

Canadian English: It's a Little Different, Eh?

On the eve of the first World War, Rupert Brooke recorded in his travel diary that "what Ottawa leaves in the mind . . . is the rather lovely sound of the soft Canadian accent in the streets." Today, over the sound of the traffic, the visitor might notice that *Ottawa* is often pronounced *Oddawa*, and that the city's most famous hotel is known, phonetically at least, as the *Shadow*. Were he armed with Mark M. Orkin's *Speaking Canadian English* (General Publishing; \$7.95), the tourist would learn that the habit of replacing *t* with *d* is a widespread North American linguistic development, and one of the many instances of American speech patterns influencing Canadian English.

Orkin, a Toronto lawyer, is a Canadian version of *Pygmalion's* Henry Higgins—a man obsessed by the uses, abuses and nuances of language. In an earlier book he chronicled the troubled history of Canadian French. Now he gives an equally learned and lively account of Canadian English, a variant of the language that is as interesting as it is ignored.

As Orkin shows, the most common attitude of English Canadians to their tongue is one of indifference. Until World War II, research into Canadian English was almost nonexistent, with the result that the bloodlines of the language are extremely obscure. The most popular myth about the evolution of Canadian English, promulgated by schoolmarm and Anglophiles, is the contamination theory. In this version, the settlers of pre-Confederation Canada spoke a pristine British English, a noble tongue that was gradually sullied by contact with American English. In fact, the influence may have worked the other way around.

By the time of Confederation, half of Canada's population was of British descent, but there is very little evidence that everyone went around talking like Queen Victoria. Today, the stock joke is that a Canadian is someone who is mistaken for an Englishman in the States and an American in England. Even so, says Orkin, "A Canadian speaker when he is being himself undoubtedly sounds more like an American than he does an Englishman."

In his everyday speech, the average Canadian treads an uncertain, arbitrary and sometimes self-contradictory path between British and American usage. At school, he will probably be taught to spell like an Englishman, but his newspapers will often as not use American spellings. His daily vocabulary will verge on the schizophrenic. In general, the Canadian prefers the American *billboard*, *editorial*, *gas* and *muffler*, instead of the British *hoarding*, *leader*, *petrol* and *silencer*; at the same time, he favors the British *blinds*, *porridge*

and *tap* over the American *shades*, *oatmeal* and *faucet*. Sometimes the Canadian will embrace both usages, using *clothes pegs* as well as *clothes pins*, carrying out both *rubbish* and *garbage*, receiving either a *parcel* or a *package*, wearing *overshoes* and *galoshes*, retiring either to the *lavatory* or the *toilet* and getting away from it all by taking either a *holiday* or a *vacation*.

Pronunciation is even trickier. The CBC, as the guardian of national cultural values, has leaned toward Britain even in those cases where most Canadians may look southward. Thus the network's *Handbook for Announcers* admonished them to say *shed-yule* for *sked-yule*, *clark* for *clerk*, *tomahto* for *tomayto* and to rhyme *missile* with *Nile* not *thistle*. One English pronunciation that is favored by the majority is the bugle *u* in *Tuesday*, *tune*, *stupid*. Occasionally there are pronunciations that are a typically Canadian compromise. *Khaki*, for example, is pronounced *kakkee* in the U.S., *kahkee* in England—and *karkee* in Canada.

Canadian English does have its own coinages. Not surprisingly, many of these are connected with the outdoors—*muskeg*, *splake*, *goldeye* and *caribou*. There are also some delightfully evocative regional terms: in Labrador, *childbirth* was once called a *puffup*, while there is no more apt way of describing small boys than the Newfoundland *pucklins*. It is to Canada's credit that, unlike American English, it is not rich in acronyms, or derisive names for racial groups. Nor does the list of unusable expressions in parliamentary Canadian English show much obnoxious inventiveness on the part of Canadians. Australia has banned "a miserable body-snatcher" and "my winey friend." The Legislative Assembly of Uttar Pradesh forbids "mulish tactics" and "sucking the bones of the poor." Ottawa proscribes such weak innuendo as "absolutely unfair" and "he ceases to act as a gentleman."

In looking at the future of Canadian English, Orkin foresees an increasing trend toward Americanization. Yet, he says, with the renewed flowering of Canadian letters and a greater public awareness of the origins and resources of Canadian English, it may well stay different. One Canadianism will never disappear—the characteristic, interrogative *eh*? So entrenched has this become in Canadian speechways that border officials have come to regard it as a pretty good way to spot a Canadian.

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