

LEARNING TO TALK CANADIAN: INSIGHTS INTO FIRST-GENERATION ASIAN IMMIGRANTS' LINGUISTIC EXPERIENCES IN CANADA

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1. Introduction

Canada is a nation of immigrants. The most recent wave of immigration to Canada is characterized by the influx of skilled labour from the developing world, notably countries in Asia. This wave of immigration has had relatively little effect on Canadian English because the language had been largely crystallized by the late twentieth century (Chambers, to appear). These skilled workers often bring with them their children, who receive their education in Canada and learn to talk like Canadians. But with English being a global language of communication, commerce, and education, to what extent do first generation immigrants from Asia adopt Canadian patterns of speech? Do newcomers to Canada adopt the Canadian dialect immediately? Can Canadian speech patterns be acquired if a person were to move here after puberty? This paper takes a sample of the speech of first-generation immigrants who were born outside of Canada and came to this country at different times in their lives, taking into account the age of their first exposure to English, their location of English acquisition, and benchmarks these factors against a "Canadian Speech Scale".

2. Objective

The objective of this paper is to investigate the patterns of Canadian characteristics of English language use in first-generation immigrants. The author of the paper hypothesizes that Canadian characteristics of speech will be acquired shortly after a respondent's arrival in Canada if the respondent is below the age of puberty.

3. Methodology

This study took an audio sample of 14 university students from age 18 to 22. These students were all born outside of Canada. Some of these students had lived in countries other than their country of origin before coming to Canada; others have come directly from their country of origin. All of the respondents were born in Asia and have gone through at least three years of education in Canada. Respondents were asked their age, the amount of time they had spent in Canada, whether or not they had spent part of their lives in a country other than their country of origin (and Canada), and where they

first received their English education. Respondents were not informed of the purpose of the study to alleviate any anxiety and minimize subjectively induced adjustments. All of the respondents were asked to read the following passage as it appears:

Mark actually lied to me about the location of the house, so I called Sarah about the situation and borrowed her keys. He was a bit flustered and decided to say sorry. I simply smiled and told him to reschedule our rendezvous for tomorrow instead.

From a phonological perspective, there are seven different key words within this passage and these were investigated. These seven words covered three characteristics of Canadian speech. The most important point of investigation was the use of Canadian Raising, a feature characterized as “emblematic of Canadian Speech” (Clarke, 2006). A less characteristic marker of the West-Central dialect of Canadian Speech is the Back Vowel Merger of the sounds [ɑr] and [ɔr], an element that is distinctive from General American English (Labov, 2006). This marker of speech is also investigated. The paper derived a “Canadian Speech Scale” for each individual speaker to depict the results in a more accurate fashion. The Canadian Raising parts of the paragraph were given twice the weight of the Back Vowel Merger on the Canadian Speech Scale because Canadian Raising is a more distinctly Canadian characteristic. One point was weighted for the word *rendezvous*. The total was ranked on a scale from 0-10. The author believed this to be an accurate reflection of the Canadian characteristics of a respondent’s speech.

The same paragraph with Canadian markers highlighted is presented below. Bold text represents Canadian Raising, and text in italics represents the Back Vowel Merger:

Mark actually **lied** to me **about** the location of the **house**, so I called Sarah about the situation and *borrowed* her keys. He was a bit flustered and decided to say *sorry*. I simply smiled and told him to reschedule our rendezvous for *tomorrow* instead.

The instances of Canadian Raising occur in three separate environments. These are intervocalic between /b/ and /t/ in *about*, intervocalic between /h/ and /s/ in *house*, and intervocalic between /l/ and /d/ in *lied*.¹ *About* is included twice in the passage because the raising is the hardest to detect in this word. The Back Vowel Merger is easier to detect by the ear, and often much easier for speakers to acquire (Labov, 2006).² The term *rendezvous*, a French loan word meaning “meeting”, was included in the passage as well.

¹ Canadian Raising occurs only before voiceless consonants, so it would not in fact be expected in the word *lied* (before /d/).—Eds.

² Canadians pronounce *sorry*, *borrow* and *tomorrow* with the vowel in *north*. Americans have replaced the /o/ before an intervocalic /r/ with /a/ so that *sorry* sounds like *sari*. This is a distinctive difference between Canadian and American English but one not to be confused with the Back Vowel Merger (whereby most Canadians have merged the vowels in *father*, *cot* and *caught*).—Eds.

4. Results and discussion

The results showed a small linear correlation between time spent in Canada and the Canadian Speech Scale (CSS) (Figure 1). However, a respondent from Toronto who has spent nineteen years of his life in Canada only received a 3 on this speech scale. In addition, some respondents who have only been in Canada for a relatively short period of time show a great factor on their Canadian Speech Scale. These anomalies in the data suggest that they are likely more than simple outliers. It is evident that for some individuals, penetration of Canadian speech characteristics is relatively fast, but in others, speech remains persistently non-Canadian. Hockett (1950), amongst other studies, documents that linguistic crystallization occurs at around the age of puberty, after which the acquisition of a second language becomes more difficult. However, the acquisition of certain dialect features post-puberty is possible. This theory is not fully supported by the given data in **Figure 1**.

