

## LEXICAL, PRONUNCIATION, AND SPELLING PREFERENCES AMONG NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN CANADA

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Canada is a country of immigrants and as such, it will undoubtedly arrive at linguistic diversity. "While in 1871 Canada was made up largely of the British and French charter groups, by 1991 others represented one-third of the population." (Driedger, 1996. p.74) Prior to the WWII, immigrants were largely from European countries, mostly from the British Isles. This trend began to change dramatically during the last 50 years with more immigrants starting to come from non-English speaking countries. As Bednarek (2009) writes, this "multiculturalism has led to the rise in interest of Canadian studies over the past thirty years."

According to J. K. Chambers, Canada is probably the most multicultural and ethnically diverse country in the world, not for the obvious reason of having many ethnic groups present, but because these language groups sustain themselves beyond the second generation. This is a very clear indicator not of assimilation but of integration taking place without the loss of mother tongue (Chambers, 1979).

This leaves no doubt that Canadian English is being affected by the linguistic standards of these groups. To what degree, however, do new immigrants affect Canadian English? Do they cause greater language inconsistency or, in their desire to adjust to Canadian standards, quite the opposite?

The sociolinguistic theory the Linguistic Founder Principle states that early migratory inputs are more important to the outcome of the dialect mixing process than later immigration. As newcomers, immigrants try to accommodate themselves to the established linguistic patterns around them, and thus their children's peers determine the speech that is further used at home.

The linguistic study of Canadian English is a young discipline and it started at the same time as a major wave of immigration – about 50 years ago. There are extensive studies done on the influence of the first two waves of immigrants on Canadian English (Loyalists and settlers from the UK), but little study on the most recent wave. Most studies focus on the American influence on Canadian English, while ignoring what might be a key factor in its development: foreign elements, resulting from the multi-ethnic character of the country. Being a recent immigrant myself, I was interested in finding how linguistic preferences of native speakers of

Canadian English differ from preferences of recent immigrants. Taking into consideration that English is not a mother tongue for 40% of Canada's population, making this type of distinction in my research approach seems to be valid.

In order to eliminate repetitions, the following acronyms will be used in this paper: NS for Native Speakers of English – people who were raised speaking English as their main language, and NNS for Non-Native Speakers – people who learned English after gaining a native command of their mother tongue.

### *Hypotheses*

The objective of this paper is to investigate how different the language preferences of native speakers of English are from those of recent immigrants, and which group is more consistent in their language use. The study hypothesizes that there will be no significant difference in lexical or pronunciation preferences. It is anticipated, however, that more NNS than NS will choose British spellings over the American ones. These hypotheses were founded on the following assumptions. Immigrants try to accommodate themselves to the linguistic model in their new language so that, except for their different accent, they will follow the speech pattern of their Canadian counterparts. In their desire to achieve a sense of belonging, they will follow Canadian standard spelling (which I am assuming to be British). Newcomers will not use American spellings where they have a choice. Written language as less spontaneous, allows for a more conscious decision than verbal utterance.

This research involved a survey in the format of a questionnaire (see Appendix A). It focused on lexical, spelling and pronunciation tendencies of both groups. Differences in accents and the systematic, phonological aspect of Canadian English was disregarded. It seemed to be obvious that anyone who acquired their second language after the age of puberty would speak with an accent, since their own linguistic patterns were already crystallized and hard to change.

Respondents were asked their gender, age, in which country they attended schools, and how long they had been living in Canada. The exact geographical area of Canada where they lived was not taken into consideration. They were also asked to indicate a reason behind their preferences. Participants were not informed about the exact nature of the study until they had handed in the questionnaire.

Initially, a random survey was conducted in one of the bookstores and at the public library in Kingston in hopes of finding a good mix of the two groups. Unfortunately, not enough respondents whose mother tongue was not English were found this way (only 20%). There was no other choice but to select respondents in order to get enough answers in the NNS category. There were 26 responses obtained in total – 14 from NS and 12 from NNS.

