



College Quarterly

Winter 2005 - Volume 8 Number 1

▲ Home

◀ Contents



Canadian English: Notions of Nationality and Language

by *Michael R. Dressman*

It has been said that the difference between a dialect and a language is that a language has an international border and a flag. But that is not entirely true. The world has languages, such as Kurdish, Basque, and Inuktitut, which, lacking a border and a flag, still qualify as languages. But the saying holds for other so-called dialects. Catalan and Provençal are considered dialects, while Portuguese is a language. Canada, on the other hand, has a border, a flag, and two major languages, somewhat in the fashion of Belgium. Unlike Belgium, where they call the local varieties of French and Dutch 'Walloon' and 'Flemish,' respectively, Canadians have not come up with new names for their languages to make them seem more their own. Although the major languages of Canada may have some differences from the languages of the United Kingdom and of France, in most polite circles the languages are known simply as English and French.

According to *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Crystal, 109), it is estimated that, as of 1995, 63% of Canadians speak English as their first language. An additional 20% of the population speaks English as a second language. And that leaves 17% of Canadians that are not able to use English. (See Crystal, 340-3.)

Although some of these non-English speakers are speakers of Native American languages and some are immigrants from other countries, many are monolingual speakers of French in or near the Province of Quebec. And that is where most discussions of language issues in Canada focus and end: on the topic of the use of French and the dominance of English in the country. The importance of the French and English conflict and coexistence is so pervasive that the Canadian census provides data on bilingualism only in terms of French and English. Even speakers fluent in both English and Spanish are not presented as officially bilingual in federal government statistics. To be counted as officially bilingual, one must be versatile in English and French. (Beaujot, 177.)

This article does not deal directly with Francophone/Anglophone issues, although it cannot ignore them completely. My focus is on the description and reputation of Canadian English in the scholarly, popular, and Internet sources that deal with the variety of English spoken in Canada, the native language of nearly two-thirds of the population. And I am writing as a US observer, and (God help me!) a Texan—not by birth, but by long-time residence.

As part of the British colonies in North America, the land that is now Canada has had English-speaking inhabitants since the seventeenth century. When, after the American Revolution, a border was constructed between what had been simply other British colonial lands, the seeds were sown for the possibility of a national language called Canadian English. These rather obvious historical facts are worth restating, if only to point to the presupposition (actually, a scholarly doctrine) that professional linguists hold about varieties of a language, namely, that they are equally ancient and honorable. There is no question about whether, in origin, the English of Canada or the United States comes to the one from the other. They both come equally from England. But right there we begin to run into the first friction.

Commentators on language in both countries began to notice that the English on the west side of the Atlantic was not quite the same as that of "our old home." Although some Americans lamented the fact, others came to embrace and celebrate the difference between US English, or, as H. L. Mencken called it, the American Language, and the varieties used in Britain. Canadian reaction was more complex. Part of Canadian identity was tied up with being not like those disloyal former colonists in the States. On the other hand, there was the stark reality that a lot of English-speaking Canadians sounded less like Englishmen and more like people from western New York.

Most textbooks on the history and varieties of the English language deal with Canadian English in a relatively hurried fashion. For some, it is a regional variety of North American English. (See Baugh, 324-5.) Others go a bit further and distinguish among the varieties of Canadian English, pointing to differences from the Newfoundland and the Maritime Provinces to Ontario to the West. (See McCrum, 234-9.) But such discussions are rather like the treatment such textbooks give to the distinctions between Australian English and New Zealand English: There are some differences. Not many people care—except for the people in those countries.

Some Canadians, however, feel impelled to care. For them, the differences are important, especially the differences between English in Canada and that in the States. Here are some of the major items that identify Canadian English in contrast to US English:

Vocabulary: According to sources on the topic, many, but not all, Canadians are familiar with or use words such as eavestroughs, hydro, serviette, elastic, chesterfield, icing sugar, muskeg, keener, and zed. General US equivalents would be rain gutters, electricity, table napkin, rubber band, couch, powdered sugar, bog, suck-up artist, and zee.

Spelling: Canadians share a fair number of spellings in common with the British, using the –our ending for 'honour,' 'colour,' and 'neighbour' and the –re ending for 'centre' and 'theatre' (a spelling

considered fancy in the US) and the –yse ending in 'analyse,' while Americans use –yze. It is fairly common for Canadians to spell 'program' with an –amme ending, and a Canadian 'check' ends with –que.

Pronunciation: Most hockey fans in the US know that many Canadians have a special take on the 'ou' sound in words such as 'about,' 'out,' and 'house.' (To Americans, these sound like oat, aboat, and hoase. Some claim to hear oot, aboot, and hoose.) Close observers hear a bit of an Irish-like sound in words with the long 'i'. So you might hear 'high price' sound like hoi price. And there is the Canadian predilection for saying "shedule."

When it comes down to it, this may not seem like a lot to base claims of a national language on. When the comedians on "Saturday Night Live" did their Great White North routine and regaled us with frequent references to 'hosers' and intermittent doses of 'eh', most US viewers were amused but not highly mystified by how different Canadian English is from their own.

