

IT'S DIFFERENT BACK HOME, EH? DIFFERENCES IN RURAL AND URBAN USE OF THE CANADIAN 'EH'

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1. Introduction

Due to cultural icons like Bob and Doug Mackenzie, the use of *eh* is a popular indicator of Canadian English. Various studies have explored the use of *eh* in different contexts. For example, a study conducted by Gold and Tremblay (2006) considered the English *eh* and compared it to the French particle *hein*. Canada is often seen as a country made up of small-town communities with unique and quaint characteristics. Although demographics disprove this view, it draws attention to the existence of differences between rural and urban Canadian communities. The linguistic differences between these two groups have not gone unnoticed among Canadians. Many believe the frequent use of *eh* makes a speaker sound too vernacular, or "hick".

In this paper, I argue that urban Canadian English and rural Canadian English have distinct linguistic markers and, specifically, that Canadian *eh* is used more frequently in a rural context than in an urban one. Furthermore, I suspect young urbanites are likely to make frequent use of *eh* because of their susceptibility to American influence.

The paper is divided into two parts. Section 2 outlines the different contexts in which *eh* is used in Canada and describes this survey of urban and rural Ontarians. Section 3 outlines the results of the survey, showing that *eh* is generally used more by those who live in a rural setting than those who live in an urban one and that rural respondents have a more positive attitude towards the use of *eh*.

2. Usage of 'eh'

I begin by describing the methods used to collect data on the differences between urban and rural use of the Canadian *eh* (section 2.1). I then outline the questions presented in the survey and the set of responses offered to respondents (section 2.2).

2.1. Methodology

The study by Gold and Tremblay (2006) drew on previous surveys to build an effective survey of their own, which included ten contexts of *eh* usage. The present study uses these ten categories of *eh* usage and is also indebted to Gold and Tremblay's analysis

of results. Some of Gold and Tremblay's English example sentences were changed to incorporate expressions that may be more familiar. Furthermore, the focus in this study was collecting information on the rural and urban use of *eh*. This survey also collected data on the age group of respondents and their area of residence (rural or urban). The survey is reproduced in the **Appendix**.

2.2. Survey questions

The questions presented in the survey applied the contexts of Gold and Tremblay but collected data on different variables. There were 10 rural respondents and 8 urban ones. All results were tallied in percentages to facilitate comparison. The survey has 13 questions in total, including 10 on the different possible contexts for *eh* and 3 gathering data on the respondent. **Figure 1** is an example of the formatting for *eh* context questions.

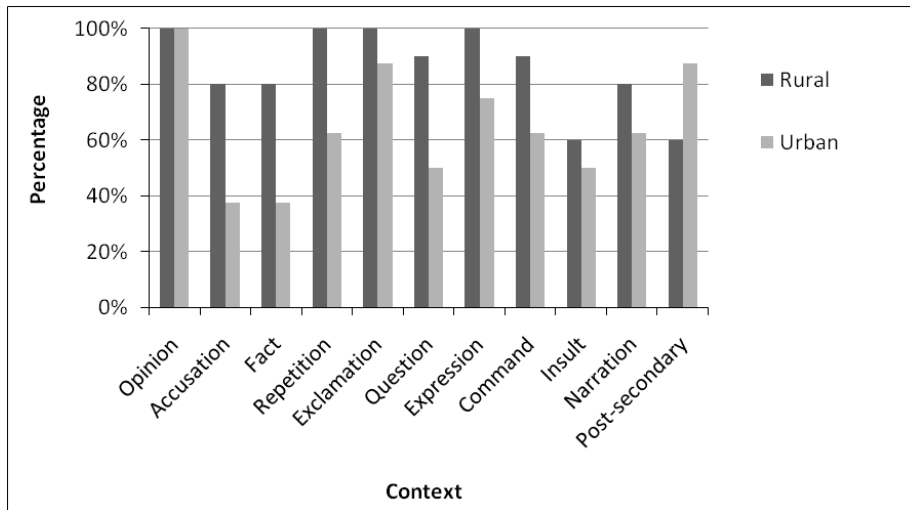
1.	After a statement of opinion, like: Nice day, eh?			
A)	Have you heard this type of use?	yes	no	
B)	Do you use it yourself?	never	sometimes	often
C)	Your attitude to this usage is:	positive	neutral	negative

