

Maintenance of Canadian English near the American border

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National borders like that between the United States and Canada present an ideal opportunity to study dialect diffusion. As diffusion is related to the size and distance of speech communities (Trudgill 1974), we may expect border towns to be more linguistically similar to each other. However, the border forms a socio-political barrier that may limit the adoption of foreign variants. The present study looks at the use of Canadian and American English variants near the Niagara border in addition to ideological views about Canadian and American speech and culture. In particular, I examine which types of American variants are more likely to be adopted or rejected by Canadians. This work builds on previous research on border regions, particularly Boberg's (2000) study of the Detroit-Windsor border which showed diffusion of phonemic incidence but non-diffusion of structural phonetic patterns.

Data on potentially diffusing features were gathered with an online questionnaire, which included pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and spelling variables drawn largely from Scargill and Warkentyne's (1972) Canadian English survey, Chambers' (1994, 1995) Dialect Topography project, and Boberg's (2005) survey of modern Canadian English vocabulary. In addition to the linguistic variables, the questionnaire assessed attitudes toward Canadian and American culture and dialects. The resulting dataset includes 803 responses across three relevant regions: Niagara, NY; Niagara, ON; and the Greater Toronto Area for comparison. The frequencies of Canadian and American variants were then calculated and compared in terms of region, variable type, demographics, and attitudinal data. Additionally, 60 interviews with a subset of the questionnaire respondents have been recorded which include a word list, free speech, and elaborated opinions on Canadian and American differences. These recordings are currently being analyzed; preliminary trends in the opinion-based responses are included here.

The questionnaire results show that, while some American variants are diffusing, both Canadian speech communities remain significantly more Canadian and less American than Niagara, NY across all variable types. Pronunciation shows the strongest propensity for diffusion with Niagara, ON using more American forms than Toronto. However, this pattern of diffusion is largely driven by certain individual variables (e.g., *pasta*, *caramel*, *niche*) while the majority still show sharp stratification. The Canadian variants are thus generally maintained despite high contact in the border region. Additionally, use of American vocabulary and spelling shows a striking reverse correlation in apparent time, with lower frequencies among younger speakers.

The preservation and potential increase of Canadian English forms may be linked to a reaffirmation of Canadian identity. The attitudinal data suggest Canadians are aware of dialect differences and prefer Canadian English. In the questionnaire, Canadians ranked American speech as significantly less pleasant than Canadian speech. In fact, only 28% gave American speech a positive Likert score, in comparison to 79% for Canadian speech. In the interviews, many participants readily identified dialect differences, particularly in terms of spelling, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Tensed /æ/ and fronted /ɑ/ were frequently mentioned as American identifiers and were seemingly stigmatized by the Canadian speakers. Thus, variables that are particularly identifiable as "Canadian" and/or "non-American" may be more likely to be maintained.

These findings provide evidence that Canadian English remains strong near the border. Though some variables show diffusion, the majority maintain a clear divide between Canadians and Americans. Further, young Canadians appear to be increasing the use of Canadian variants, despite concerns about the increasing influence of American culture. More generally, these

patterns demonstrate that the border acts primarily as a barrier to diffusion, especially for salient variables like vocabulary, spelling, and certain pronunciations.

References

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