

## REPRESENTATIONS OF LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY AMONG ENGLISH-SPEAKING CANADIANS: FOCUS ON SPELLING

### Abstract

*This article contains the partial results of a sociolinguistic sample survey based on the questionnaire "English in Canada. Representations of Language and Identity", which was administered to 77 respondents in urban Ontario and later statistically processed under SPSS. After presenting the structure, the objectives and the representativity of the questionnaire, the author focuses on the processing and interpretation of data related to Canadian English spelling and discusses the objective data against the subjective evaluation test. This discussion evidences (1) occasional discrepancies between what Canadians think they use and their actual choices and, hence, (2) the need for national distinctiveness in language usage.*

### Résumé

*Cet article contient les résultats partiels d'une enquête sociolinguistique opérée sur un échantillon de 77 informateurs de la zone urbaine de l'Ontario, à qui l'on a proposé un questionnaire portant sur "L'Anglais au Canada. Représentations sur la langue et identité", traité statistiquement en utilisant SPSS. Après la présentation de la structure, des objectifs et de la représentativité du questionnaire, on s'est fixé sur une zone moins fréquentée par les chercheurs, à savoir l'orthographe. Les données objectives sont confrontées aux tests d'évaluation subjective, ce qui nous a permis de relever certaines divergences entre ce que les locuteurs canadiens pensent de leur langue et la réalisation effective de leur usage. Il en résulte la nécessité d'une spécification nationale de leur production langagière.*

### Preliminaries

It has occasionally been remarked (see, for instance, Chambers 1991: 93) upon the homogeneous speech of the inhabitants of Canada, with the notable exception of Newfoundland, which reflects the relative social homogeneity of the population in this country. Indeed, educational standards, both in Canada and in many of the immigrants' countries of origin, are such that standard varieties of English are taught, or else indirectly encouraged by various other means. Still, far from offering the newcomer the sound and sight of homogeneous speech and writing patterns, urban Canada is the stage for an amazing variety of Englishes that confuses the unprepared visitor. However, the Canadian English of the media, is, indeed, both influential and relatively homogeneous, and, consequently, is most often described as such (Chambers, Todd, Trudgill, Albu).

How do the inhabitants of English-speaking Canada relate to the normative rules that (are supposed to) define the Canadian English standard? What are their representations

of a standard / of standards and what are their actual choices? My initial hypothesis, based on bibliographic sources, was that of an ad-hoc construct of a national Canadian variety torn between the two major endonormative models of British and of the United States standard English. This hypothesis has been checked against the results of a sample survey I launched in July-August 2000 by administering a questionnaire entitled "English in Canada. Language and Identity" to individuals and communities located in the two main urban areas in Ontario: Toronto and Ottawa.

My investigation is basically the expression of an outsider's "imaginaire linguistique" - that is my own - related to Canadian linguistic realities and to my Canadian respondents' subjective evaluation of these realities. Part of the subjectivity in the selection of focus has been smoothed by the direct contact with Canadian specialists and with the speakers themselves. Previous influences such as Coseriu's, Labov's and Pilch's are also to be mentioned.

## 1. Description of the questionnaire: structure and objectives

The three parts of the questionnaire totalling over 150 questions, of which Part One and Part Two have been statistically processed (under SPSS), have led to a data base that includes 143 variables completed for 77 respondents.

**Part One, General Information**, is meant to elicit data necessary for: the identification of the respondents in terms of sex, age, birth place, mother tongue, family background, education, knowledge of languages; the quantification and description of their cultural habits (watching TV, listening to the radio, listening to music, watching movies, reading books); the quantification of the frequency of language use in situations (at home, at work, in stores and restaurants, with friends, with relatives, with strangers); the detection of attitudes to language(s), namely, how important it is to be able to use English/French and for what reasons, how important it is to speak one's mother tongue (if different from English), whether English is beautiful or not, easy or difficult, closer to British English or to American (US) English or different from both in terms of spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, whether they would take English or drop it if it were entirely up to them; self-evaluation concerning their own accent / kind of English Canadian, American, British, foreign or other; what English variety they would like other people to think they speak: American English, British English, Canadian English, Canadian English with a special accent, other (specify!).

**Part Two, Focus on language**, consists of a number of "right or wrong", multiple choice and open-ended questions meant to elicit the respondents' speech and writing habits in terms of pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar. In most cases respondents are encouraged to check one out of a choice of two forms or several forms which are traditionally described in bibliography (see, for example, Trudgill, Cheshire, Todd and Hancock) as "British" and "American", respectively. Occasionally, open-ended questions enable the respondents to mention "what they call" or "what they would say". . . Part Two is further subdivided into two sections: **Spelling and Pronunciation** (consisting of 19 entries that contain 42 choices) and **Vocabulary and Grammar** (consisting of 52 entries).

