

PRESTIGE
A STUDY OF BRITISH ENGLISH USAGE AT HIGH SCHOOLS IN ONTARIO

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1. Introduction

Many students pride themselves on where they attended school and on being a distinguished alumnus or alumna. In turn, these institutions pride themselves on influencing pupils in a positive and constructive manner; but are these schools passing on more habits than they intend? The differences between private school and public school can be discussed *ad nauseam*, but this paper looks at the pronunciation, grammar, and spelling of private school and public school attendees. We have been unable to find prior research that looks at the influence of Britishness or Americanism on private and public schools. However, we hypothesize that on account of the prestige associated with attending private schools in Ontario, those who attend during their “critical period”, will be more apt to use the British variant than the American variant in spelling, grammar, and possibly pronunciation. After all, tuition is required at the majority of private schools around Ontario, and the parents of students are paying not only for the education but for the status associated with attending such schools.

Table 1 shows data for select private schools in Ontario (*Our Kids Publications*, 2006). These schools were chosen from a much larger list of Ontario private schools and chosen solely on the basis of their tuition, the assumption being that the higher the tuition, the higher the prestige of attending such an establishment. Many, if not all, of the schools shown are the most prestigious, the oldest, most attended, and most expensive in Canada, and all were founded between 1852 and 1913, in the heyday of “Canadian Daintiness”. Canadian Daintiness is the use of Britishisms for prestige purposes by Canadians (Chambers, 2005).

This paper looks at several key issues within the framework described above. In Section 2, we outline our methods of data collection for the testing of our hypothesis. In Section 3, we develop the background needed to interpret our results for by delving into the phenomenon of Canadian Daintiness in the context of Ontario public and private school students. Also, we develop and describe the opposing forces operating in the education of students in Ontario, and explain how each is applicable to the speech of young students at Ontario private schools. We ask the question: “Did the British influence Canadian speech, writing, and thinking enough to influence the education and English of young pupils in the present day?” Also within Section 3, we look at the ability of parents and teachers to affect the speech and usage of the English language of their

children and pupils given that their accents and vernacular are influenced mainly by their peers—although students’ spelling is taught by their teachers (Chambers, 2005). In Sections 4 and 5, we state and analyze our results.

Table 1: Prestigious Private Schools in Ontario with tuition in excess of \$10,000

School	Year Founded	Location	Average Tuition
Albert College	1857	Belleville	\$35,000
Appleby College	1911	Oakville	\$35,000
Ashbury College	1891	Ottawa	\$28,000
Bishop Strachan School	1867	Toronto	\$33,000
Branksome Hall	1903	Toronto	\$23,500
Crescent School	1913	Toronto	\$23,750
Lakefield College School	1879	Lakefield	\$28,000
Ridley College	1889	St. Catharines	\$26,000
St. Andrew’s College	1899	Aurora	\$30,000
St. Clement’s School	1901	Toronto	\$20,700
St. Michael’s College School	1852	Toronto	\$13,875
Upper Canada College	1829	Toronto	\$40,000

2. Methodology

We test this hypothesis through the use of a research survey conducted in 2008 on undergraduate students at Queen’s University and other Ontario universities. Respondents were given the survey and asked to answer as truthfully and in as unbiased a manner as possible. The survey is attached as **Appendix A**.

This paper analyzes results from respondents that went to private or public schools located in Ontario. The breakdown of the respondents is available in Table 2. The main

group surveyed was private school students, with a control group of public school attendees.

