linguistics professor. "And those are possessive-named stores, and they're really important in Pittsburgh."

Curt Wootton – a.k.a. Pittsburgh Dad, the expert on Pittsburgh vernacular – told *The Incline* he has noticed the add-an-s-to-it trend since his teenage years.

He remembers as a teenager hearing a friend try to teach his mother that it's Trax Farms, not Trax's Farms.

Even Wootton's own mother is known for adding an "s" to words – including words that already have one, like calling the now-defunct (but still treasured) department store Hills's.

"She'll add an "s" to anything," Wootton said.

In the show, "Pittsburgh Dad" is often heard referring to "Giant Eagle's (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJfN19DppP4>)."

Hear a "Giant Eagle's" reference in the first 3 seconds of this "Pittsburgh Dad" clip:

"We've implemented the unnecessary pluralization of anything we can," he said, whether that's Olive Garden's, Walmart's or Target's.

"Our favorite is adding an 's' to Sally Wiggin," Wootton said.

Sally Wiggin, the beloved Pittsburgh newscaster said she has been called Sally Wiggins for years – an inaccuracy that's not just linked to Pittsburghers.

When she lived in Michigan and Alabama, she was often called Wiggins, a name that she said is much more common than Wiggin. By the way, her first name is actually Sarah. Sally is a nickname. (Mind. Blown.)

Given her fascination with linguistics and her profession's demand for accuracy, it grates on her nerves to hear the extra "s" at the end.

"When I hear the "s" on it, it's like somebody taking their nails on a chalkboard and dragging them down," she said. "It does send a chill up my spine, and you try to be polite because people mean well."

In jest, WDVE's Randy Baumann introduces her as Sally Wiggins when she's on the program, "knowing that I will start screaming that my name is Wiggin," she said.

Nate @nategood · Aug 7, 2014
When I saw that "Wiggins" was trending, I naturally assumed it was in reference to @SWigginWTAE and not the NBA.

Sally Wiggin @wiggin_sally
@nategood ha!!! Good for you! Yes, Andrew Wiggins! But I have no "s" on the end of my name.

12:29 PM · Aug 7, 2014

1 Reply Copy link to Tweet

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Nate @nategood · Aug 7, 2014
Replying to @wiggin_sally
@SWigginWTAE Of course you don't, but I was thinking "Wiggins" as in *multiple* Sally Wiggin. ;-)

Sally Wiggin @wiggin_sally
@nategood boy, you are clever! First time I have ever heard that explanation. Touché !

1:22 PM · Aug 7, 2014

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The Sally Wiggin vernacular phenomenon doesn't quite follow the rule. Pittsburghers may just not actually know that the TV broadcaster's last name is Wiggin not Wiggins. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w5Q7ki9D8cQ>), Johnstone said.

Hear a Sally "Wiggins" reference at 4:10, courtesy of "Pittsburgh Dad":

Before anybody decries Pittsburghers for this bit of bad grammar concerning store names, know that this turn of phrase can be used for a specific, intentional purpose. It's a concept called "productivity" in linguistics.

"It could be kind of to mark definiteness a bit," Kiesling said. "Or it's a place they go to regularly, so it sort of marks that we should as a listener know which specific store they're talking about."

There's no reason to believe this trend is limited specifically to Pittsburgh or Southwestern Pennsylvania, the linguists said. But it's certainly been talked about as a "Pittsburghese thing," Johnstone added.

Even Pittsburgh Dad, in his real life as Wootton, catches himself adding possessives.

"I've been caught doing it," he said. "We go to Benihana restaurant, and I'll say Benihana's, and I'm guilty of it."

It's phrasing packed with nostalgia, which Pittsburghers love, CMU's Johnstone said.

"It's something that sounds a little bit old fashioned and kind of endearing," she said.

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