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Representations of Language and Identity: Focus on Canadian English Lexis

Abstract

This article continues the "Representations of Language and Identity among English-speaking Canadians" series of studies based on the data provided by the sociolinguistic sample survey of the same name. Initiated by the author in the year 2000, it illustrates the linguistic habits of English-speaking inhabitants of urban Ontario as well as their subjective evaluation of these habits. Whereas the first article evidenced a lack of concordance between Canadians' spelling choices (51% American - according to the collected data) and what they think their spelling is like (namely, 55% British), this article brings forth a more realistic perspective of the population with regard to vocabulary. Just as the initial hypotheses had foreseen, Canadians' lexical choices are divided between (1) the British lexical item; (2) the North American lexical item (US and Canada); and (3) the typically Canadian lexical item. Apart from that (4), New Canadians tend to preserve, at least for some time after their arrival, culture-specific elements that influence their lexical choices. However, their subjective self-reflexive statements reveal the sense of belonging to a common North American culture, followed by an increasing sense of national identity.

Résumé

Cet article continue la série d'études "Représentations sur la langue et identité", opérée sur les résultats de l'enquête sociolinguistique au même titre. Initiée par l'auteur pendant l'année 2000, l'enquête illustre les choix linguistiques ainsi que l'évaluation subjective de ces choix par les locuteurs de la zone urbaine de l'Ontario. En ce qui concerne l'orthographe, la première étude a mis en évidence une légère discrédance entre le choix concret entre les variantes nord-américaines et la conviction que leur orthographe est plutôt proche de celle britannique. En ce qui concerne le vocabulaire, les informateurs semblent plus réalistes. L'hypothèse initiale sur l'existence de trois types d'options possibles, à savoir, (1) le terme britannique; (2) le terme nord-américain; et (3) le terme canadien, est confirmée et, en même temps, complétée par une autre possibilité: (4) les "Nouveaux Canadiens" ont la tendance à conserver, du moins pour quelque temps, des éléments culturels de leur pays ou groupe ethnique d'origine qui influencent leurs choix lexicaux. Pourtant, les considérations subjectives révèlent un sentiment d'appartenance à un espace culturel commun nord-américain, ainsi que le développement d'un sentiment d'identité nationale canadienne, placéé au plan secondaire en ce qui concerne le vocabulaire.

Preliminaries

This paper is a sequel to my article on "Representations of Language and Identity among English-Speaking Canadians: Focus on Spelling", which was published in the first volume of the *Central European Journal of Canadian Studies* and, like it, is based on the field work I was able to do in Ontario in the summer of 2000. The initial

hypothesis and the first steps of my investigation can be briefly presented as follows:

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 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. (Albu, 46-47)

The statistical processing of data in SPSS for Windows has led to a data base that includes 143 variables completed for 77 respondents, numbered R1-R77, henceforth referred to as R1, R2, etc.¹ (For a detailed description of the structure and the objectives of the questionnaire and a discussion of the representativity of the population sample that provided the collected data see Albu, 48-49.) The questionnaire includes 52 entries on “vocabulary and grammar”. For this presentation, I have focused on nine questions that elicit answers concerning lexical aspects of Canadian English.

1. “Washroom”, “bathroom” or ... “restroom”?

In selecting the lexis-eliciting questions, I started from the commonsensical remark that “Canadian English is usually defined by the ways in which it differs from what American or British observers consider their norm” (McCrum et al, 244). Americans will notice the preference for Britishisms in the case of *tap*, *braces*, *railway*, *tin (of beans)* rather than AE *faucet*, *suspenders*, *railroad* and *can*, whereas the British will selectively hear *clerk*, *gas*, *sidewalk* or *truck* for BE *shop assistant*, *petrol*, *pavement* or *lorry*. (See McCrum et al., Todd & Hancock.) However, both will agree that the preference for *washroom* illustrates neither the British nor the United States speakers’ lexical choice and that it may be labelled as “Canadian”.

Guided by these basic observations, I introduced eight open-ended questions of the “What do you call ...” type and a double-choice question (“Which do you say: postman or mailman?”), and anticipated that statistical processing might evidence a preference for (1) the British lexical item; (2) the North American lexical item (US and Canada); or (3) the typically Canadian lexical item. Since about half of my informants (39 out of 77) were “New Canadians”, that is, they were not born in Canada, I looked forward to the quantitative expression of their options against those of the “Old Canadians”.

The processing evidenced the following cases.

