

CONVERGENCE AND DIVERGENCE IN CANADIAN ENGLISH

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In North America, English has taken varying forms depending on different factors which include regional, social, and ethnic backgrounds of its speakers. In this section, we will take a closer look at Canadian English with particular reference to the speech communities in Toronto.

The linguistic situation characterizing Canadian English (CanEng) makes it emblematic of the different directions a language may take with respect to its “root-language” as a consequence of different historical events that shape its structural properties despite the historically attested common origin.¹

Over the last decades, there has been a growing interest in the description of Canadian English especially focusing on phonological variants (Canadian Raising, Canadian Shift) and other typical features characterizing speech (discourse tag *eh?*). However, in almost all descriptive approaches to CanEng the synchronic perspective of such descriptions predominates with respect to insightful diachronic analyses of evolution of CanEng. In particular, the main critical issues have been concerned with the composite nature of CanEng which has frequently been depicted as a blending of British and American English speech patterns and variously described as an endonormative variety even though not yet stabilized and autonomous.

It is also worth noting that most evidence of Americanization or diffusion of American norms in most literature on CanEng is based on isolated phonological and lexical items retrieved from questionnaire surveys rather than systematic investigation of the inherent variability of natural speech data, without considering the linguistic constraints and social meanings associated with variant usage in the Canadian context.

¹ Leitner (2012, 133) considers Canadian English as a “third path” along with British English and American English.

When looking back at past literature in the field, Lighthall (1889) represents one of the earliest attempts to identify different regional and social varieties of English within the country.

The identification of distinct regional dialect regions has not, however, been prominent in the study of CanE, apart from two general exceptions, i.e. the island of Newfoundland (along with Labrador) and Quebec English, which constitute separate dialect areas along with more distinct dialect enclaves. A recent national survey carried out by Boberg (2010) has highlighted the regional fragmentation of CanEng characterized by phonetic and lexical isoglosses tracing specific dialect areas (Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario and West). As such “subtle differences” can be heard in Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, they present a challenge to the conventional view that CanEng is geographically homogeneous over the vast territory extending from Vancouver to Ottawa (Boberg 2008, 150) as well as to the Loyalist Base theory (e.g. Chambers 2009, 71-3) which interprets the apparent homogeneity of central and western CanE in terms of westward expansion (Dollinger and Clarke 2012, 460). According to this view, Ontarians (themselves Loyalists) were among the first to settle western communities and set the speech patterns, in accordance with the founder principle “those who come and settle first have linguistically more input in the *koinéization* process” (Dollinger 2012, 460). But the biggest problem of many existing studies of CanE is their middle-class basis which hardly considers the rural/urban split (ib.).

Another potential source of heterogeneity in CanE is the influence of L2 speakers and the development of ethnic varieties. For instance, data from Montreal reported in Dollinger and Clarke (2012, 460) would place Canada in Phase 5 of Schneider’s Postcolonial English model (2007), and contribute to classify CanEng as a variety characterized by high linguistic diversification. As a matter of fact, well-established communities, such as Italians, have developed features of their own, but it seems that outside of Montreal other communities continue to assimilate features of general Canadian speech patterns.

CanEng can be said to be originated from different waves of migration (see Chambers in this volume) that far from being easily identifiable from a linguistic perspective, make it even more difficult to determine with any certainty what specific features the varieties of English spoken by these groups would have displayed.

It is, however, easier to characterize the speech of the immigrants who came in the first half of the nineteenth century from the British Isles. They would have spoken regional varieties from all over Great Britain and Ireland with northern and western (Irish) varieties better represented than the

southeastern varieties on which modern Standard British English is based (Boberg 2010, 244). It seems most likely that the formative period of CanEng, during the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries, was characterized by a mixture and levelling of regional varieties of English from Ireland, Scotland and England as well as northeastern American colonies. The historical outline presented so far inevitably crosses/matches with theoretical assumptions necessary to explain the evolutionary path of CanEng might have followed towards its linguistic differentiation and identity (Chambers 2012). The relation of settlement history and linguistic variation, the connection between ethnic differences and national identity, and the processes of convergence vs divergence all have vital relevance for Canada (Görlach 2003) and should be therefore further investigated with renewed methodologies.

The historical perspective is in fact the approach adopted by Chambers in his contribution demonstrating how both past and recent changes are moving inexorably toward completion on the same timeline in the historical framework in which his analysis of Canadian variants can be set.

Casagrande's study shows how the French language has contributed to language change within the Canadian variety and investigates how lexical variation can be considered as a marker of identity and one of the strategies adopted by speakers to convey the plurality of languages and cultures of Canada.

Parascandolo presents the preliminary results from a case study of variation in the verbal system of Italian speakers who live in the Greater Toronto Area.

The contributions in the present section can variably be read as addressing the two main issues that have characterized research on Canadian English so far, namely autonomy and homogeneity of the Canadian variety.