A few refinements were made in the personal data collection section. Participants were assigned to two main categories based on their mother tongue—"English" and "other

language." Canadians of French origin were to be included in the second group, but a choice of "French" as a mother tongue was added for personal interest only to find out how many francophones would randomly be found in Kingston. In the "country where educated" question, the USA was added as a choice in order to identify the American participants and observe any difference in their responses.

The data was analysed in two main ways. First, responses to all three parts (spelling, lexical choice and pronunciation) were compiled for each item by mother tongue category (see **Appendix B**). In the same manner results were compiled according to gender and age (14-39 and 40+). No third (young middle) age range could be formed because only 4 participants were between 30-49 years old.

Within the NNS category a sub-categorization by number of years spent in Canada was initially planned in order to check whether language preference became more consistent with time. This analysis could not be done for two reasons. First, there was only one respondent in the 0-10 years in Canada category, and, second, the range of years in the "number of years in Canada" choices were too broad (see **Appendix A**). Thus only two groups could have been analysed, and these would have been 0-25 years and 26+ years in Canada. There would have been a high possibility of making a wrong conclusion, if respondents who had been in Canada for almost the same number of years (25 vs. 26 years, for example) were arbitrarily placed in different groups. All participants provided their personal information as asked in the questionnaire, except for one who didn't mark her age. Her answers had to be eliminated from the age analysis. In the end, there were no participants whose mother tongue was French.

A couple of interesting observations were made during the process of assigning participants to the language groups. Most of the NS participants had lived in Canada all their lives, except for two, who came to Canada 45 years ago from England. Thus their mother tongue was English, but not Canadian English, as they are first generation immigrants. To assign them into the right category took some thinking. It was decided that they be assigned to the group with Canadians because they would not reflect the most recent wave of immigrants: that wave includes a very small percentage of British. It was at this point that the original subject of this study was modified from a comparison between non-native and native speakers of *Canadian English* (the dialect) to non-native and native speakers of *English in Canada*. Another interesting issue came up during this process. When these participants' answers were included in the NNS group (in accordance with the original plan for this study), the overall results were changed significantly, in fact reversing the final outcome with respect to recent immigrants preferences for British spelling. This example shows how sensitive to distortion a survey on such a small group can be, and how hard it is to read the data and make the right conclusion.

Another dilemma was encountered in regard to the response from a young person, who indicated his mother tongue as Polish/English. A decision had to be made as to which main group he belonged to. If he was not able to choose one mother tongue and listed both – how

was the survey giver supposed to resolve the issue? It was decided to include him with NNS, but whether this was the right choice remains unclear. These two examples highlight the difficulties in identifying NS and classifying many Canadians for this type of research project.

### *Part One: Spelling*

In Part One, participants were presented with 16 pairs of words, each pair consisting of a different spelling variant of the word. Most variants included American and British spellings, but respondents received no indication of that factor, of which was which. The words were randomly placed in two columns. Responses to the words *story/storey* and *mold/mould* were eliminated when calculating the results, because of complications pointed out by some participants. The spellings *story/storey* are assigned different meanings by some Canadians as are *mold/mould*.

The overall results showed no full consistency in NS or NNS, except for a few words. Surprisingly, 100% of respondents in the English group chose *connection* and *judgement* as their preference. There was no such a consistency in the NNS group. In general, English native speakers displayed more uniform tendencies than the NNS category: in addition to the unanimous choice of *connection* and *judgement*, other spellings--*catalogue*, *colour*, *labour* and *airplane*--scored as high as 92% ; *harmonize* and *favour* followed closely (83%). The most inconsistent use was for *centre/center*, *defence/defense*, *pyjamas/pajamas* and *jewellery/jewelry*.

With respect to age, the results show more consistency among younger people regardless of their mother tongue. Among young people across NS and NNS categories, 100% preferred *catalogue*, *colour*, *connection* and *airplane*; almost 90% preferred *favour*, *harmonize*, *labour*, *program*, and *judgement*. These overall results were similar to NS, even though 38% of young participants were NNS.