Table 2: Survey respondents by gender and high school type

	Gender	Highschool		Gender	Highschool
1	Female	Private	10	Male	Private
2	Female	Private	11	Male	Private
3	Female	Private	12	Male	Private
4	Female	Private	13	Male	Private
5	Female	Private	14	Male	Private
6	Female	Public	15	Male	Private
7	Female	Public	16	Male	Private
8	Female	Public	17	Male	Private
9	Female	Public	18	Male	Public
			19	Male	Public
			20	Male	Public

The aim of the survey was to see what variant of English students used; it contained four sections. Each of the four sections on the survey was created to test a different part of a respondent's English. The first two sections reveal the respondent's pronunciation of certain words, words that were specifically chosen because they highlight the different syllable emphasis that British and American English speakers use. The third section focuses on the spelling that these students preferred. It should be emphasized that, unlike pronunciation, spelling is not fossilized at a certain age—spelling is an attribute that is wholly taught by teachers and elders, and as a result, need not be acquired during the "critical period" of language acquisition. Again, for every word the respondents were able to choose from British and American variants. The last section was purely a test of the grammar that students chose to use, and each question in the section had two sentences that essentially meant the same thing. It was up to the respondent to pick which sentence they were most comfortable saying; one of the sentences was clearly the American variant, while the other one was clearly a British variant. If our hypothesis was to hold, a higher percentage of private school respondents would choose the British variant in each question (pronunciation, spelling, and grammar), while the public school respondents would choose the American variant in most cases.

The order of the questions was also important in that we did not want to influence respondents with our first questions. The Social Identity Theory (Turner & Tajfel, 1979) states that in-group members will try and increase the differences between themselves and out-group members. Therefore, if the well known American-British spellings appeared first, then respondents might skew their answers in an attempt to be un-American, presumably because it is important to many Canadians to insist that Canadian English is different from American English. Therefore, spelling was placed

after pronunciation (in pronunciation, it is less known which variant is which) to try and prevent any anti-American sentiments from developing before respondents delved deeper into the survey.

The subjects given the survey were from both private schools and public schools in the province of Ontario. Because we stop learning most features of our dialect by 18 years of age, it was assumed that the respondents were attending either their private or public schools during their "critical period" of language formation. The respondents included 9 females and 11 males, of whom 13 attended private high schools and 7 attended public high schools.

3. Background

In the days before Confederation, the southern part of present-day Ontario was known as Upper Canada and was mostly settled by the British and Loyalists from the United States. The Loyalists became "the founding population of inland Canada," and "linguistically, they brought with them sounds and syntax of... [the American] middle states..." (Chambers, 2001:14). According to Chambers, the Loyalists, as the founding members of Upper Canada, established its rules of speech, which were very similar to those of Americans just across the border: "The founding population of any place exerts many subtle and largely unintentional dictates on those who succeed them" (Chambers, 2001:14). Therefore, quite naturally the residents of Upper Canada and their successors in Ontario spoke and still speak a form of American-derived English. This concept of Loyalists' founding Ontario English is one of the reasons that we expect Ontarians on the whole to use the American variants of English.

An opposing force, a factor mitigating the influence of American speech on Ontario students is Canadian Daintiness. Canadian Daintiness is the linguistic aspect of the enthusiastic espousal of all things British, and this phenomenon lasted from the 1850s to the 1950s (Chambers, 2005). Some Canadians were obsessed with sounding British. At that time, Britain was equated with the Empire, prosperity and high culture. Every effort was made to imitate British culture (Chambers, 2005). Many of the most prominent private schools located in Ontario were built or founded in the era of Canadian Daintiness, and these are schools that brand themselves as prestigious (or why would they charge such high tuitions?); therefore, at their inception they too would have adopted Canadian Daintiness. Immigrant British and prestige-conscious Loyalists would have pushed private school pupils to adopt the Canadian Daintiness, thus encouraging their use of British variants.

