

Canadian English: Not Just a Hybrid of British and American English
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The inspiration for this paper comes from a regular column called “Our Home and Native Tongue”¹ written by Bill Casselman in the magazine *Canadian Geographic*. I have long been drawn to languages, their history, etymology, and idiosyncrasies. As an undergraduate, I studied English (and later Spanish) literature, but it was not until my second year of university that I became consciously aware that Canadian English is not simply a hybrid of British and American English.

This revelation was brought on by a relatively obscure book entitled *Wordstruck*. It had been recommended by my poetry professor at Saint Mary’s University, where I was a second-year English major. It was not a textbook or an obligatory reading, but rather it was deemed one of those books that would affect one in such a way that you’d never be the same person again after having read it.

Wordstruck was written by Robert MacNeil, a writer about whom I knew nothing. The book is his personal, conscientious and analytical recollection of how he learned English — specifically, Canadian English.

I felt an immediate bond with this writer. Like me, he grew up on the East coast of Canada in the city of Halifax. Like me he had a mother conscious of her British roots and attempted to teach her child more standardized pronunciation, clear enunciation and at the same time, discouraged the use of regionalisms (known as “vulgarisms” to my mother — and Mr. MacNeil’s). At the same time, we kept some British constructions, such as:

- “Shall we go?” instead of the more common North American “Will we go?”
- Saying “I have to go to the loo”, instead of “I have to use the bathroom.”
- The less common custom of spelling the diminutive of “mother” as “Mum”, instead of “Mom”. (My pronunciation of the word also corresponds better with the English spelling, as my mother abhorred the sound of her children calling her “mawm”.)

It was only after reading MacNeil’s book that I realized that I was neither alone, nor a linguistic anomaly. A discussion arose with my classmates who were also majoring in English. We soon came to the same conclusion — linguistically we are neither British nor American. We are Canadian.

¹ The title of this column is a reference to the beginning lines of the Canadian national anthem, “O Canada! Our home and native land...”

This realization was somewhat of a revelation, for as a child growing up in Canada one is trained to recognize that the Brits and the Americans spell certain words differently:

British	American
colour	color
favour	favor

A teacher of one grade could demand that a student use only American spellings, arguing that, “It’s more common,” or “We’re right next door to them,” or (with a certain tinge of resignation) “Someday that’ll be the standard here too, so you might as well get used to it.” In the next grade, a teacher could demand the use of British spelling only and would mark any “Yankee aberrations” of the language as being wrong and reminding students that Canada, while perhaps geographically close to the US, was in every other way closer to Britain and its monarch. Thus the cultural — and linguistic — dichotomy of Canada. By the time one reaches university, most professors have resigned themselves to saying, “I don’t care which spelling you use, as long as you keep it consistent.”

Every Canadian who has travelled abroad and been mistaken for an American (and this will undoubtedly happen at least once during any international voyage -- except perhaps in Cuba) has no doubt experienced irritation or even anger at the charge, without necessarily being able to articulate why. I remember two different occasions in Spain when my national identity was questioned. The first instance was on my first day in there, as I was more or less lost and trying to find my way to the university residence. After wandering around for almost half an hour, being too embarrassed to try my broken Spanish on any of the Madrileños hurrying by, I finally recognized that it was getting later and if I didn’t ask someone, I could spend my first night in Madrid in an alley. The exchange was something like this:

- Euh... Perdona, señora, me puede dirigir al colegio Santa María de la Universidad Complutense, por favor? (Translation: “Excuse me, ma’am, can you please direct me to Saint Maria’s residence at the Complutense University?”)

- Sí, sí ...

And she rattled off the directions in rapid Spanish full of rolling “r”s and heavy “th”s. She evidently saw my utter confusion and after explaining it three times, decided to walk with me there. I was grateful for this and as it turned out, the residence was not far. The first question she asked me was:

- ¿Eres inglesa? (Translation: “Are you English?”)

In a split second I decided that it wasn't a bad thing to be English, at least not for this very kind lady who was walking me to the place where I could finally put down my bags and sleep.

- Euh.... no... Mi madre es inglesa. Yo soy canadiense.... (Translation: "No, my mother is English. I am Canadian.")

- ¡Ah! ¡De Canadá! Pensaba que eras inglesa porque me pareces un poco tímida... (Translation: "Ah, from Canada! I thought you were English because you seem a bit timid.")

Timid? Me? I hardly thought so! But whatever she was labelling "timid" meant, for her, in a roundabout sort of way, "not American". I wasn't about to complain. We exchanged pleasant conversation and I thanked her profusely for walking with me to the residence.