The next category analysed was gender, which showed balanced answers between males and females, so this approach was abandoned after the first five pairs of words. It was hypothesized in this study, that more NNS than NS would use the British spelling. The results, however, did not prove this hypothesis. In most pairs of words where there was a choice between an American and British spelling, it was actually more NS who chose the British version. The only exceptions among 11 pairs of words were *centre*, *harmonise*, *connection* and *defence*, which were preferred by more NNS.

An interesting and surprising observation was made during follow up discussions between the researcher and respondents. Three NNS believed that the Canadian language standard was the American one and not British, because Canadians sound and act more like Americans. This might explain the choice of spelling in some cases.

Participants generally added no comments indicating the reason behind their choices, except in few instances. Follow up questions were asked after questionnaires were handed in. A few

of them said that this was the spelling they had learned in school. Seven people recognized the British and the American spellings, but most of them weren't sure which one was which. Three of them stated that they preferred the British spelling, but they had chosen many American variants.

Overall, the results were similar to the results of other studies showing uncertainty and confusion among Canadians about what is an American and what is a Canadian [traditionally British] spelling.

### *Part Two: Word Choice*

In Part Two the participants were presented with 10 sets of words or phrases, each set containing synonyms. Participants were asked to indicate their lexical preference and the reason behind it. Before the results were compiled, sets 7 and 10 were eliminated (see **Appendix A**), set 7 because most respondents indicated using two or three of the terms alternatively, set 10 because many participants were adding another word (*bathroom*) as their preference, while some didn't answer at all, which might indicate their use of a different term not listed. The results showed similarity in vocabulary preference between NS and NNS, if the majority of each group is considered. The only exceptions are *fire hall/fire station* and *eavestrough/gutter* where the groups' preferences were polarized.

This proves the first hypothesis, that recent immigrants use similar vocabulary to their Canadian counterparts. However, slightly more consistency in using vocabulary was observed among NS. In 4 out of 9 sets of terms NS answers concurred over 90% of the time; one variant--the term *pop*--was chosen by 100% of respondents. Such conformity in NNS group was obtained for only 1 out of 9 terms with a score of 91%.

The results by age for vocabulary were similar to the results for spelling. Younger people are more consistent in choice of vocabulary than the older generation. They showed 100% support for terms *napkin*, *fire station*, *dish soap* and *pop*. No similar unanimity was obtained in the 40+ group. As in the Part One, an analysis by gender showed answers were balanced between males and females. This approach was again abandoned after the first 6 pairs of words.

### *Part Three: Pronunciation*

In Part Three of the survey participants were presented with 15 words with two pronunciation variants for each. They were asked for their pronunciation of each word. The results from NS and NNS were similar in that all show great *inconsistency* in pronunciation of most words, with the exception of the prefixes *semi*, *anti*, *multi*. These were pronounced the same way by at least 85% of respondents. Of 15 words, only 3 were pronounced in the same way by NS respondents. The most inconsistent pronunciations among NS were *genuine*, *schedule*, *herb*, and *avenue*, and, in the NNS group, *zebra*, *student* and *lever*.

The results proved the hypothesis that NNS pronunciation choice is similar to NS. Out of 15 words, only two were pronounced significantly different--*news* and *zebra*. Among NS, 69% favoured the yod-less American pronunciation of *news* (nooz; cf. British nyooz), compared to only 18% of NNS. Yod-dropping in words like *avenue*, *student* and *news* is generally more favoured by NS than NNS and creates the biggest pronunciation difference between the two groups. In the case of *zebra* the strong preference ( 92%) for *zee* among NS contrasts with a weaker preference (55%) for the same variant among NNS.

Once again, in pronunciation, the younger group is more consistent: 9 out of 15 words are pronounced the same way by at least 80% of young respondents. In comparison, only 3 pronunciation variants scored 80% or more among the 40+ participants.

