Academic and public attitudes to the notion of 'standard' Canadian English

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On Standard Canadian English, those who speak it, those who study it, and those who discuss it

Introduction

This paper reflects on 'standards' in Canadian English in scholarly research and the public debate about English in Canada from a number of viewpoints. The goals of these reflections are three-fold. First, I aim to characterize the chasm between scholarly and public debates about a language 'standard' in Canadian English (CanE). While this debate is not new (e.g. Kretzschmar, 2009: 1–5 for a recent example), its application in the Canadian context is a desideratum. Second, I aim to characterize the standard in CanE from a demographic point of view: what is this standard and, above all, which Canadians (and, more importantly, how many) presently speak it? And third, what can linguists who research Canadian English offer to the public, and how can the perceived gap in knowledge be bridged?

The perspectives discussed here reflect on notions of a standard from the perspective of speakers of 'non-dominant' dialects of a given language (Clyne, 1992).[1] These non-dominant dialects are in traditional parlance constructed as hyponyms of a language. Examples will clarify the point more easily than a definition: Austrian German and Swiss German are in public discourse often seen as hyponymous to (German) German; Canadian English and Irish English and New Zealand English often to British English or American English and Quebec French and Algerian French to (Parisian) French. Concepts of standards vary, of course, across western languages, and English is special as it allows for two dominant languages since the mid-20th century: British English (BrE), the historical standard, and American English (AmE), the most powerful dialect of the language at present. AmE and BrE are dominant in a number of ways: the economic (and military) powers are unmatched in the former, and considerable in the latter case. Their historical roles as players on the world stage have a long history and so it is little surprise that the most powerful norm-providing institutions for English are situated in these two countries. Because of the importance of one source in the present context, I will draw from that paper, Chambers (1986), more heavily perhaps than usual in this stocktaking 25 years after the first (and only) conference on the Standard in Canadian English (see Lougheed, 1986).

The historical assignment of importance to dominant and non-dominant Englishes (see Watts

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doi:10.1017/S0266078411000472
English Today 108, Vol. 27, No. 4 (December 2011). Printed in the United Kingdom

and Trudgill, 2002) is questioned by newly-aspiring national varieties of English and the study of world Englishes in the famous Inner, Outer, Expanding Circles (Kachru, 1985) attests to this diversification. Textbooks clearly drive home the point that ownership of English (and with it the 'right' to sanction good and bad language) is no longer in the hands of the dominant varieties (Jenkins, 2009; Widdowson, 1994). However, while logical, this argument has not (yet) entered public discourse at large, or had much of an impact in the school system where language norms and 'standards' are usually taught. What standards, one needs to ask, pertain to Canadian English and how are such standards perceived by the Canadian public?

Researching Standard Canadian English usage

There are obvious intersections and shared interests between professional linguists of certain persuasions and the Canadian public. Concerning a standard in CanE, one institution stands out by way of its mandate which, via a bequest of businessman J. R. Strathy, is to be a 'unit for the continuing study of standard Canadian usage' (Chambers, 1986: 1). This unit, the Strathy Language Unit at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, has been producing some of the work that is grounded in scholarship but is geared towards the general public. Fee and McAlpine's grammar (2007) is the unit's most prominent and successful example of knowledge transfer from academia to the public at large. The 'Strathy' was founded in 1981 with a one-million-dollar bequest, and some language buffs, doubtless, expected to see rules imposed in language-police-like manner, which is precisely what the Strathy Unit does not do. Mr Strathy put his money where his mouth was, as his endowment established one of the longest-standing institutions dedicated to Standard Canadian English. One wonders, though, whether J. R. Strathy may have had in mind a more prescriptivist idea of what such a 'standard' might be.

So what does the Strathy do? It studies 'standard Canadian usage', the opaqueness of which gave rise to the 1985 conference and Chambers' opening address (see Lougheed, 1986 for this, and other papers). J. K. Chambers, who is an authority on Canadian English, called the issues around a standard then 'largely untried' territory (1986: 2). Twenty-five years later, these issues have been addressed somewhat, but there is still much confusion as to the Canadian 'standard', if not in research circles, then at least in the public domain. To address this question, I would like to retrace Chambers' steps partly and, more importantly, provide an update for 2011, with reference to ESL teaching in Canada and the implications for dictionary compilation. Illustrating linguists' perspectives, Chambers adopts a distinction succinctly laid out in this journal by Strevens (1985), one of the early writers on World Englishes. According to this, language standards are 'the norms or canons of generally-accepted language usage'; norms that Chambers correlates with the neutral sense of a standard as 'an average or conventional property' (1986: 2–3). Strevens applies the common distinction between accent and dialect, which will be used in this paper as well. A dialect comprises features of syntax, morphology, and core vocabulary. So a *standard* dialect is 'the grammar and core vocabulary of educated usage'. A standard *accent* is the 'pronunciation [. . .] of people whose speech is not highly localized' (Chambers, 1986: 2).

