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The Representation of the Speech of Native Canadians in Two Modern Canadian Dramas¹

*“And try to tame that
accent that sounds like you
have a mouthful of sawdust ...”*

(The Magistrate to Rita in *The
Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George
Ryga)

Abstract

*This paper examines the language used by the Native Canadian (Indian) characters in two modern Canadian dramas, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) by George Ryga and *The Rez Sisters* (1986) by Tomson Highway. Phonological, morphological and syntactic features are analysed. I intend to deal with certain aspects of the vocabulary used by the characters in a subsequent article. In the Conclusion, the results are summarised under the following headings: general non-standard/colloquial features, play-specific and character-specific features; moreover, an assessment is made of the artistic effects achieved through language.*

Résumé

*Cet article examine la langue utilisée par les personnages indiens dans deux pièces de théâtre modernes de Canada: *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (1967) de George Ryga et *The Rez Sisters* (1986) de Tomson Highway. Des caractéristiques phonologiques, morphologiques et syntactiques sont examinées. J'ai l'intention d'analyser certains aspects du vocabulaire utilisés par les caractères dans un article suivant. Dans la Conclusion, les résultats sont résumés dans les catégories suivantes: caractéristiques non-standards, caractéristiques qui dépendent de la pièce ou du caractère; en plus, une évaluation est donnée sur les effets artistiques atteints à travers la langue.*

1. Introduction

The language used in works of literature is of immense importance. It is especially the speech of the various characters that can enhance the artistic effect of the given work. Many studies have focused on the style and vocabulary of specific authors, and quite a few have analysed the works of writers who attempt to represent certain geographically restricted speech varieties (i.e. dialects), and/or certain socially restricted speech varieties (i.e. sociolects). In the field of Canadian Studies, for example, I would like to

mention two articles, both of which analyse the writer Percy Janes's language in two of his works: one concentrates mainly on examining the Newfoundland features of his characters' speech (Shorrocks and Rodgers, 1992), the other focuses mostly on the non-standard features in the speech of the *dramatis personae* (Shorrocks, 1996).

Apart from its literary values, Canadian drama in English is also interesting from the linguistic point of view, as some of its most prominent authors were not and are not native speakers of the Canadian variety of English, or are not native speakers of English at all. (This is not surprising in a country where only about 60% of the population are native speakers of English—Brinton and Fee, 2001, 423; based on census data from 1996.) Such authors are, for example, George Ryga (1932-1987), who is of Ukrainian origin, and whose first language was Ukrainian; Michael Cook, who was born in London, of Anglo-Irish parents, and who moved to Newfoundland when he was 33 years old; and one of the most prominent playwrights of the 1980s and 1990s, Tomson Highway (born in 1951), a Native Canadian, who "learned to speak English at six years and became comfortably fluent in the language only in his late teens" (*The Rez Sisters*, vii).

In the following I would like to examine the speech of Native Canadians (Indians) in two modern Canadian plays where Native Canadians are the protagonists: *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* by George Ryga, and *The Rez Sisters* by Tomson Highway. I have selected these plays because they are well known and popular and were written by two acclaimed playwrights.

2. Analysing the language of dramas

When analysing the language of dramas, one should bear in mind that several factors will influence the kind of language used. The ones I consider important when doing a linguistic analysis are outlined below.

(a) The author

- (i) whether a native speaker of English or not
- (ii) whether a native speaker of the Canadian variety of English or not

(b) The characters of the play

- (i) ethnic and linguistic affiliation: whether English-speaking Canadians (and from which part of Canada), French-speaking Canadians, Native Canadians or other
- (ii) social status and education: e.g. middle-class, working-class
- (iii) gender
- (iv) age

(c) The situation

- (i) who the given character is talking to
- (ii) degree of formality

The problem of authenticity also arises: i.e., how authentic is the speech of a character who is supposed to represent a certain ethnic or social group? One only has to think of the stage-Irish given into the mouth of many Irish characters by English playwrights, or even of the controversy surrounding the language used by the characters who were the creations of the Irish playwright, John Millington Synge. Thus one should always be careful when drawing conclusions from this kind of material. This article does not wish to assess the authenticity of the speech of Native Canadian characters as represented in drama (more extensive research would be necessary for that): it simply intends to describe it from the linguistic point of view.