This thirst for prestige among Canadians allowed wealthy, landed Brits to keep a part of their heritage and history alive in the New World. "English immigrants took it upon themselves to try and change linguistic practices that differed from their own" (Chambers, 2001:16). As a result, the pressure of these private schools to teach the

British variant of English had to have been enormous. The British immigrants in the late nineteenth century were not at all impressed with Canadians' language skills:

British soon discovered that "the unpleasant accent of Upper Canada was accompanied...by a lack of manners...and a decline in literacy among first generation Upper Canadians. (Chambers, 1993:7)

This disdain for the Canadian accent and Canadians' lack of proper schooling would affect parents and make it a priority for them to pass on the "proper" way of speaking to their children as well as the ability to read and write (Chambers, 1993). However, as mentioned above, it is our peers that influence the way we speak. Our accent and vernacular will come to represent the way that our friends speak as opposed to the way our parents speak. Children that attended private school would probably comingle with those that attended public school, and they would subsequently influence each other. Therefore, this paper must examine two types of English: the written variety (more influenced by parents and teachers) and the spoken variety (more influenced by students' peers). If our hypothesis holds, then the private school respondents would be more inclined to choose the British variants over American ones in the written variety particularly. Thus we would expect the pronunciation variants to be evenly distributed through private and public school students but the grammar and spelling of private school respondents to swing more toward British variants.

It is worth noting that this survey is not intended to collect data on the regional lexicon and accents of respondents. Instead, this paper specifically focuses on the pronunciation and spelling of certain words that are clear examples of British or American English, as well as establishing certain grammar norms in public versus private school respondents.

4. Results

Some of the results within the survey were unanimous among respondents and were determined to be Canadianisms, for example, the spellings of *colour* and *cheque*, the pronunciation of *leisure*, and yod-retention (see **Appendix A**, question 7) in *avenue* (Chambers, 2001). After all, "Ontarians prefer the spelling *colour*" (Chambers, 2001:16). As a result, these survey findings were excluded from the comparison of the influence of private versus public high schooling on students' choices in pronunciation, spelling, and grammar. Instead, the results used from the survey were for those variants showing marked trends differentiating public and private school attendees. The list of variants surveyed is included within **Appendix B**.

4.1 Pronunciation-based Questions

ADverTISEment vs. adVERTisement

For the first question (see **Table 3**), respondents were asked if they preferred to use the British variant of stressing the first and third syllable in *advertisement* ("ADverTISEment") or the American variant which stresses the second syllable ("advertisement").¹

Table 3: Responses to Question 1 by school type

The syllable stressed in <i>Advertisement</i> is...	Private	Public	Grand Total
First	77%	57%	70%
Second	23%	43%	30%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%

Clearly, the majority of private school respondents, or 77%, preferred the British variant; whereas the public school respondents were more split in their responses with 57% preferring to use the British variant, and 43% preferring the American variant.

Kilometre vs. kiLOmetre

For the second question (see **Table 4**), respondents were asked if they preferred to use the British variant of stressing the first syllable in *kilometre* ("KILOmetre") or the American variant, which stresses the second syllable ("kiLOmetre").

Table 4: Responses to Question 2 by school type

The syllable stressed in <i>Kilometre</i> is...	Private	Public	Grand Total
<i>First</i>	38 %	71 %	50 %
<i>Second</i>	62 %	29 %	50 %
Grand Total	100 %	100%	100 %

As the table depicts, the majority of public school respondents, or 71%, preferred the British variant, whereas the private school respondents were slightly less consistent with 62% preferring the American variant, and 38% preferring the British.

¹ The authors of this paper have fallen prey to a common mistake for Canadians: confusing which variant is actually common usage in British English and which in American. In four cases, they have reversed the national attribution of variants. In section 4.1, ADverTISEment is, in fact, the common *American* pronunciation, rhyming *shone* with *Joan* is typically American, and so is rhyming *lever* with *clever*. In Appendix B, the spelling *analyze* should be labelled American not British, and *all right* and *alright* actually vary in formality not by nationality. In spite of these errors, the raw data collected in this study is useable (since the variants were not labelled on the survey), and the overall trend the authors identify in private school usage also stands.—Eds.

Pronunciation of 'o' in Progress

For the fourth question (see **Table 5**), survey respondents were asked if the 'o' in *progress* sounded like the 'o' in *got* (the American variant) or *go* (the British variant).