A couple of weeks later, I was in a small shop with another Canadian. The shop owner heard us speaking English and called us, "Gringas americanas". We were furious and replied,

- "No señor, no somos americanas. Somos canadienses." (Translation: "No sir, we are not American. We are Canadian.")

- "¡Aj! ¡Es igual!" (Translation: "Same difference.")

- "Son dos países diferentes." (Translation: "They're two different countries.")

- "¡América, norteamérica, es todo igual!" (Translation: "America. North America. It's all the same!")

We left the store without buying anything. Now, I can't remember what kind of shop it was or what we were trying to buy, or even if the shop was in Madrid, Toledo or Avila. All that I remember is being shocked that anyone would think that "America" and "North America" were both the same place and that there was no difference between Canada and the U.S.

The question of Canadian identity has plagued us for many years. It reached a new peak in 1995, when the French-speaking province of Québec was preparing for a referendum on whether or not to separate from the rest of the country. The subject came up time and time again and generated discussions on the news, in cafés, in classrooms and around the dinner table. One of our provinces was talking about separating from the rest of the country, saying that they are not like the rest of the country — they are different and distinct in language, culture and identity.

This is true to some extent. Quebec is the only province where the French language, and consequently the French Canadian culture, dominate. But then again, every region of Canada has its distinct cultural differences:

Newfoundland

- The last province to join confederation
- Strong sense of loyalty to the English monarch
- Economically underprivileged compared to the rest of Canada
- First settlers came mainly from Ireland
- A distinct “island culture”
- Main industry is fish
- Radically different accent not found anywhere else in Canada

Maritime Region (includes Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia)

- First settlers came mainly from Scotland, Ireland, Germany, France
- Economically underprivileged compared to the rest of Canada
- Main industries are fish and coal mining

Quebec

- French is the principal language spoken
- First settlers came mainly from France
- Main industries are forestry and hydro-power

Ontario

- Home of the Parliament of the federal government; Wealthy
- Industrially well-developed

Manitoba

- Strong sense of bilingualism
- Home of the “Métis” — a racial mix of French and indigenous
- Home of the Parliament of the federal government; Wealthy
- First settlers came mainly from Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Russia, Poland, Hungary and the Ukraine.
- Farming is a major industry

Prairie Region (Saskatchewan and Alberta)

- Strong indigenous culture
- Very little French
- Birthplace of new political parties in Canada
- Strong sense of feminism
- Less socially tolerant than other regions of the country (more racism, homophobia, etc.)
- Wealthy region
- Major industries are petroleum, wheat farming and cattle raising
- Immigrants came mainly from Ukraine, Russia and China
- Great expanses of land

British Columbia

- Most socially progressive province
- Relaxed culture (often compared to California)
- Most expensive province to live in
- Variety of natural resources: timber, fruit, vegetables, fish

In 1980, the province of Quebec held its first vote on whether or not to separate from the rest of Canada and lost. Fifteen years later, in October 1995, another referendum was scheduled to be held. A new generation of voters would decide the fate of our country. A new generation of Canadians — mine — was faced with the question we had never before considered: What exactly does it mean to be Canadian?

Because of the huge regional differences in our country due to its size, it is sometimes difficult for us to identify symbols of our national identity. Of course, we have a flag. But our current flag with the red maple leaf was only created in 1965. Before that, we used the British Union Jack.

Yes, we have a national anthem, but “O Canada” was not made our official national anthem until 1980. Before that, we used “God Save the Queen” and an unofficial version of “O Canada”. When it was finally accepted in 1980, a few “minor” changes in wording were made. The result? Not that all Canadians learned the new version. On the contrary, unless one was an elementary or high school student at the time and had to learn the revised anthem by singing it every day in school, many people simply didn’t bother. To this day, there are many

adult Canadians who do not know the exact words of their national anthem.²

This was evidenced earlier this year when the internationally renowned Canadian rock star Bryan Adams mixed up the words of the anthem while singing in front of thousands of people gathered for a national hockey game. Hockey, is one of the few things Canadians would identify as a national symbol. The irony is that officially, hockey is not our national sport. Lacrosse is. Many people, including many Canadians, don't know that. Even fewer Canadians have played it, seen it played or even know the rules of the game. Hockey, on the other hand, is to Canada what polo is to England or what soccer is to Brazil. We go crazy over it. The sport is broadcast from coast to coast on national television. That's how we all heard our famous rock star, Bryan Adams, make his embarrassing error of mixing up the words of the current and old version of our national anthem. For anyone who missed the hockey game on TV that night, there were replays of the mistake on the national news.