A final conclusion was reached: Canadians are no nearer to the consistency of a national standard than they were two generations ago. Canadian speech is as varied as its people. The purpose of this study was to observe whether NNS are more inconsistent than NS in spelling, lexical and pronunciation choices. The results of this study show, that NS are no more consistent in using their language than NNS. Further and more extensive studies could be done on this topic, trying to divide Canadians into different categories. But as was already noted, there are serious sociolinguistic issues complicating this type of categorizing. So, instead of trying to divide, why not focus on this phenomenal diversity within unity? Canada is most likely leading the world to globalization with its different English variants being used simultaneously. Similar changes are already happening in American English. Is this the beginning of a glocal language? Canadian English with its speakers using different language variants can be used in both broad multicultural contexts and in a closed monocultural context. This is the language of one culture with a multicultural character.

## References

- Bednarek, A. (2009). *Studies in Canadian English: Lexical Variation in Toronto*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Chambers, J.K. (Ed.). (1979). *The Languages of Canada*. Montreal: Didier.
- Driedger, L. (1996). *Multi-Ethnic Canada: Identities and Inequalities*. Don Mills: Oxford University Press.

## Appendix A Questionnaire

*Hello,*

*My name is Danuta. I am a Queen's University student taking a Linguistics course that requires a small research study on language use. I would like to ask for your assistance in completing a questionnaire, which will take 10-15 minutes. You are absolutely free to decide not to participate and/or to discontinue participation at any time. The data collected from the questionnaire will be used only for my project and all the private information you provide will be kept strictly confidential.*

*I would greatly appreciate your participation in this project.*

Please keep in mind that there are no "correct" answers to any of the questions. All linguistic forms used in the questionnaire are approved by English Dictionaries. We are simply testing your own preference in using them.

Your personal details: (please circle)

**Male**                      **Female**

**Age:** (14-19) (20-29) (30-39) (40-49) (50-59) (60+)

**Country where you attended schools:** Canada USA Other

**Mother tongue:**      English              French              Other

**How many years living in Canada:** (0-10) (11-25) (26+) (all life)

### PART I

From the following pairs of words, please circle the spelling that you usually use. If you have any specific reason behind your choice, please indicate it in the same line:

favor                      favour

centre                      center

catalogue                      catalog

harmonise                      harmonize

colour                      color

jewelry	jewellery
connexion	conection
gray	grey
labour	labor
defence	defense
program	programme
judgement	judgment
airplane	aeroplane
mold	mould
pajamas	pyjamas

## PART II

From the following pairs of words, please circle the one that you usually use. If you have any specific reason behind your choice or you don't use any of the words from the pair, please indicate:

1. napkin or serviette
2. dove or dived
3. trash or rubbish
4. fire station or fire hall
5. dish soap or dishwashing liquid
6. soda or pop
7. hydro or power or electricity
8. gutter or eavestrough
9. parking garage or parkade
10. washroom or restroom



### PART III

Please circle your answer according to your pronunciation of the word:

1. Does the ending in AVENUE sound like in *canoe* or *discontinue*
2. Does the ending in SEMI, as in semi-trailer, sound like *my* or *me*
3. Does the ending in ANTI, like in antidemocrat, sound like *tie* or *tee*
4. Does the U in STUDENT sound like *oo* or *you*
5. Does NEWS rhyme with *cruise* or *views*
6. Does LEISURE rhyme with *seizure* or *pleasure*
7. Does the ending in MULTI, as in multi-vitamin, sound like *tie* or *tee*
8. Does LEVER rhyme with *cleaver* or *clever*
9. Do you say HERB with the H or without like *erb*
10. Does the beginning of EITHER sound like in *eager* or *item*
11. Does the beginning of SCHEDULE sound like in *shoe* or *school*
12. Does GENUINE rhyme with *fine* or *fin*
13. Does RATION rhyme with *fashion* or *nation*
14. Does E in ECONOMICAL sound like in *except* or *eager*
15. Does ZEBRA rhyme with *Deborah* or *libra*