**Part Three, Supplementary**, is a list of twenty open-ended questions that enable respondents to make personal statements regarding the way they relate to the languages they speak; the way they picked the languages they speak; their interest in a particular club, team, ethnic community, spiritual practice, political orientation; the degree of integration/isolation of the ethnic communities they are familiar with; an important interest in their life; one aspect of Canadian life they particularly like; one thing they would change in Canada if they could; one thing they would like to change in the world.

Note: Some of the questions in Part One are based on the Uritescu-Maugeon (University of York) questionnaire, whereas in Part Two most of the questions in the pronunciation and vocabulary sections, as well as some in the morphology-syntax section, are based on the "Dialect Topography of New Brunswick questionnaire" and on a number of studies generously provided by Professor Chambers. Other questions are based on statements in the specialised bibliography or on my own observation and earlier collection of language data.

## **2. Sample representativity**

The population sample that provided the data collected is representative in several ways. Although the respondents are only seventy-seven in number (out of a population reported as around 30 million in the year 2000), they are a varied lot in terms of age, ethnicity, place of origin, occupation. This is reflected in the frequency tables (FT) which provide the numerical values mentioned in the text and which form my Canadian English Data Base (CEDB - © Albu).

The distribution by age approximates the distribution for the whole country, with a maximum in the 30-39 years bracket. The average age is around 33 years, which is again representative.

As regards sex, women seem to have been more eager to complete the questionnaire, so they exceed men in a proportion higher (61 per cent) than the national ratio (about 50.2 per cent of the whole population). However, I do not think sex as a biological feature is essential in the interpretation of language data. Gender would be so, but it is next to impossible to quantify.

In terms of place of origin, 38 of my informants are Canadian-born, whereas 39 are immigrants of varied origins. They come from 19 countries and are, in most cases, of single ethnic origin. Rather than produce a long list of countries of origin, I chose to group the informants into two categories, labelled "Old Canadians" (that is, born in Canada) and "New Canadians" (that is, born outside of the Canadian borders). Of the "New Canadians", who are from 19 countries, five come from English-speaking countries (Great Britain, Ireland and the U.S.) and ten come from other countries and territories where English has an official (Hong Kong, Pakistan, the Philippines, Mauritius) or quasi-official (India) status.

Except two Montreal inhabitants, all the respondents live in Ontario, the most populated province (one third of the people of Canada). Ontario's inhabitants include not only those of British and French descent but also other sizeable communities, such as Chinese, Italian, German, Ukrainian. (Immigration from Asia has increased over the past few years; many people left Hong Kong before China assumed control in 1997.) Incidentally, the numbers of Toronto informants (46, i.e., 59.7%) and of Ottawa

informants (29, i.e., 37.7%) are also in direct ratio to the total number of inhabitants in the two urban areas.

English is the mother tongue of 35 of the respondents, that is, 45,5%. The remaining respondents, 42 in number, speak no less than 19 other languages. These 19 languages continue to be spoken as home languages, but are often doubled by English, so at present English is the language spoken at home in 52 cases (it is the only 'home language' in 39 cases and is spoken side by side with another language in another 13 cases). English is also the only or the main language of education in 58 out of 77 cases. Most of the informants are at least bilingual, more than half speaking three languages or more, and 61 of them have higher education.

On being asked to arrange the languages they have acquired/learned according to the degree of confidence/proficiency with which they use them, almost all the informants placed English in the top position. (English comes second only in three cases). Although not essential, respondents' exposition to language(s) through TV, radio, magazines, books and films has also been quantified (TF One 21-29).

### 3. Interpretation of data

Of the four possible directions as regards data processing and interpretation – spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar – the less trodden path is that of spelling. It is in this very area that I have obtained the most intriguing results on considering what my informants' actual choices are against what they **think** they prefer.