Figure 1: Sample Survey Question

This format is repeated for each of the 10 *eh* contexts, which are as follows: Opinion, Accusation, Fact, Repetition, Exclamation, Question, Expression, Command, Insult, and Narration. Thus each of these questions examined three issues: familiarity with the context, self-reported usage, and attitude towards the usage.

3. Results and discussion

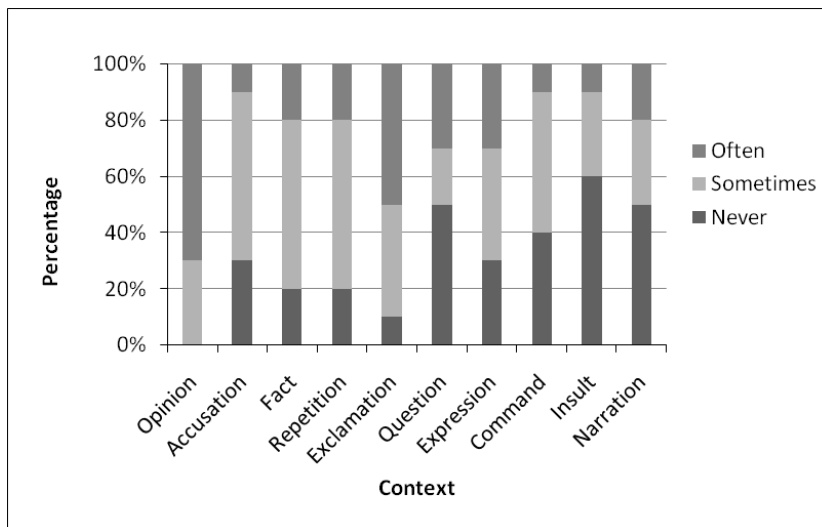
The results of the survey comparing urban and rural familiarity with all the various contexts of *eh* are presented in **Graph 1**.



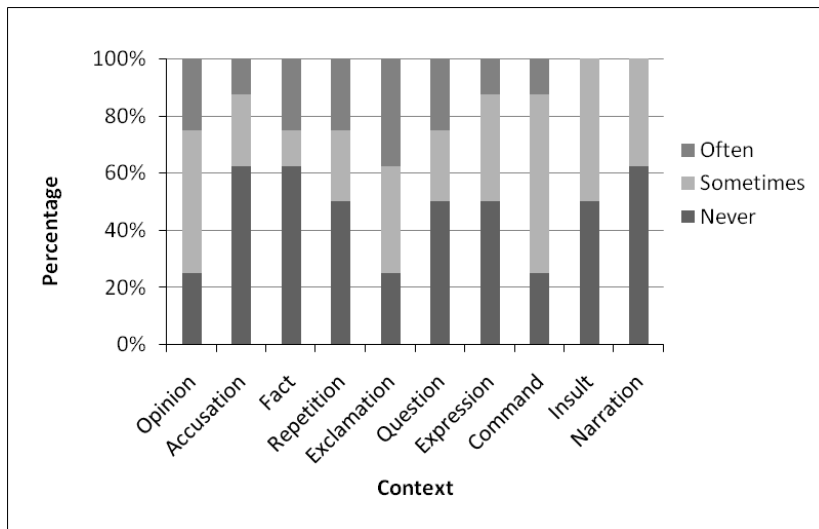
Graph 1: Rates of affirmative response to "Have you heard this type of use [of 'Eh']?" by community type (urban/rural) & level of education (urban/rural)

The above graph shows that rural respondents more often report having heard *eh* than urban respondents in all but one context. In one single question, 100% of respondents reported having heard the usage: *eh* with an opinion (e.g., "Nice day, eh?"). The final question illustrated in this graph is not part of the 10 contexts but concerns post-secondary education. The urban respondents showed a higher percentage pursuing post-secondary education, and it could be that the higher frequency of *eh* use in rural communities is related to the lower rate of post-secondary education.