These examples must strike Cubans as strange — the idea that some people (national “heroes” included) could mix up the words to the national anthem or that many of us don't know what the “official” national sport is. Does it signify ignorance and a lack of education? Not particularly. Rather, it embodies the sense of apathy we have when it comes to who we are as a nation. Our lack of identity is our identity. We like to think of ourselves as people who are unassuming, apologetic and benign, people who like to blend in; who are moderate in opinions and politics and respectful of other ways of thinking and living.

We are proud of who we are, but don't like to talk about it. Personally, I would bet that more Canadians would know that we have never been involved in a civil war or a revolution than those who would know that hockey is not our national sport. Even fewer would know that we are linguistically different from our neighbours to the south or our imperialist cousins across the Atlantic. But we are.

² Subsequent to writing this paper, a Canadian elementary school teacher informed me that the national anthem is no longer sung in schools on a daily basis as once was. The reason given is that the anthem contains the word “God”, which may be offensive to non-believers. The anthem is therefore no longer “forced upon” children of different (or no) faith.

Here are four characteristics of Canadian speech³:

1) Sound shifts, especially in the middle of a word:

Sound “t” pronounced “d”:

“Alberta”	is pronounced	“Al-bird-a”
“Arctic”	is pronounced	“Ar-dic”
“bottom”	is pronounced	“bod-dum”

Sound “d” pronounced “j” (or soft “g” sound in English)

“Did you eat yet?”	is said	“Jeet jet?”
“Canadian”	is pronounced	“Can-a-jan”

2) Dropping of syllables in the middle or at the end of a word”

Ca na di an (4 syllables)	Ca na jan (3 syllables)
for in stance (3 syllables)	“frin stance” (2 syllables)
im mi grant (3 syllables)	“imm grunt”(2 syllables)
Am er i can (4 syllables)	“Mare can” (2 syllables)
na tio nal an them (5 syllables)	“nash null an thum” (4 syllables)

3) A lack of superlatives in everyday speech. (Note that this may be more common when Canadians speak to each other, rather than when they speak to foreigners.)

Mark Orkin notes that Canadians use “not bad” when they really mean “good” and that they say “not good” when they really mean “quite bad” and that something that is “fair” is expressed as being “not too bad.”

³ The individual word examples given here come from Mark Orkin’s book *Canajan, eh?* I have analysed his individual word examples and categorized them in the above four groups.

The contrast of these Canadian expressions can be contrasted to the American and British equivalents in the following manner:

American	British	Canadian
great, terrific	awfully good, awfully well	not bad
OK	fair	not too bad
lousy, terrible	awfully bad, poorly	not too good

Orkin notes the “intrusion” of the American “Great!” into Canadian English, but emphasizes that it has been Canadianized by the sound shift of “t” to “d”, resulting in a Canadian sounding exclamation of “Grade!”

For Canadians, the above expressions can be used adverbally or adjectively:

“How are you today?”	“Not too good. I have a cold.” (Adverb)
“How was the hockey game last night?”	“Not too bad. My team won.” (Adjective)

4) The Canadian “eh?”

Orkin’s presentation of the Canadian “eh?” is superb and much would be lost by paraphrasing his original text. Thus, the following is a direct quote (pages 35-37):

Eh? Rhymes with hay. The great Canajan monosyllable and shibboleth, ‘eh?’, is all things to all men. Other nations may boast their interjections and interrogative expletives - such as the Mare Can⁴ ‘huh?’, the Briddish⁵ ‘what?’, the French ‘hein?’ - but none of them can claim the range and scope of meaning that are encompassed by the simple Canajan ‘eh?’. Interrogation, assertion, surprise, bewilderment, disbelief, contempt — these are only the beginning of ‘eh?’ and already we have passed beyond the limitations of ‘huh?’, ‘what?’ and ‘hein?’ and their pallid analogues.

⁴ “Mare Can” is Canadian for “American”, according to Orkin.

⁵ Briddish = British

To begin with, ‘eh?’ is an indicator, sure and infallible, that one is in the presence of an authentic Canajan speaker. Although ‘eh?’ may be met with in Briddish and Mare Can litter choor⁶, no one else ‘eh?’s’ his way through life as a Canajan does, nor half so comfortably. By contrast, ‘huh?’ is a grunt; ‘what?’ foppish and affected; and ‘hein?’ nasal and querulous. Whereas ‘eh?’ takes you instantly into the speaker’s confidence. Only ‘eh?’ is frank and open, easy and unaffected, friendly and even intimate.

Viewed syntactically, ‘eh?’ may appear solo or as part of a set of words, in which case it may occupy either terminal, medial or initial position. We shall consider these briefly.