(a) Preference for the British term, e.g.,

What do you call the knob you turn to get water in a sink?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<i>faucet</i>	18	23.4	26.9	26.9
	<i>tap</i>	40	51.9	59.7	86.6
	<i>knob</i>	5	6.5	7.5	94.0

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<i>tap/faucet</i> (depends on sink type)	1		1.3	1.5
<i>Tutee</i>	1	1.3	1.5	97.0
<i>tap/knob</i>	1	1.3	1.5	98.5
<i>robinet</i>	1	1.3	1.5	100.0
Total	67	87.0	100.0	
Missing	10	13.0		
Total	77	100.0		

The respondents definitely favoured the "British" term, *tap*. Less than one-third stated their preference for the word *faucet* (which the *COD* describes as "North American" and the *DK IOD* as "especially United States"). As expected, the majority of the respondents who chose *faucet*, (12 out of 18) are Canadian-born.

(b) Preference for the American term, e.g.,

Which do you say: (1) postman or (2) mailman?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
(1) <i>postman</i>	18	23.4	25.4	25.4
(2) <i>mailman</i>	47	61.0	66.2	91.5
<i>mailperson</i>	2	2.6	2.8	94.4
<i>postal worker</i>	1	1.3	1.4	95.8
(1) or (2)	3	3.9	4.2	100.0
Total	71	92.2	100.0	
Missing	6	7.8		
Total	77	100.0		

The preference my informants expressed for the American term is accompanied by a cultural element related to recent gender policies and strategies, namely, three respondents added comments that revealed their awareness of politically correct language and their preference for "PC forms" such as *mail person* and *postal worker*. Moreover, R50 added in a note that *postal deliverer* is the politically correct term. The division between "Old" and "New" Canadians is very clear. Of the *mailman* respondents, over two-thirds (32) are Old Canadians; 16 out of the 18 users of the British term are New Canadians, most of whom come from countries where British English is officially encouraged. Of these 5 are Romanian immigrants.

(c) Preference for the specifically Canadian term, e.g.,

Which do you say: Where is the (1) washroom, (2) bathroom or (3) . . . ?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
(1) <i>washroom</i>	56	72.7	72.7	72.7
(2) <i>bathroom</i>	16	20.8	20.8	93.5
(3) <i>toilet</i>	3	3.9	3.9	97.4
all three	1	1.3	1.3	98.7
<i>washroom</i> or <i>bathroom</i>	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
Total	77	100.0	100.0	

Again, the results confirmed my expectations. This was definitely an area of national identity assertion. Both main choices are evenly distributed between the Old and the New Canadians. An awareness of regional distinctiveness is revealed in the note added by R30: "I say *washroom* except when in the US – I try to remember to say *restroom*."

Apart from these neat cases, one notices a fourth, namely,

(d) The existence of several competing terms, e.g.,

What do you call the garment you wear over pajamas?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<i>bathrobe</i>	7	9.1	11.5	11.5
	<i>robe</i>	23	29.9	37.7	49.2
	<i>jacket</i>	2	2.6	3.3	52.5
	<i>house coat</i>	14	18.2	23.0	75.4
	<i>gown</i>	4	5.2	6.6	82.0
	<i>sweater</i>	1	1.3	1.6	83.6
	<i>morning gown</i>	1	1.3	1.6	85.2
	<i>night gown</i>	2	2.6	3.3	88.5
	<i>house robe</i>	1	1.3	1.6	90.2
	<i>Night dress</i>	1	1.3	1.6	91.8
	<i>top</i>	1	1.3	1.6	93.4
	<i>robe/house coat</i>	1	1.3	1.6	95.1
	<i>kurta</i>	1	1.3	1.6	96.7
	<i>dressing gown</i>	1	1.3	1.6	98.4
<i>robe de chambre</i>	1	1.3	1.6	100.0	
	Total	61	79.2	100.0	
Missing		16	20.8		
Total		77	100.0		

In the questionnaire of the Dialect Topography Survey (see Heisler 1999, Chambers and Heisler) this was question 4, which, administered in the Golden Horseshoe, elicited four variants that show significant frequency: *housecoat*, *dressing gown*, *bathrobe* and *robe*. Of these, *housecoat* "is the most common variant" according to Canadian findings in the 1990s (Heisler, 13). My results place *robe* (described by the *DK OID* as especially North American for *dressing gown* or *bathrobe*) first (23 respondents), the favourite among the 20 to 40-year-old respondents, and *housecoat* second (14), supported mainly in the 50-59-year-old bracket (the ex-40-year-olds in Heisler's records?). *Bathrobe* and *gown* come next, very close to each other, particularly if *morning gown* and *night gown* are assimilated to *gown*. The frequency tables based on the difference between the choices of the "New Canadians" and the "Old Canadians" show Old Canadians' preference for *robe* (17), followed by *house coat*. Some of the lexical units introduced by only one or two speakers represent New Canadians' options, and illustrate their previous cultural attachments and verbal habits (esp. Hindi *kurta*, French *robe de chambre*).