Table 5: Responses to Question 4 by school type

The 'o' in <i>Progress</i> sounds like...	Private	Public	Grand Total
<i>Go</i>	46 %	29%	40 %
<i>Got</i>	54 %	71%	60 %
Grand Total	100 %	100%	100 %

Though the majority of public school respondents, 71%, preferred the American variant, there was a marked division within the private school respondents with almost equal numbers, 46% and 54%, choosing the British and American variants, respectively.

Pronunciation of 'a' in Vase

For question 5 (see **Table 6**), the survey asked respondents if *vase* rhymed with *face* (American variant) or *cause* (British variant).²

Table 6: Responses to Question 5 by school type

<i>Vase</i> rhymes with...	Private	Public	Grand Total
<i>Cause</i>	54%	14%	40 %
<i>Face</i>	46%	86 %	60 %
Grand Total	100%	100 %	100 %

From the table it is clear that public school respondents strongly preferred the American variant (86%), whereas the private school respondents were more mixed with 46% preferring the American variant and 54% preferring the British variant.

Pronunciation of 'o' in Shone

In the sixth question (see **Table 7**), survey respondents were asked if their pronunciation of *shone* rhymed with *Joan* (British variant) or *John* (American variant).

² There is a third common Canadian pronunciation of *vase*, which rhymes with *daze*.—Eds.

Table 7: Responses to Question 6 by school type (see note p. 42)

<i>Shone rhymes with...</i>	Private	Public	Grand Total
Joan	54%	29%	45%
John	46%	71%	55%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%

It is clear once again that public school respondents showed a clear trend of selecting the American variant (71% of respondents), whereas the private school respondents were once again split in their usage, with 54% preferring the British variant and 46% preferring the American variant.

Pronunciation of first 'e' in Lever

The last pronunciation question (see **Table 8**) showed a marked difference between private and public school respondents; the question asked survey respondents if their pronunciation of the word *lever* rhymed with *cleaver* (American variant) or *clever* (British variant).

Table 8: Responses to Question 8 by school type (see note p. 42)

<i>Lever rhymes with...</i>	Private	Public	Grand Total
Cleaver	54%	100 %	70 %
Clever	46%	0%	30 %
Grand Total	100 %	100%	100 %

The results show that the public school attendees surveyed unanimously chose the American variant, whereas the private school respondents were once again at odds, with 54% of respondents choosing the American variant and 46% the British variant.

4.2 Spelling-based Questions

In most of the survey questions for spelling, private and public school respondents responded similarly. That is, the same number of respondents in both public and private school preferred either the British or American spelling for specific words (such as *license*, *analyze*, *judgement*, *jewellery*). It should be noted that most of the respondents preferred the British variants for the majority of spellings with the exception of *maneuver/manoeuvre* and *fibre/fiber*, where respondents were split on their preferred choice.

Maneuver vs. Manoeuvre

In this survey question (see **Table 9**), respondents were asked to indicate their preferred spelling of the word used with the sentence: "You must _____ the car around the bend."

Table 9: Responses to Question 14 by school type

"You must _____ the car around the bend."	Private	Public	Grand Total
Maneuver (American variant)	54%	14%	40%
Manoeuvre (British variant)	46%	86%	60%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%

Though it is clear that public school respondents prefer the British variant, private school respondents were again mixed in their responses, with 54% preferring the American variant and 46% preferring the British variant.

Fibers vs. Fibres

In question fifteen (see **Table 10**), respondents were asked to which spelling of the word they would use to complete the following sentence: "The fabric _____ are delicate."

Table 10: Responses to Question 15 by school type

"The fabric _____ are delicate."	Private	Public	Grand Total
Fibers (American variant)	54%	29 %	45%
Fibres (British variant)	46%	71%	55%
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%

Once again, the public school respondents prefer the British variant (71%); whereas the private school respondents are split, with 54% preferring to use the American variant and 46% the British variant.

4.3 Grammar-based Questions

The results of the grammar portion of the survey established that the norms for both public and private schools are essentially the same, with a few statistical outliers.