Drama is essentially something to be heard and seen, so it is somewhat anachronistic that academics should examine the text in its written form. However, a lot of useful linguistic information can still be drawn from this material. As one is dealing with printed texts, it is not possible to examine how the actual lines of the drama are pronounced by the actors; but pronunciation will not only depend on the ethnic/linguistic affiliation of the character, but also on that of the actor. Still, very often attempts are made by the playwright to indicate with the help of spelling some non-standard and colloquial features in pronunciation. Apart from the representation of such features, spelling is a variable factor in Canada, depending on the publisher, as in this country a mixture of the British and American spelling systems is used; however, this will not affect the actual performance from the linguistic point of view. Thus beside the indications of non-standard/colloquial pronunciation, the features of morphology, syntax, and vocabulary are worth examining. As mentioned in the Abstract, I intend to analyse the vocabulary of these two plays in a subsequent article.

Of the two plays to be analysed, *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe* (henceforth *ERJ*) was first performed in 1967, while the *The Rez Sisters* (henceforth *RS*) in 1986. What is common to them is that both have Native Canadian characters (Indians) as their protagonists; in *RS*, seven of the eight characters, while in *ERJ*, the two most important characters (i.e. those who speak most) are Native Canadians.

From the point of view of the analysis, it would be useful to summarise the action of the two plays in a few words.

In *ERJ*, the heroine, Rita Joe, and her boyfriend, Jaimie, are unable to live the life that their people lead on the reserve, and they are not able to adapt themselves to white society's requirements in the city either. Rita finds herself before a magistrate, who sentences her to thirty days in prison. The plot is carried forward in dream-like scenes, where, on the one hand, mostly dialogues between Rita and the important people in her life (representing her past), and, on the other hand, between Rita and the Magistrate (representing her present) alternate. The final scene, where we can witness Jaimie's and Rita's death at the hands of the Murderers, conveys the cruelty of society towards those who are unable to cope with its demands.

In *RS*, seven Native Canadian women, all of whom are related to one another in some way, attempt to break out of their life on the reserve by trying to win

the biggest bingo in the world. During their preparations to go to the bingo game, their characters, their relationships to one another and their hidden traumas are revealed. The play is imbued with bitter and melancholy humour all through.

The following can be said about the factors influencing the kind of language used in the two plays (the references are to the points outlined above): (a) (i) as mentioned earlier, neither of the authors is a native speaker of English, and (b) (i) with their Native Canadians they represent the speech of people who are not native speakers of English either. Highway himself belongs to the community the speech of which he is trying to represent; while Ryga does not. We do not get any direct information about (b) (ii) the amount of education each of the characters must have had, with a single exception: we learn from *ERJ* that Jaimie Paul finished grade six (*ERJ*, 34); however, from indirect references (e.g. the kind of job the characters have, the age at which they bore children) we can conclude that what they have received is secondary education at most—and probably in the majority of cases, not even that. It transpires from *ERJ* that all the Native Canadian characters belong to the underprivileged social classes, and they are very much aware of this fact. In *RS*, the characters do not belong to the privileged social classes either; however, they seem to be able to cope with their situation better than the characters in *ERJ*. As far as (b) (iii) gender is concerned, in *RS* all the Native Canadian characters are female, while in *ERJ* out of the five Native Canadian characters who have lines, three are female and two are male. The characters in *RS* represent several age groups ((b) (iv)), as the seven women are aged between 24 and 53, while in *ERJ* Rita, Jaimie and Eileen are young, while David and the Old Woman are elderly people. Finally, in *RS* all the situations are informal ((c) (ii)); while in *ERJ*, formal and informal situations alternate.

Two more things should be noted here. First, because of the different format and layout, it is difficult to compare the length of the two plays; however, it appears to me that they are similar in length. Second, one of the characters in *RS*, Zhaboonigan, is mentally disabled and can not speak properly, so the language she uses is not analysed here.

Below are listed the most important features to be found in these two plays that differ from both standard British and standard American English. (Canadian English, while being essentially a North American type of English, shares some features with British rather than American English. Naturally, it also has some specific Canadian features. The latest detailed description of this national variety of English can be found in Brinton and Fee, 2001, 422-440.) These linguistic phenomena can be divided into two groups: non-standard/colloquial features of pronunciation and non-standard features of morphology and syntax. Where there are no more than ten examples of a certain feature, all the references are given to the page numbers; however, in the case of features with more than ten examples, only some of these references are given in the article. The references are to the page numbers in the 3rd edition of *Modern Canadian Plays*, Vol. I (1993), and *RS*, published by Fifth House Publishers in 1988. An abbreviation of the

name of the character in whose lines the given form can be found is also given after the page number. (The characters referred to in *ERJ* are: R = Rita Joe, J = Jaimie Paul, D = David Joe, E = Eileen Joe, OW = Old Woman, H = Mr. Homer, S = Singer, W = Witness. The characters referred to in *RS* are: A = Annie, E = Emily, MA = Marie-Adele, P = Pelajia, PH = Philomena, V = Veronique.) E.g. RS 3 PH means 'page 3 in *RS*, in the lines of Philomena'.