The second segment of each context question examined self-reported use, and **Graphs 2 and 3** illustrate these results.

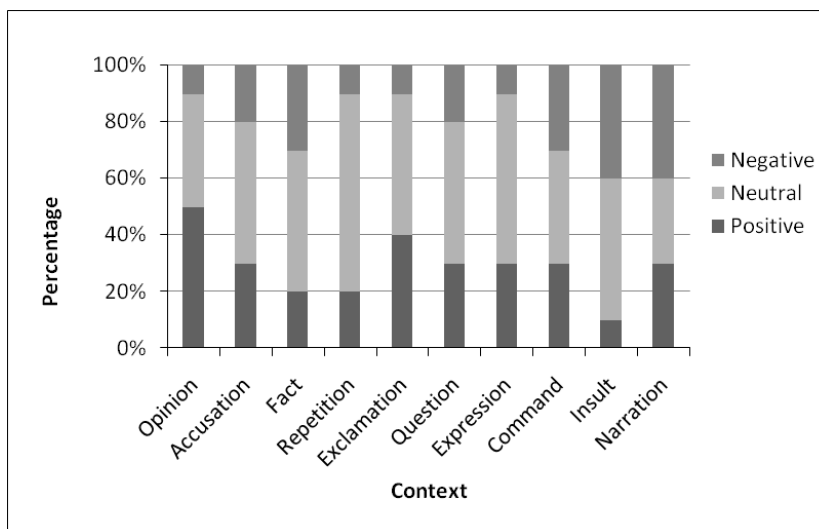


Graph 2: Rural respondents' self-reported use of 'eh'

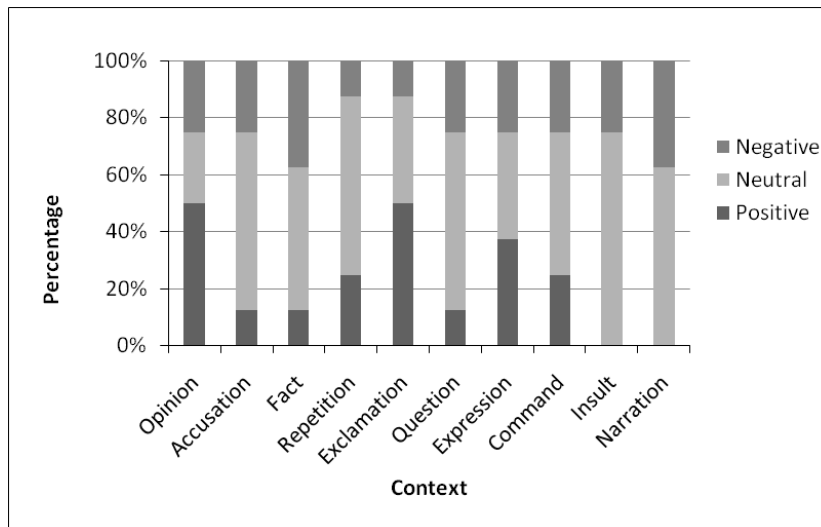


Graph 3: Urban respondents' self-reported use of 'eh'

As seen in the two graphs above, in each *eh* context, urban respondents reported "never" using *eh* more frequently than rural respondents. Also, in every single context, some rural respondent(s) reported using *eh* "often". This is especially significant. To quote Gold and Tremblay (2006): "[A]s pointed out by Gibson (1977) and evident from casual observation, many speakers are unaware of their own use of 'eh' and are likely to under-report their use of it" (p. 251). This statement suggests that the levels of usage reported by rural respondents, although already remarkably high, are likely an underestimate of their real usage. Results in **Graphs 2** and **3** are not entirely consistent with the responses for the third segment of each question in which subjects were asked their attitudes towards particular uses of *eh* (see **Graphs 4** and **5**).