It is worth noticing that extralinguistic patterns of daily behaviour may determine the linguistic choices. Sixteen of the respondents did not answer this question, some of them adding explanatory comments, e.g. "I do not wear anything over my pajamas," "You don't wear garments over pajamas." One reason for that may be that this article of clothing is gender-specific as well (*housecoat* = "a woman's long garment for informal wear in the house, usu. worn over a nightgown or pyjamas" [*DK OID*]).

Another case that is worth mentioning is the “rubber-soled shoes you’d wear with exercise clothes”:

What do you call the rubber-soled shoes you'd wear with exercise clothes?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	(1) <i>sneakers</i>	17	22.1	23.9	23.9
	(2) <i>running shoes</i>	35	45.5	49.3	73.2
	<i>joggers</i>	2	2.6	2.8	76.1
	<i>gym shoes</i>	3	3.9	4.2	80.3
	<i>canvas shoes</i>	1	1.3	1.4	81.7
	<i>runners</i>	6	7.8	8.5	90.1
	<i>soles, plimsoles</i>	2	2.6	2.8	93.0
	<i>tennis shoes</i>	3	3.9	4.2	97.2
	both (1) and (2)	1	1.3	1.4	98.6
	<i>espadrilles</i>	1	1.3	1.4	100.0
	Total	71	92.2	100.0	
Missing		6	7.8		
Total		77	100.0		

The comprehensive term *running shoes* (listed as a separate entry by the *COD* but not by the *WNWD*) represents the main option, whereas the term *sneakers* (“soft-soled shoes” – see the *CTCD*; marked by the *DK IOD* as “especially North American”) is indicated by only 17 respondents. *Trainers*, which is the term commonly labelled as British (*COD*, *DK IOD*), is not even mentioned once.

The answers to the question “*What do you call a carbonated soft drink?*” offered no surprise. About two thirds (65.2%) of the respondents preferred *pop*, which is spread on both sides of the Atlantic and represents “the overwhelming choice in most parts of Canada outside Quebec” (Chambers & Heisler 1999).

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<i>pop</i>	45	58.4	65.2	65.2
	<i>soda</i>	4	5.2	5.8	71.0
	<i>pop or soda</i>	4	5.2	5.8	76.8
	<i>soft drink</i>	6	7.8	8.7	85.5
	<i>cola</i>	5	6.5	7.2	92.8
	<i>can of drink</i>	1	1.3	1.4	94.2
	by the brand name, e.g., <i>coke</i>	2	2.6	2.9	97.1
	<i>coke</i>	1	1.3	1.4	98.6
	<i>boisson gazeuse</i>	1	1.3	1.4	100.0
		Total	69	89.6	100.0
Missing		8	10.4		
Total		77	100.0		

As for the question about the “casual wear for exercises”, it occasioned so many solutions that they defy any systematic conclusions. Of the 21 suggestions, *sweat suit* (12) comes first, followed by *track suit* (9), *sweat pants and sweat shirt* (8), *jogging pants/suit* (5), *sports wear* (4), *jogging pants and sweat shirt* (3) and *survetement*.

The answers to the two remaining questions will only be mentioned to complete the picture.

(1) Of the two terms *napkin* and *serviette*, denoting “a cloth or some paper to wipe one’s fingers on”, the latter is described by the COD as “especially a paper one” and as “Canadian and British”. Obviously, the more inclusive and more generally accepted term, *napkin*, prevails. See the chart below for alternatives:

What do you call a cloth or some paper to wipe one's fingers on?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<i>napkin</i>	52	67.5	70.3	70.3
	<i>serviette</i>	10	13.0	13.5	83.8
	<i>serviette (paper)</i>	4	5.2	5.4	89.2
	<i>/napkin (cloth)</i>				
	<i>tissue</i>	2	2.6	2.7	91.9
	<i>(hand) towel</i>	2	2.6	2.7	94.6
	<i>wipper?</i>	1	1.3	1.4	95.9
	<i>cleenex</i>	2	2.6	2.7	98.6
	<i>paper towel</i>	1	1.3	1.4	100.0
	Total	74	96.1	100.0	
Missing		3	3.9		
Total		77	100.0		

(2) For the “evening meal” Canadians prefer the term *dinner* (defined by the COD as “the main meal of the day”), but *supper* (defined by the COD as “the evening meal, often the main meal of the day”) is also frequent. The property “the main meal of the day” seems to be relevant.