3. Analysis

3.1 Representation of non-standard/colloquial pronunciation

3.1.1 -in' for -ing

In *RS*, I have found 41 examples of -in' forms, one by Marie-Adele (78), five by Annie (30, 78, 83, 84—2x; of these, two appear in a song), and 35 by Emily (e.g. 37, 46, 58, 98—eight of these appear in songs). In all the other cases (the great majority of examples), -ing is used.

Below is a table which gives the distribution of -in' versus -ing forms in *ERJ*. In this play there are considerably more examples where the playwright marks that the velar nasal is dropped than in *RS*. (E.g. 41 R, 50 J, 52 R, 58 D, 59 J).

	-in'	-ing	%
Native Canadian characters			
Rita Joe	30	45	40—60
Rita Joe (repeating what the Teacher says)	0	6	0—100
Rita Joe (reporting a Native Canadian character, Johnny)	0	1	0—100
Jaimie Paul (Rita's boyfriend)	30	29	51—49
David Joe (Rita's father)	6	15	29—71
Eileen Joe (Rita's sister)	1	3	25—75
Old Woman	0	1	0—100
Total for Native Canadian characters	67	100	40—60
White characters			
Mr. Homer	7	6	54—46
Singer	5	12	29—71
First Witness	2	1	67—33
Second Witness	2	0	100—0
Teacher	0	24	0—100
Priest	0	8	0—100
Magistrate	0	23	0—100
Policeman	0	3	0—100
Total for white characters	16	77	17—83

Table 1

The Distribution of -in' and -ing in *ERJ*

As can be seen, with the exception of the Old Woman (in whose lines there is only one word that can be analysed in this section), all the Native Canadian characters use -in' in at least 25% of the cases, Jaimie Paul leading the list

with 51%. Of the white characters, the two witnesses and Mr. Homer, who runs the Centre for Indians, have the highest percentage of **-in'** forms—they probably represent less educated members of society. It is notable that the Teacher, the Priest, the Magistrate and the Policeman, representing authority and the established order, use only the **-ing** forms. In the lines of characters where variation exists between **-ing** and **-in'**, I did not find that this was situation-specific; actually, in some cases both forms can be found in the same passage (e.g. the lines of Rita in *ERJ* 39).

3.1.2 an' for and

Only **and** appears in *RS*. Below there is a table which presents the distribution of **an'** versus **and** in *ERJ*. Here, in the lines of all the Native Canadian characters (with the exception of the Old Woman, but here again the number of examples is very low), the form **an'** is in a majority. (E.g. 41 J, 46 R, 51 J, 56 D, 60 R.) As far as the white characters are concerned, the Magistrate, the Priest, the Teacher and the Policeman use only **and** (although in the last case there is only one example). These are the same characters who use only the **-ing** forms. Just like in the case of the distribution of **-ing** and **-in'** forms, of the white characters only the two Witnesses, Mr. Homer and the singer use the colloquial form, and they use **and** very rarely or not at all. Rita's usage varies, but I was not able to find any factor that may influence this. Here again there are passages where she uses both forms (e.g. *ERJ* 30). In general it can be said the colloquial forms of **-ing** and **and** are used much more frequently by the Native Canadians than by the white characters.

	an'	and	%
Native Canadian characters			
Rita Joe	43	19	69—31
Rita Joe (reporting Jaimie Paul)	1	0	100—0
Rita Joe (reporting her uncle)	1	0	100—0
Jaimie Paul	39	2	95—5
David Joe	30	0	100—0
David Joe (reporting "big Sandy")	2	0	100—0
Eileen Joe	3	1	75—25
Old Woman	1	2	33—67
Total for Native Canadian characters	120	24	83—17
White characters			
Mr. Homer	12	4	75—25
Singer	12	1	92—8
First Witness	1	0	100—0
Second Witness	2	0	100—0
Teacher	0	5	0—100
Priest	0	9	0—100
Magistrate	0	19	0—100
Policeman	0	1	0—100
Total for white characters	27	39	41—59

Table 2

The Distribution of **an'** and **and** in *ERJ*

3.1.3 Merged forms of **going to** and **want to**

I have no examples of **want to**, only of **wanna** in the speech of Native Canadian characters from either play. **Gonna** also appears almost exclusively for **going to** in both texts (e.g. *RS* 3 PH, *RS* 66 MA, *RS* 99 E; *ERJ* 31 R, *ERJ* 41 J, *ERJ* 52 R); there is only one example of the full form in *ERJ*, in the lines of the white Teacher (44), and one in *RS*, which, I believe, is for the sake of emphasis (12 A).