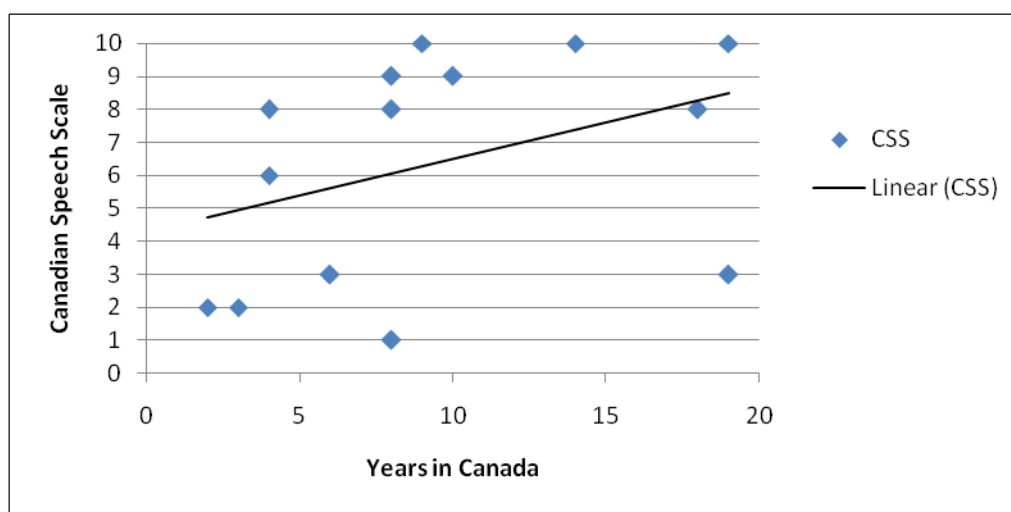


Figure 1: Canadian Speech Scale (CSS) scores by age

These results did not conclusively prove the hypothesis but warranted further investigation. Respondents were also asked their country of origin and where they began their English education. Those who scored low on the Canadian Speech Scale all received some kind of education in the United States or an American International School. The results show that regardless of the amount of time these respondents have spent in Canada, the non-Canadian elements of their speech are very pronounced. For example, respondent 1 has lived in Canada since he was 10, but, because of his American education, the more subtle traits of Canadian speech such as Canadian Raising are nonexistent. However, respondents who received English education in places other than Canada and the United States (such as Germany) tend to attain Canadian elements of speech rather rapidly (see **Figure 2**).

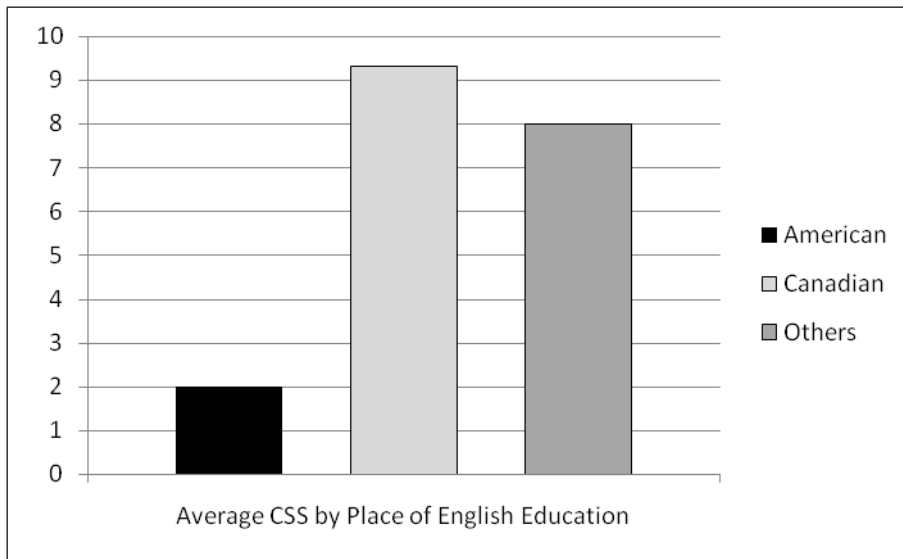


Figure 2: Comparison of Canadian Speech Scale by place of English education

5. Conclusions

The paper was unable to conclusively prove the hypothesis that the number of years respondents had spent in Canada had a simple linear relationship with the number of observable Canadian characteristics within their speech. There does, however, appear to be an upward trend. A respondent's Canadian characteristics of speech, measured by the Canadian Speech Scale, seem more dependent on the place of English education. Education in American English has the greatest net effect on the adoption of Canadian speech by young speakers. People who do not go through education at an American institution are much more likely to attain distinctive Canadian speech markers such as Canadian Raising and the preservation of /o/ before intervocalic /r/.

References

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