*Thank you for taking part in this survey.*

## Appendix B Survey Results

**Table 1. Results for Part One (Spelling Variants)**

<i>Variant</i>	Native Speakers %	Non-Native Speakers %	Age 14-39%	Age 40+ %	Females %	Males %
favour	83	80	88	83	90	78
centre	42	64	38	79	40	36
catalogue	92	64	100	57	70	78
harmonise	17	27	13	14	15	10
colour	92	91	100	86	92	73
jewellery	58	45	50	64		
connexion	0	9	0	10		
gray	25	36	25	29		
labour	92	92	88	93		
defence	58	73	50	71		
programme	25	9	13	21		
judgement	100	55	88	71		
airplane	92	82	100	79		
pyjamas	50	36	25	50		

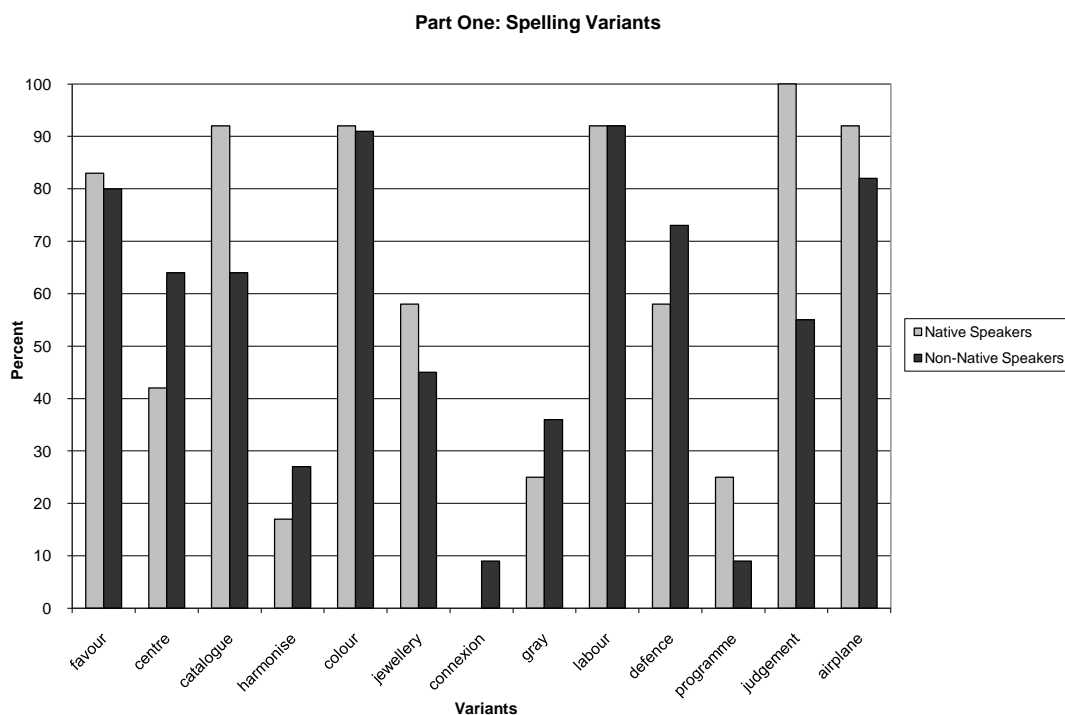
**Table 2. Results for Part Two (Word-Choice Variants)**

<i>Variant</i>	Native Speakers %	Non-Native Speakers %	Age 14-39%	Age 40+ %	Females %	Males %
napkin	83	91	100	64	90	78
dove	75	80	88	69	67	88
trash	83	63	75	75	78	78
fire hall	25	70	0	62	40	44
dish soap	92	70	100	75	80	89
pop	100	80	100	82	90	88
gutter	8	44	25	36		
eavestrough	92	22	75	71		
parking garage	83	82	50	80		