3.1.4 Auxiliary omitted

The omission of the auxiliary could also be treated under syntax. However, as I believe that this feature is originally due to fast, careless speech, I have decided to discuss it here. (Note that the deletion of the auxiliary between a personal pronoun and **got** is discussed by Shorrocks under non-standard grammatical features. He also classifies the construction **I seen** as a non-standard preterite—Shorrocks, 1996: 227.)

Either the various forms of **to be** (**are** and **is**), or **have** can be omitted. I have four examples of the omission of **are** (when it should accompany **gonna**) from *RS* (7 P, 12 P, 57 E, 99 E), and one from *ERJ* from the lines of a Native Canadian character (58 J). However, note that in *RS* 12 and in the example from *ERJ* the interrogative word ends in an [r], just like the required form of the auxiliary (**Where you gonna ...**), so it is very easy for the auxiliary to be dropped under such circumstances. I also have seven examples of **gonna** with **are** from *RS* (12 A, 62 P, 63 P, 64 E, 69 A, 65 PH, 66 MA), and one from *ERJ* (31 R). Note that in the last two examples listed from *RS*, the forms appear in a question (**are we gonna ...**).

I have two examples of **is** omitted (when it should accompany **gonna**) from *RS* (11 P, 57 E), and one from *ERJ* in the lines of a Native Canadian character (57 J). However, in *RS* 11 the preceding word, which is a name, ends in a [z] (at least that is how I take it: **That Gazelle Nataways gonna leave ...**), just like the required form of the auxiliary, so again, the dropping of the verb in fast speech would pass almost unnoticed.

I have found 48 examples of **have** omitted between 1st sg./pl., 2nd sg./pl., and 3rd pl. subject + **got** (21 from *RS*, and 27 from *ERJ*; apart from one doubtful case, all from the lines of Native Canadian characters) (e.g. *RS* 3 P, *RS* 46 A, *RS* 88 E; *ERJ* 34 J, *ERJ* 46 D, *ERJ* 48 R), and only one example of such a subject + **got** where the auxiliary does appear in the lines of Native Canadians (**We've got**)—this is found in *RS* 58 P.

I only have a single example where **has** is omitted between the subject and **got**—this occurs in *ERJ* 51 J. In all the other cases, **has** does appear.

In *ERJ*, **have** is often omitted between a pronoun and the third form of a verb other than **get**. This occurs most often with **seen**, which appears without the auxiliary 22 times (e.g. 30 J, 43 J, 48 D, 49 R, 60 R)—see my remark on the

analysis of this construction above. I have only one example of **I have seen** from the lines of a Native Canadian character (41 J); this could be for emphasis here, or it may simply be an inconsistency on the part of the playwright. I also have two examples from *ERJ* (41 J, 60 R), and one from *RS* (108 E), where **have** is omitted between the pronoun **you** and **been**.

3.2 Non-standard features of morphology and syntax

3.2.1 Lack of concord

3.2.1.1 Number: verb in the singular used with plural noun

This occurs most often with **there is/there was**. I have four examples from *RS* (by four different characters: 3 P, 29 V, 36 MA, 66 A) and five from *ERJ*, although three of these are found in the lines of non-Native Canadian characters (31 R, 49 R, 47 W, 54 H, 56 H). In other constructions, I have one example of the lack of concord in number from *RS* (50 E), while there are eight examples from *ERJ*, all by Native Canadian characters (six by Rita alone!) (30 J, 38 R, 43 R, 46 R, 48 R, 60 J, 60 R, 61 R).

3.2.1.2 Person: **don't** for **doesn't** in the 3rd sg.

I have two examples of this feature from *RS* (8 P, 79 MA), and eight from *ERJ* (38 R, 43 OW, 46 D, 51 J, 51 R, 52 J, 56 R, 60 J – although in *ERJ* 46 somebody, about whom we do not learn whether he is a Native Canadian or not, is reported).

3.2.2 Adjective used as an adverb

This occurs most often with **real** when it qualifies an adjective. I have nine examples of this from *RS*, spoken by five of the characters (8 P, 17 PH, 36 MA—x2, 81 PH, 84 A, 97—x2 E, 99 E). **Real** in this position occurs only once in *ERJ* (30 R). I have no example of **really**.