5. Discussion

Many of the results of the research would seem to contradict our hypothesis and background research, but there are several points to be noted. Private school

respondents were split in almost all of the options chosen whether it was pronunciation, or spelling. This is where the vitality of the language is apparent. Britain, at its peak during Colonial days, had extremely high heritage vitality that was solidified by the economic, social, and political strength that Britain exercised over the rest of the world including Canada; however, in the twentieth and twenty-first century, Britain has lost its strong hold as “the mother country”, and its prestige effect has become less influential in Canada (Chambers, 2005). In a paper on Canadian Daintiness, Chambers comments: “Britain’s failure to impose itself on recent generations of Canadians is abetted, of course, by the dissolution of the Empire and the decline of Britain as a world power” (Chambers, 2005:239).

In contrast, the United States has over the past half century become culturally and economically one of the most prestigious countries in the world (Chambers, 1993). Now, as Chambers concludes, the variety of English taught abroad, which was recently British English, is likely to be American English (1993). Therefore, we argue that had our survey been conducted 100 years ago, there would likely have been a clearer demarcation of results between public and private school respondents, and the private school students would likely have chosen the British variants. However, with the survey results as they are, it can only be reasoned that the heritage vitality of the founding American emigrant population, as well as the economic, social, and political strengths exerted by our neighbours to the South, has blurred the line between American and British variants for most of the private school respondents.

We conceptualize a complicated shift between British and American prestige. We have reasoned that because of the high standard of education within private schools and the prevalence of global university level testing (such as the SAT), private schools in Ontario are torn between maintaining their British roots and keeping their students primed and prepared for the American-dominated world. Our analysis suggests that the mix of usages for most if not all of the pronunciation and spelling variants is a result of many private school students having in their immediate future the opportunity to go to American colleges and universities. This opportunity requires them to understand and use American English on the SAT, a test that most public school respondents are unfamiliar with. It should be noted that there are shibboleths and Canadian markers that will continue in Canadian English regardless of how vital American English becomes. These markers (for example, the spelling of *colour* and *cheque*) are a strong part of the Canadian identity. It is likely that in several decades, if the United States continues its climb to global prominence that all students— regardless of the type of education they receive — will lean towards the American variant of English rather than the British, except when the British variant defines our “identity” (Prasad, 2000).

Yet, in spite of historical forces, Canadian English may forever be variable. Canadian English, in and of itself, is characterized by variability and flexibility among its speakers. Herd describes Canadian English in relation to other types: “We see that the general pattern relating to the use of either American or British spellings is a lack of consistency”; “This co-existence of different forms and variations and the refusal to

accept the imposition of a single uniformity of spelling could well be what constitutes the Canadian Standard" (Herd, 2000:31–33).

6. Conclusion

Private school students pay for prestige, but it is up to the broader society to determine what is prestigious and what is not. The British prestige of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century has died down, and American prestige in the last 50 years has risen. We originally believed that teachers and parents involved in private schools would be able to hand down their own linguistic variants to their children and students. In reality, it was the private schools *as an entity* that searched for the most prestigious manner of speech and adopted it regardless of what it was, and this is how private schools most affected our respondents.

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Appendix A

The Survey

Thank you for helping us with our survey. We are examining the way Canadians speak English. We are only interested in what you say when you are among friends and what you would write in a letter—not what you think you should say or think you should write, and certainly not what you think other people think you should say or write.

The questions start below. Most people take under 10 minutes to answer them. Everybody who has answered the questionnaire has enjoyed doing it. They say it makes them think about things they usually take for granted.

We don't want you to take a long time answering these questions. Your first answer is likely the best one, so please don't look back. Answer each question as it comes.

Here's a really useful tip. Some questions ask for your pronunciation of certain words. The syllable stress is indicated by capital letters. If you look at the word before reading the question and pronounce it to yourself, you'll find that the question is very easy to answer.

Your participation is anonymous, but we need some general information about you.

What is your gender (please highlight)?