#### 3.1 Spelling between fact and fiction in the country of "tire centres"

##### 3.1.1 Canadian spelling choices

"I've learned 'tyre' but one of my profs marked it wrong, so I'm now using 'tire'." (Respondent 75, commentary on II 5)

They say Americans owe Noah Webster *color* for 'colour', *wagon* for 'waggon', *fiber* for 'fibre', *tire* for 'tyre' and *defense* for 'defence'. Canadian spelling preserves some British forms (*colour*, *centre*) but adopts many American spellings (e.g., *aluminum* vs Brit. *aluminium*, *tire* vs. British *tyre*) and are hesitant in some cases (*jewelry/jewellery* - the choice of the British spelling possibly connoting distinction, refinement, art). Indeed, being in Canada, I passed by many "tire centers" and had the confirmation of this "melange". I wondered if Canadians' options were systematic and am tempted to say they are. However, counterexamples can be found to demonstrate the random character of these choices. For instance, one of the texts I received from Telecare Distress Centre Brampton reads (bold type added – R.A.):

Domestic violence is a pattern of abusive **behaviour** that profoundly affects our relationships, family units and social network. Abuse **centers** around the need for control and occurs when an individual is attacked by another person emotionally, psychologically, physically or sexually to gain or exert power and control (*Telecare Distress Centre Brampton*).

My informants' task regarding spelling was the following:  
Choose the spelling you prefer in each pair:

- |   |   |  |   |
|---|---|--|---|
| 1. pajamas   | pyjamas    | 2. analyze  | analyse    |
| 3. program   | programme  | 4. favor    | favour     |
| 5. tire      | tyre       | 6. center   | centre     |
| 7. aluminum  | aluminium  | 8. jewelry  | jewellery  |

For each variable, the first item follows AE spelling rules and the second BE spelling rules, but, of course, this was not specified in the questionnaire. The quantified results are presented in the following table:

|         |                      | 1               | 2               | 3               | 4               | 5               | 6               | 7           | 8               | Total |
|---------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------|-----------------|-------|
| AE      | Freq.no.<br>per cent | 30<br>40%       | 53<br>69.7<br>% | 44<br>57.9<br>% | 10<br>13.2<br>% | 64<br>84.2<br>% | 22<br>28.9<br>% | 49<br>64.5% | 38<br>50%       | 310   |
| BE      | Freq.no.<br>per cent | 44<br>58.7<br>% | 21<br>27.6<br>% | 28<br>36.8<br>% | 61<br>80.3<br>% | 8<br>10.5<br>%  | 49<br>64.5<br>% | 25<br>32.9% | 37<br>48.7<br>% | 273   |
| both    | Freq.no.<br>per cent | -               | -               | 2<br>2.6%       | 2<br>2.6%       | -               | 1<br>1.3%       | -           | -               | 5     |
| missing | Freq.no.<br>per cent | 2<br>2.6%       | 2<br>2.6%       | 2<br>2.6%       | 3<br>3.9%       | 4<br>5.2%       | 4<br>5.2%       | 2           | 1<br>1.3%       | 20    |

That means that c. 51% of the respondents are in favour of AE spelling, c. 45% prefer BE spelling and c. 4% are hesitant.

Discussing this foreseeable result with a few technical writers, I understood that the computer spellers in their offices are set to AE spelling and, also, that their companies' economic policies have imposed AE spelling as compulsory for technical manuals and other documents issued on behalf of the company. This will naturally lead to the further Americanisation of Canadian English norms with regard to spelling.

In terms of individual preferences, the American spelling is preferred for *analyze*, *program*, *tire*; the British spelling wins in the case of *favour* and *centre*; whereas in the case of *aluminum-aluminium* and *jewelry-jewellery* there is a split between the Old Canadians and the New Canadians, the former favouring the American spelling and the latter the British spelling. This may be accounted for by the fact that most of the New Canadians investigated come from countries where British English is taught.

As for the new *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, "the foremost authority on current Canadian English", it takes into account familiarity or frequency in Canadian usage and avoids definite prescriptions, but suggests both through its title and through its content that there is a Canadian standard variety. Thus in point of spelling, the American version is the only "Canadian" entry in four of the eight cases discussed. The alternative versions are introduced parenthetically by *also* in two cases (*analyse* and *programme*) and by *Brit.* in two other cases (*tyre* and *aluminium*). In three cases the British versions – *pyjamas*, *favour* and *jewellery* – come first as "Canadian", and they are accompanied by the alternative parenthetical (*also*) versions. In only one case are there two different entries, but one is significantly marked as favourite: thus *centre* is accompanied by the parenthetical specification *also centre*, whereas *centre* is just defined as a variant of *centre*. Obviously, in terms of spelling, no other dictionaries

(see, for instance, *WNWD* and *Chambers*) will add the specification "Canadian" with regard to spelling. It may be possible in relation to vocabulary, though.