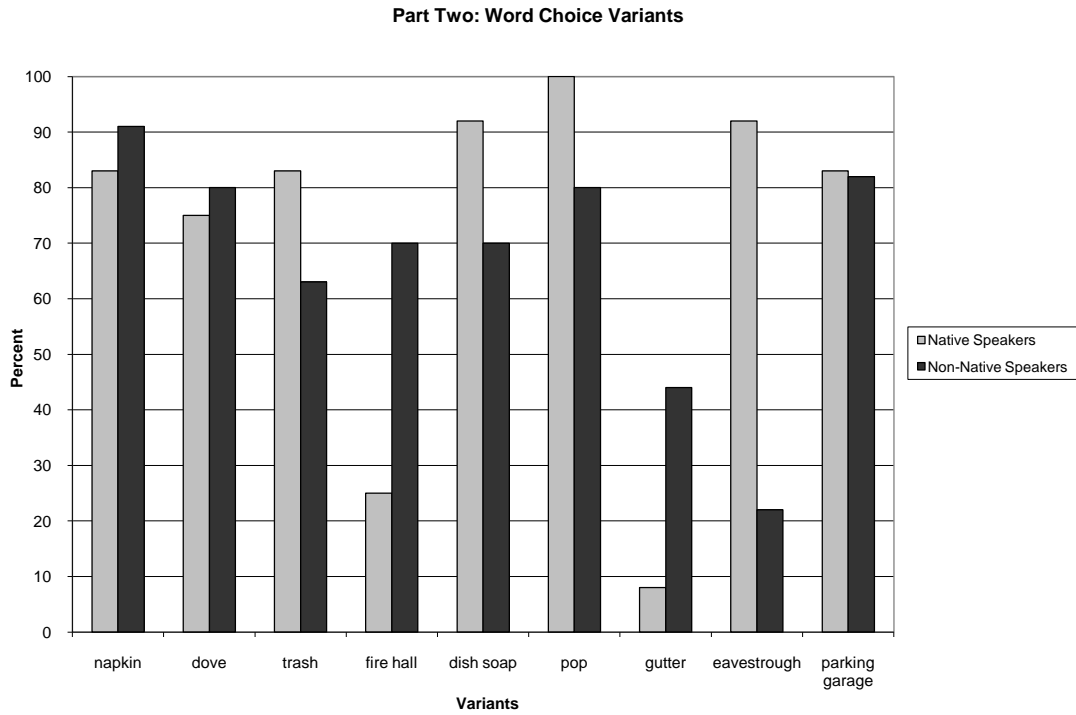
**Table 3. Results for Part Three (Pronunciation variants)**

<i>Variant</i>	Native Speakers %	Non-Native Speakers %	Age 14-39%	Age 40+ %
<b>avenue</b> (like <i>discontinue</i> )	64	82	70	79
<b>semi-</b> (like <i>me</i> )	100	91	100	93
<b>anti</b> (like <i>tee</i> )	85	100	78	100
<b>student</b> (like <i>you</i> )	29	55	10	60
<b>news</b> (like <i>views</i> )	31	82	30	71
<b>leisure</b> (like <i>pleasure</i> )	23	18	20	27
<b>multi-</b> (like <i>tee</i> )	92	100	100	100
<b>lever</b> (like <i>clever</i> )	23	55	40	36
<b>herb</b> (like <i>erb</i> )	50	36	80	40
<b>either</b> (like <i>item</i> )	38	20	22	36
<b>schedule</b> (like <i>school</i> )	62	73	89	53
<b>genuine</b> (like <i>fin</i> )	57	36	50	47
<b>ration</b> (like <i>nation</i> )	7	36	10	27
<b>economical</b> (like <i>eager</i> )	21	27	20	33
<b>zebra</b> (like <i>libra</i> )	91	55	90	62

**Graph 1. Spelling**



## Graph 2. Word Choice



## Graph 3. Pronunciation