As far as other adjectives are concerned, I have four examples of **sure** for **surely** in *ERJ*, although one of them is found in the lines of a non-Native Canadian character (44 R, 49 R, 52 J, 54 H); two examples of **good** for **well**, also from *ERJ* (30 J, 51 J), and six examples of various other adjectives from *RS* (3 P, 13 A—x2, 35 A—x2, 117 PH), and one from *ERJ* (34 R).

3.2.3 Accusative/dative **me** used for reflexive **myself**

I only have examples of this feature from *RS*—namely four, used by three different characters (5 PH, 8 P—x2, 97 E).

3.2.4 Accusative/dative **them** used as a demonstrative (for **those**)

I have five examples of this feature from each of the plays. In *RS*, four different characters use it (6 P, 7 PH, 79 MA, 84 A, 86 A). I only have examples in *ERJ* in the lines of Rita Joe (31—x3, 48, 49), but it is also from her that we can hear the single example of the standard form, **those** (49). It is interesting to note that both **them** and **those** occur in her conversation with the Priest.

3.2.5 Double negation

I have found only two examples of this feature in *RS* (by two different characters) (4 PH, 44 E), but seven in *ERJ*, where only the Native Canadian characters use this structure (31 J, 38 R, 42 E, 51 J, 56 J—x2, 60 R).

3.2.6 Simple past for past participle

I have three examples of the simple past of a verb functioning as a past participle, all from *ERJ*, and all in the lines of Rita Joe (31, 39—x2). These forms are **forgot**, **spoke**, and **rode**.

4. Conclusion

The features analysed are not specifically Canadian but can be found in non-standard varieties all over the English-speaking world. Some of these phenomena are common in both plays, while some are play-specific, and some are character-specific.

4.1 General non-standard/colloquial features

Certain non-standard/colloquial features of pronunciation and non-standard features of morphology and syntax can be found in both plays with the relatively same frequency. These are the following: the use of **gonna**, the omission of **have** between a pronoun and **got**, the use of adjectives as adverbs, the lack of concord in number in constructions with **there is**, and the use of **them** for **those**. With the exception of the last, these can be found even in the colloquial speech of educated people everywhere where English is spoken.

4.2 Play-specific features

There are some non-standard features that appear only in one of the plays: the use of the accusative/dative form of the personal pronoun instead of the reflexive one figures only in *RS*; **an'** for **and**, **I seen**, and simple past for past participle appear only in *ERJ*.

In some cases, there is also a great difference in the frequency of certain features: **-in'**, lack of concord in number (in constructions without **there is**), lack of concord in person, and double negation occur a lot more often in *ERJ* than in *RS*.

4.3 Character-specific features

Simple past forms of the past participle occur only in the lines of Rita in *ERJ*. In *RS*, it is Emily who uses non-standard forms most often (e.g. her lines account for almost 90% of *-in'* forms in *RS*; she is the one who utters the single example from *RS* of the lack of concord in number in a construction without **there is**; and hers is one of the two examples of double negation in *RS*). She is the youngest of the characters apart from the mentally disabled Zhaboonigan.

4.4 The effects achieved by language

From the above analysis it transpires that Ryga attempted to indicate the social differences between the white and the Native Canadian characters through language, and apart from a few inconsistencies (e.g. in the case of the *-ing* and *and* forms), he did this very convincingly. However, it should be noted that “literary writers usually feel that it is unnecessary to mark every single phonetic detail with absolute consistency” (Shorrocks, 1996: 227). As already mentioned earlier, *-in'* and *an'* are used significantly more often by the Native Canadians than the white characters; and with the exceptions of *gonna*, *wanna* and the lack of concord with **there is**, the non-standard/colloquial features are used almost exclusively by Native Canadians.

Highway uses language in a different way. He does not have to indicate the differences between the whites and the Native Canadians; this is probably partly why he marks fewer non-standard features of pronunciation (e.g. the lack of *an'* in *RS*). However, age (generation) differences are indicated by the frequency in the use of non-standard and colloquial forms (e.g. Emily's frequent use of *-in'*, and her omission of various auxiliaries.)

Finally, it can be said that these non-standard/colloquial features enhance the artistic effect of both plays, and help to highlight ethnic, social and age differences.

Endnote

1. This is a modified version of a paper read at the HUSSE (Hungarian Society for the Study of English) conference on 26 January 2001 in Eger, Hungary. The title then was “How Canadian is the Language of Modern Canadian Drama?” The research for this paper was made possible by Hungarian National Research Fund (OTKA) project no. T032445 (“Posztkoloniális angol nyelvű irodalmak nyelvi vizsgálatá”—“The Linguistic Analysis of Post-Colonial English Literatures”). Special thanks should go to Krisztina Kodó, who lent me her own copy of *The Rez Sisters*.

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