

How to be urban (or not) in Newfoundland

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The urban/rural distinction drives social behaviour and affiliation, in language as elsewhere (Ito 1999, Thomas 1997). The distinction is especially salient in urbanizing societies such as Newfoundland (Childs & Van Herk 2014). Local discourse names these subgroups (“townie” vs. “bayman”), and previous research shows strong differences between them, in usage (Childs et al. 2010), claimed usage (Van Herk et al. 2014), and attitudes (Clarke 1982).

It is unclear, however, what exactly constitutes “urban” (in the relevant sense of “amenable to urban innovations”) in Newfoundland. Is a community urban at a certain population threshold (e.g., Paddock 1966)? With certain amenities (Wolfram & Thomas 2008)? Or proximity to the metropolis?

We take a linguistic approach, contrasting the systems of speakers from two somewhat urban communities. Petty Harbour is a formerly isolated fishing community with 967 inhabitants, 15 km from the provincial capital (St. John’s), with many residents now working in the capital. Corner Brook is much larger (population 27,000), and the urban centre for western Newfoundland, but it is a 689-km drive from St. John’s.

Multivariate analysis of 24 speakers from each community reveals clear differences between them. For the salient traditional Newfoundland English feature of non-standard verbal –s marking (e.g., *I goes*), Corner Brook (N=1850) retains an earlier system: -s is frequent (28%) and favoured by habitual verbs. Petty Harbour speakers (N=1090) have adopted a newer system (Wagner & Van Herk), with low rates of –s (6%) favoured by non-habituals. For the less salient stative possession (e.g., *I got it* vs. *I have it*), Corner Brook (N=1066) lags behind Petty Harbour (N=2116) in adopting mainland *have* (40% vs. 53%), with a gender bifurcation in the youngest generation, similar to that described for Cajun English (Dubois & Horvath 1999). For the completely non-salient past habitual distinction (*would go* vs. *used to go*), which seems to be undergoing rapid continent-wide change (Van Herk et al 2016), Corner Brook (N=163, preliminary results) strongly lags behind Petty Harbour (N=1531).

Taken together, these findings suggest that Newfoundland urbanization is characterized as proximity to the capital (and its social networks), rather than community size. Ideologies of urbanization seem to intersect with saliency and stage of language change, so that gender and regional identity work are most at play with locally salient variables in the late-middle stages of change.

References

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