### 3.1.2 Subjective evaluation

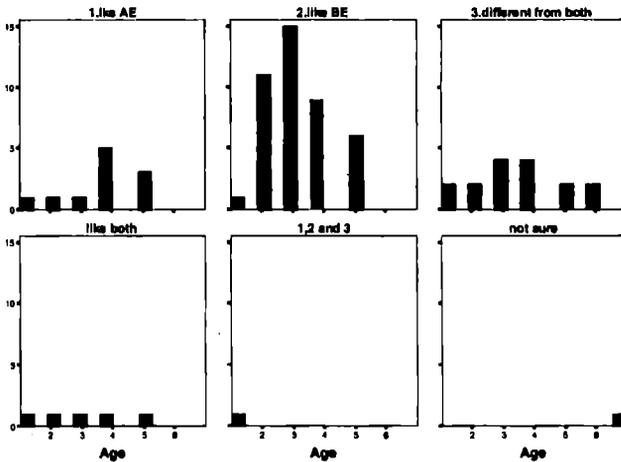
"We are influenced by the American way of writing and talking, but, also, we like to think that British English is the proper English." (Respondent 75)

To understand the way Canadians spell versus the way **they think** they spell it is enough to compare the above results with the following:

"I think in spelling Canadian English is ..."

|         |                         | Freq. | %     | Valid % | Cumulative % |
|---------|-------------------------|-------|-------|---------|--------------|
| Valid   | (1) like AE             | 11    | 14,3  | 14,5    | 14,5         |
|         | (2) like BE             | 42    | 54,5  | 55,3    | 69,7         |
|         | (3) different from both | 16    | 20,8  | 21,1    | 90,8         |
|         | like both               | 5     | 6,5   | 6,6     | 97,4         |
|         | (1), (2) and (3)        | 1     | 1,3   | 1,3     | 98,7         |
|         | not sure                | 1     | 1,3   | 1,3     | 100,0        |
|         | Total                   | 76    | 98,7  | 100,0   |              |
| Missing | System                  | 1     | 1,3   |         |              |
| Total   |                         | 77    | 100,0 |         |              |

The histogram below displays the distribution of choices per age groups:  
I think that in spelling Canadian English is . . .



It results that Canadians want to believe that Canadian spelling is like BE spelling (54.5%) or different from both BE and AE spelling (16%). Only 14.5 of the respondents find Canadian English spelling more like American, which confirms once again the subjective evaluation testing hardly ever reflects the objective language data. Notice that a segment of the investigated people, with a relative uniform representation in all the age groups, asserts their national affiliation by stating that Canadian English spelling is different from both British English and American English.

The “Old Canadians” are subjective in a higher ratio than the “New Canadians”. The latter are more sensitive to linguistic labels, particularly if they had access to English through education. As regards age, most of the 20-40-year-old informants maintain that Canadian spelling is British rather than American.

### **3.2 Attitudes to standards**

In discussing **people’s attitudes to the normative rules** that act within Standard CE the notion of Standard English itself is worth considering. The concept of *Standard English* has to be treated as subject to a centripetal force, which ensures its content stability, and to a centrifugal force, which makes this stability be relative and leads to a permanent re-definition of its content. In the Canadian context, the hypothesis of an ad-hoc standard torn between the two major endonormative models of the British and of the United States standard may be balanced against the more flattering hypothesis of Canadian English norms as a possible model for Global English.

Such a discussion involves the consideration of certain social, physical and psychological parameters, such as informants’ occupational and regional affiliation, age, sex, and attachment to ethnic and cultural background.

By launching this investigation I found myself engaged in a quasi-dialogue with my informants. Some secondary entries, less important for statistic purposes, triggered this dialogic type of response, with pedagogic effects on the investigator. Thus, on being asked about the kind of English they like and the kind of English they dislike, several respondents complained about the influence of US English on CE or were nostalgic about UK English. “I dislike the increasing use of American spelling.” (Respondent 18) “I dislike American English.” (Respondent 27) “I dislike rappers’ English.” (Respondent 56) “I like Canadian and British English.” (Respondent 61)

### **4. Final remarks**

Although Canadian English naturally belongs to American English, the patterns of which are reinforced by economic and cultural policies, various other influences account for its distinct features. Worth mentioning is the British influence in the teaching and use of English in the European countries as well as in the Asian and African countries that provide immigrants. The need for national distinctiveness in language usage as an indicator of national identity may also play a role in the Canadians’ linguistic choices. The marginal comments, the unintended language goofs, as well as the answers to the open-ended questions of Part Three of my questionnaire reveal the fact that Canadians reluctantly notice the devouring power of their stronger

neighbour and make symbolic gestures in defence of their national identity, which is one in the making – and will probably long be so.

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