What do you call your evening meal?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	<i>dinner</i>	42	54.5	56.0	56.0
	<i>supper</i>	24	31.2	32.0	88.0
	<i>(either)</i>	8	10.4	10.7	98.7
	<i>roti</i>	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
		Total	75	97.4	100.0
Missing		2	2.6		
Total		77	100.0		

To conclude, although Canadian English naturally forms part of the world of American English and, with regard to lexis, has developed a regionally specific vocabulary, the choice of a “British” variant may still be evidenced in isolated cases (*tap*, for instance) and may occasionally be reinforced by the newcomers who were exposed to the British standard in their countries of origin. The newcomers also contribute a number of terms that they bring from their first language and culture. Apart from that, the frequency of some words (such as *serviette*) that are labelled “Canadian” by lexicographers is on the decrease in favour of the more widely spread or the “international” terms. (In this respect, the case of *chesterfield* has been thoroughly analysed by Canadian specialists.)

2. American, British or Canadian? What Canadians think their vocabulary is like.

As for the subjective self-evaluation of Canadians’ lexical choices with relation to the two major varieties, British English and American English, the respondents were asked to complete the following statement: “I think in vocabulary Canadian English is

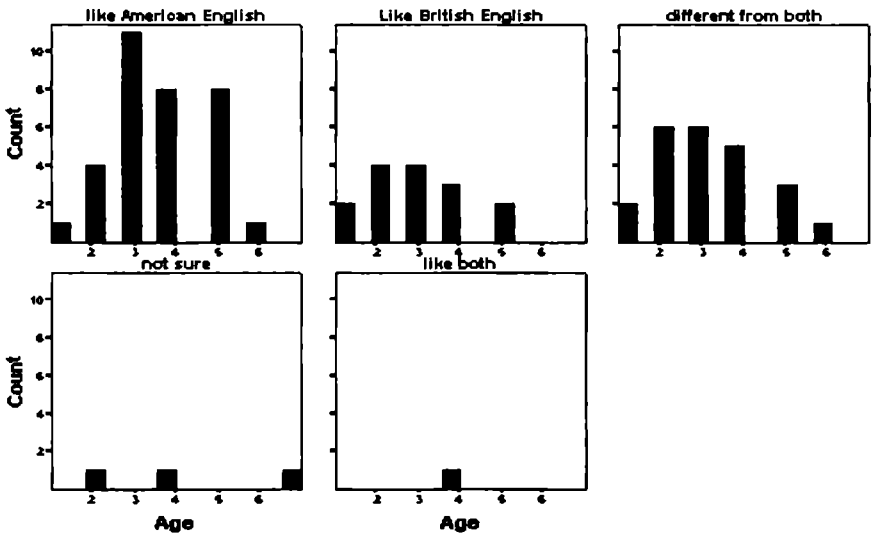
like...” They had a choice of three answers (numbered 1-3), to which the respondents added two more (see below).

“I think in vocabulary Canadian English is ...”

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	(1) like American English	33	42.9	44.0	44.0
	(2) like British English	15	19.5	20.0	64.0
	(3) different from both	23	29.9	30.7	94.7
	not sure	3	3.9	4.0	98.7
	like both	1	1.3	1.3	100.0
	Total	75	97.4	100.0	
Missing		2	2.6		
Total		77	100.0		

The graphic representation of results distributed by age brackets is self-evident:

I think that in vocabulary Canadian English is...



More realistic than in the case of spelling (see Albu), the respondents were aware of the prevalence of the common American vocabulary and also of the existence of Canadian-specific terms. The ties that link them to British English come only third, although they definitely rated Canadian spelling as British (according to Albu). The assertion of their Americanness is particularly obvious with the people within the thirty to thirty-nine-year-old bracket, who also form the majority of the Canadian population. The “general awareness among Canadians of their linguistic independence from both British and US varieties” (Chambers, 1991, 93) is asserted more clearly than in the case of spelling.

As for the unquantifiable side, the questionnaire contains notes and additional comments which reflect a sense of belonging to North American culture in English (R75: “There are some expressions [in the questionnaire – R.A.] that North Americans would not use”), a sense of superiority in language use (R41: “I dislike use of slang

and colloquial phrases”; R69: “I dislike slang and poor vocabulary”); the joy of multiculturalism (R50, Canadian-born).

Acknowledgements

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Endnote

1. The population sample that provided the data collected is representative in several ways. Although the respondents were only seventy-seven in number (out of a population reported as around 30 million in the year 2000), they were a varied lot in terms of age, ethnicity, place of origin and occupation, and approximate the ratios at the national scale. The only exception is the men/women ratio, for the latter seem to be more eager to complete sociolinguistic questionnaires than men are!

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