Graph 4: Rural respondents' attitudes towards 'eh' usage



Graph 5: Urban respondent' attitudes towards 'eh' usage

In these graphs, we see that, though the urban respondents consistently reported less frequent use of and less frequent hearing of *eh*, their *attitudes* towards *eh* usage across the different contexts are very similar to those of the rural subjects. One key difference in attitudes can be seen in Question 10: no urban respondents showed a positive attitude towards the use of *eh* in the context of a narration (e.g., "This guy goes up the street, eh? then he stops in at Joe's, eh?..."). The other questions show consistently similar trends in attitude.

The results of each question suggest the original hypothesis was accurate in that *eh* is in more frequent use in a rural context than in an urban one, which means that urban Canadian English and rural Canadian English have measurable linguistic differences. As Chambers (to appear) writes, "[T]he greatest variety [...] is found away from the cities, in those rural enclaves founded by settlers from different linguistic backgrounds" (p. 18). While my study does not delve into linguistic backgrounds, it supports Chambers' idea that there are differences between rural Canadian English and urban Canadian English. This specific research on *eh* could be done more broadly to study the differences between different communities and different provinces. Douglas Coupland is quoted in Clarke's (2006) work: "[I]ndexicality and social marketing become potentially much more complex as features and styles 'travel', and we need more sophisticated methods of uncovering social meanings and their activation in different global contexts" (p. 226). The study of different usages of *eh* in rural and urban Canadian English is a significant tool for discovering differences between these settings.

4. Conclusion

Due to cultural icons like Bob and Doug Mackenzie, Canada is often seen as a country of quaint, small-town communities. Although demographics disprove this stereotype, it brings to mind the differences between rural and urban Canadian communities. Many

people believe the frequent use of *eh* makes the speaker sound too vernacular, or “hick”. This research supports that perspective by showing higher recognition and higher self-reported usage of the many types of *eh* among rural as opposed to urban respondents. This suggests that *eh* has been adopted to a greater degree in and has become a marker of rural Canadian English.

References

- Chambers, J. K. (to appear). English in Canada. In T. Hopkins (Ed.), *Varieties of world English*. London: Continuum International.
- Clarke, S. (2006). Nooz or nyooz?: The Complex construction of Canadian identity. *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, 51(2/3), 225–246.
- Gold, E., & Tremblay, M. (2006). Eh? And Hein?: Discourse particles or national icons? *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, 51(2/3), 247–263.

Appendix The Survey

I am currently taking a course on Canadian English. As part of my class work, I am gathering data on Canadians' use of the word 'eh'. Please take a few moments to complete the following survey. It should take about 10 minutes. Please note that there is no correct answer to these questions. Circle the option that matches your answer and answer every question. Thank you for your help.

1. After a statement of opinion, like: **Nice day, eh?**

- | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|--|
| A) Have you heard this type of use? | yes | no | | |
| B) Do you use it yourself? | never | sometimes | often | |
| C) Your attitude to this usage is: | positive | neutral | negative | |

2. After an accusation, like: **You took the last piece, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

3. After a statement of fact, like: **That's where he's from, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

4. In a request for repetition, like: **Eh? What did you say?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

5. After an exclamation, like: **What a game, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

6. After a question, like: **What are they trying to do, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

7. After a fixed expression, like: **Thanks, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

8. After a statement of command, like: **Think about it, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

9. After an insult, like: **You're a real snob, eh?**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

10. As part of a narration, like: **This guy goes up the street, eh? then he stops in at Joe's, eh?...**

- A) Have you heard this type of use? yes no
B) Do you use it yourself? never sometimes often
C) Your attitude to this usage is: positive neutral negative

11. Do you live in a rural or urban setting?

- a. Rural b. Urban

12. How old are you?

- a. 25 years or younger
b. 26 to 50 years
c. 51 years or older

13. Do you have any post- secondary education (university or college)?

- a. yes b. no

Thank you!