The same conclusion is echoed a few years ago in iconoclastic piece in the magazine English Today called 'The Myth of Canadian English'. Jaan Lilles, a Canadian in his twenties, sets out after the world of dictionary and usage book publishing in Canada and takes the scholars and editors to task for fraud. He expresses the worry that "the need to propagate the myth of Canadian English is anchored more in a desire to distinguish Canada as a cultural entity from the United States, and by doing so to legitimate its own nationhood" (p. 5).

As valid as Lilles' perception might be, I do not think it is entirely fair or accurate to ascribe Canadian English and its seemingly exaggerated differences from US English entirely to publishers' pandering to feelings of inferiority or trumped up jingoism. The realities of historically closer ties to Great Britain and the ever-present question of French also press the case for the distinctive features of Canadian English. Consider for a minute the plight of a Canadian publisher or a technical editing service, such as Cornerstone Word Company of Ottawa. Such a company does not exist in a vacuum; it has a context. The public they serve has its unique (if sometimes contradictory) strongly held feelings about what is correct or acceptable usage.

On its website www.cornerstoneword.com/misc/cdneng/cdneng.htm, Cornerstone has a usage guide that discusses Canadian English's contrasts not only with US English but with UK English, also. For example, when speaking of automobile parts, Canadians talk about hoods and trunks, not bonnets and boots. They spell tire, jail, and curb the way Americans do—not tyre, gaol, or kerb. But the Cornerstone guide also cites splits in the opinions of the Canadian public over the use of the –our in 'colour' and the –re in 'centre.' Most Canadians want to spell

'check' with a -que, 'defence' ending with -ce, 'cigarette' and 'omelette' with -ette, 'catalogue' and 'dialogue' with -gue; but they are not so sure about 'programme,' with the -mme ending, or 'organise,' with -ise ending. In arriving at their advice, the Cornerstone people cite usage surveys of the public and of Canadian editors. What these usage comments point to is that there is a tendency for Canadian editors to want to keep forms from British standard that are closer to French, in most instances.

What is a publisher or editor to do, ignore its clients? Only at their commercial peril. Despite the heavy penetration of Canada by American media, arts, products, and services, Canada is, after all, a separate country with shared national and regional concerns, policies, and laws that apply within provinces and across the country. Because of such issues as international copyright laws and education policies, there are such things as Canadian editions of books, expensive as it might be to reset in type a whole book just to get the right forms of a handful of words.

I suppose that some observers, such as Jaan Lilles or many in the US or UK, might offer Canada advice to just give it up. Concede to some other standard. I am sure that events in the not-to-distant past, such as the flap over many perceived errors in Microsoft's Canadian spell-check, it would be tempting to do so. But usage and spelling in English have been hard to harness or direct, no matter which country finds itself using the language.

When Hans Kurath initiated his project, in 1928, to trace all the varieties of English in North America, he called the plan for the work *The Linguistic Atlas of the United States and Canada*. The idea was to try to find out what people said where and report it. That still seems like a good principle. Even if some people in Canada wanted to do away with distinctively Canadian spellings, pronunciations, or usages, you can be sure that their very act would inspire others to redouble their efforts to hold on to those forms and use them all the more. Jaan Lilles, quoting Walter Avis, says that "unfortunately, a great deal of nonsense is taken for granted by many Canadians' when it comes to language issues. And into that category of nonsense I add the notion that there is such a thing as 'Canadian English.'" (Lilles, 9)

Although it may not be generally known, the state where I live, Texas, was once a separate country for a few years before joining the United States. Had Texas remained a separate country, I can only imagine what howlingly funny special spellings and usages that would be ratified by Texas governmental guidelines for schools and publishers. And I would speculate that Texas English spellings would track closer to Spanish spellings than other forms of English. I would also predict that some people would be upset about the differences and tell Texans to quit being so different and to spell and choose words like normal people. "Normal" would be subject to shifting definitions, one can be sure.

Mr. Lilles' iconoclasm has established his credentials as a Young Turk, but folk and their language preferences are not easily reasoned away, eh? 'Canadian English' may be so broad a term as to be useless for some purposes. Still, it is as real as the people for whom it is real. It is no less useful or real than Irish English, Australian English, or Texas English, if'n yew ketch mah drift—which is a kind of Texas version of "eh?"

References:

Baugh, A. and Cable, T. (1993). A history of the English language, 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Beaujot, R. and McQuillan, K. (1982). Growth and dualism: The demographic development of Canadian society. Toronto: Gage.

Cornerstone Word Company. <www.conerstoneword.com>

Crystal, D. (1999). The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English language, reprinted with corrections. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lilles, J. (2000, April). The myth of Canadian English. English Today 62, 16(2): 3-9.

McCrum, R., Cran, W, and MacNeil, R. (1992). The story of English, new and rev. ed. New York: Penguin.

This article is based on a presentation made at the Popular Culture Association and American Culture Association Convention held in Toronto, March 16, 2002.

Michael Dressman teaches at the University of Houston-Downtown, Houston, Texas. He can be reached at DressmanM@uhd.edu

◀ [Contents](#)

• The views expressed by the authors are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of The College Quarterly or of Seneca College.

Copyright © 2005 - The College Quarterly, Seneca College of Applied Arts and Technology