- a. Male
- b. Female

Did you attend a private high school or public high school (for the majority of your high school education) (please highlight)?

- a. Private high school
- b. Public high school

What syllable do you stress in following words (highlight your preferred choice):

1. Advertisement:

- a. adVERTisement
- b. ADverTISEment

2. Kilometre:

- a. KILometre
- b. kiLOmlometre

How do you pronounce the following (highlight your preferred choice):

3. Leisure:
 - a. Does it rhyme with *pleasure*?
 - b. Does it rhyme with *seizure*?

4. In 'We are finally making progress,' does the o of PROGRESS sound like the o of *go*, or the o of *got*?
 - a. Sounds like o of *go*.
 - b. Sounds like o of *got*.

5. In 'Please put the flowers in the vase' — the a in *vase*:
 - a. Does it rhyme with *face*?
 - b. Does it rhyme with *cause*?

6. In 'The sun shone brightly' —the on in *shone*:
 - a. Does it rhyme with *John*?
 - b. Does it rhyme with *Joan*?

7. Does the ending of Avenue sound like:
 - a. *you*
 - b. *oo* (sounds like the vowel in the word *move*)

8. Does Lever, as in 'Pull the lever', rhyme with . . .
 - a. Does it rhyme with *clever*?
 - b. Does it rhyme with *cleaver*?

What spelling do you most often use (highlight your preferred choice)?

9. Colour or Color?
 - a. Colour
 - b. Color

10. Centre or Center (Example: The _____ of the circle.)
 - a. Centre
 - b. Center

11. Cheque or Check (Example: Will you write me a _____ for my rent?)
 - a. Cheque
 - b. Check

12. Licence or License (Example: You need a _____ to drive a car.)
- Licence
 - License
13. Alright or All right (Example: Everything will be _____.)
- Alright
 - All right
14. Manoeuvre or Maneuver (Example: You must _____ the car around the bend.)
- Manoeuvre
 - Maneuver
15. Fibers or Fibres (Example: The fabric _____ are delicate.)
- Fibers
 - Fibres
16. Analyze or Analyse (Example: Please _____ the following data.)
- Analyze
 - Analyse
17. Judgement or Judgment (Example: The verdict is based on the court's _____.)
- Judgement
 - Judgment
18. Jewellery or Jewelry (Example: Your necklace is a beautiful piece of _____.)
- Jewellery
 - Jewelry

Which sentence would you write/use (highlight your preferred choice)?

- 19.
- Finnair has a flight to London today.
 - Finnair have a flight to London today.
- 20.
- Have you got your grade in history yet?
 - Have you gotten your grade in history yet?

- 21.
- a. He went on a course. How many were on the course?
 - b. He was in a course. How many were in the course?
- 22.
- a. We lived in the High Street.
 - b. We lived on Main Street.
- 23.
- a. I have got a car.
 - b. I have a car.
- 24.
- a. We weren't able to catch him up.
 - b. We weren't able to catch up with him.

Thanks for your help!

Appendix B See note p. 42 **A List of British and American Variants Used**

British Variant	ADverTISEment	Kilometre
American Variant	AdVERTisement	kiLOMetre
British Variant	Pleasure	Go
American Variant	Seizure	Got
British Variant	Cause	Joan
American Variant	Face	John
British Variant	You	Clever
American Variant	Oo	Cleaver
British Variant	Colour	Centre
American Variant	Color	Center
British Variant	Cheque	Licence
American Variant	Check	License
British Variant	Alright	Manoeuvre
American Variant	All right	Maneuver
British Variant	Fibres	Analyze
American Variant	Fibers	Analyse
British Variant	Judgement	Jewellery
American Variant	Judgment	Jewelry
British Variant	Have a flight	Got your grade
American Variant	Has a flight	Gotten your grade
British Variant	He went on a course	We lived in
American Variant	He was in a course	We lived on
British Variant	I have got	Catch him up
American Variant	I have	Catch up to him