Its commonest solo use is as a simple interrogative calling for the repetition of something either not heard because inaudible or, if heard, then not clearly understood. In this context ‘eh?’ equals ‘What did you say?’, ‘How’s that?’ Or in Canajan, ‘Wadja say?’, ‘Howzat?’

According to intonation, the meaning of solo ‘eh?’ may vary all the way from inquiry (as we have seen) through doubt to incredulity. Here are a few examples:

‘I’m giving up smoking.’
‘Eh?’ (A cross between what? and oh yeah?)

‘Could you loan me two bucks?’
‘Eh?’ (Are you kidding?)

‘Here’s the two bucks I owe you.’
‘Eh?’ (I don’t believe it!)

‘Eh?’ in terminal position offers a running commentary on the speaker’s narrative, not unlike vocal footnotes:

“I’m walking down the street, eh?” (Like this, see?)

“I’d hadda few beers en I was feeling priddy good, eh?” (You know how it is.)

“When all of a sudden I saw this big guy, eh?” (Ya see.)

“He musta weighed all of 220 pounds, eh?” (Believe me.)

⁶“Litter chore” is Canadian for “literature”, according to Orkin.

⁷ “Bucks”, slang for “dollars”.

“I could see him from a long ways off en he was a real big guy, eh?” (I’m not fooling.)

“I’m minding my own business, eh?” (You can bet I was.)

“But this guy was taking up the whole sidewalk, eh?” (Like I mean he really was.)

“So when he came up to me I jess stepped into the gudder, eh?” (I’m not crazy, ya know.)

“En he went on by, eh?” (Just like that.)

“I gave up, eh?” (What else could I do?)

“Whattud you a done, eh?” (I’d like to know since you’re so smart.)

‘Eh?’ in medial position is less common and so more prized by collectors:

“We’re driving to Miami, eh? for our holidays.” (Like where else?)

“There aren’t many people, eh?, that can find their way around Oddawa⁸ like he can.” (You know as well as I do.)

‘Eh?’ rarely appears in initial position. Thus, while one might ask: “N’est-ce pas qu’il a de la chance?”, Canajans could only say, “He’s lucky, eh?”

Forners⁹ are warned to observe extreme caution with ‘eh?’ since nothing will give them away more quickly than its indiscriminate use. Like the pronunciation of Skatchwan¹⁰ (only much more so), it is a badge of Canajanism which requires half a lifetime to learn to use with the proper panache.

⁸Orkin’s interpretation of how Canadians say the name of their national capital, Ottawa.

⁹ “Foreigners”

¹⁰ “Saskatchewan”, one of Canada’s Prairie provinces.

A teacher at Arm See¹¹ suggested recently that ‘eh?’ is not Canajan since it may also be found in the Knighted¹² States, the You Kay¹³ and Sow Thafrika¹⁴. In the same way sign tists¹⁵ tried to prove that hockey was not invented in Canada, but Canajans remain unconvinced, eh?

Thus concludes this brief study on Canadian English. Certainly, we have only begun to scratch the surface, but if throughout the course of this short paper you have come to understand better a few of the characteristics — even the idiosyncrasies — of Canadian English, then that’s not to bad then, eh?

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¹¹“Arm See” = R.M.C, short for “Royal Military College”, a prestigious private school in Ontario.

¹² “United”

¹³ U. K. = United Kingdom

¹⁴ “South Africa”

¹⁵ “Scientists”

Responses to the question, “What is a Canadian?”

As part of my research for this paper, I interviewed a number of Canadians to understand their sense of national identity. I asked them one simple question: “What is a Canadian?” These are their direct answers:

“To be Canadian is to enjoy the rights and freedoms of a progressive, nonaggressive nation, while claiming a cultural heritage from anywhere else.”

Connie (age 42)

“Someone who lives in a frozen land... um... someone who believes in some semblance of universal health care... What else?... A weird combination of socialism and capitalism... I’m trying to avoid saying, ‘not American’”.

Dan (age 45)

“To me, being Canadian means that when I travel, I’m proud to say I’m from Canada because everybody seems to like Canadians and thus one generates a reasonably friendly reaction.”

Claire (age 29)

“A Canadian? Oh my gosh... What is a Canadian?... A person who lives in Canada and speaks English and French.”

Millie (age 50)

“I don’t know what it is... I never thought of it before... It’s a person who lives in this country. ‘My Canada includes Quebec!’”

Wendy (age 25)

“What’s a Canadian? A tolerant person... multi-cultural and conservative... humble.”

Dave (age 31)

“A person who has Canadian citizenship (whether it’s acquired at birth or from immigrating).”

Line (36)