The Canadian Standard: a definition

Flash forward a decade and a half and we obtain a precise definition of a standard *accent* in CanE by social criteria. Chambers (1998: 252) defines the Standard Canadian *accent* socially as the accent of those Canadians who speak 'urban, middle-class English as spoken by people who have been urban, middle-class Anglophones for two generations or more', which applies to the entire country, except, for historical reasons, the province of Newfoundland (whose role, with its half a million inhabitants in a country of 34 million, is discussed elsewhere; see Clarke, 2010). This means that the second generation, those born in Canada, if they are non-francophone and urban and middle class, speak the Standard Canadian accent by default. By extension, I would argue that they also speak a Standard Canadian *dialect* (i.e. accent *and* morphology and syntax, *including* its pragmatics of use).

Now that we have defined StCanE, how many Canadians speak this standard? I have not seen an estimate, or any figure for that matter. Boberg (2010) in his excellent book, for instance, just says that StCanE is 'a uniform type of Canadian English spoken over most of the country by the majority of anglophone Canadians' (p. 107). Claims of uniformity in CanE have been made for vast parts of the country since at least 1951 (Dollinger, 2008: 12), and have been prominent in sociolinguistic research (e.g. Avis, 1973; Chambers and Hardwick, 1986). But it is clear

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078411000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that this uniformity in present-day CanE is only applicable to the 'Standard' variety of Canadian English.

The Canadian Standard: a first attempt at quantification

Perhaps the best way to begin estimating the numbers of speakers of Standard Canadian English is by applying Chambers' definition to the most recent Statistics Canada data, from 2006, and to use the data to estimate the total number of speakers of StCanE. There are many ways to do this and every method has its drawbacks. Despite this, I shall attempt to come up with a broad estimate, although such an estimate may be open to criticism, given its reliance on census data. This critique is welcome in the hope that it will, eventually, lead to a better understanding of the part of the population that speaks, or can be expected to speak, Standard Canadian English.[2] Arguably, the most problematic category in Chambers' definition of the Standard Canadian accent is the notion of 'middle class', with which I will start. There are many ways to define 'middle class', and one indicator is education. The 2006 census shows for 'Educational and Income Characteristics' for the population of age 15 and older the figures shown in Table 1.

Interpretations of 'middle class' are naturally fuzzy and thus open to dispute. It is true, for instance, that a person, with or without a high-school degree, who loves reading or who has business sense can attain a very comfortable middle-class life, despite a lack of higher education. However, I would suggest that a higher level of education (certificate, college and university levels) would provide a broad indication of membership in the Canadian middle class. Following this, we might then infer, on the basis of educational criteria, that 71% of the population might be regarded as middle class. If we now factor out the Francophones (6,817,655 in the 2006 census) and first-generation dwellers (those who immigrated to Canada and are or were 'landed immigrants' in the 2006 census, such as the present author; 6,186,950), we arrive at a number of 8,313,460. Now we need to add the children (0–14) of which there are 5,579,835 (including immigrant children), and the potential pool of non-Francophone, middle-class speakers and the total is 13,893,295 for middle class out of the 2006 population of 31,612,895. In 2006, 80.2% of the population were urban dwellers, which gives us 11,392,502 speakers that meet this criterion. On the basis of these figures, this would suggest that about 36% of the Canadian population (36.02% by the math) are, in theory, middle class and, therefore, likely speakers of 'Standard Canadian English'. This is the target group of Boberg's book and those are the speakers that offer the object of study for the Strathy – in one way or another. The percentage seems overly precise: 36.02%, but, for the first time, I would suggest, we have a useful broad estimate, at least on the basis of educational criteria. It is not the majority, as Boberg claims, but about a third of the Canadian population.

Slightly more than a third of the population may not sound much at first glance, but when compared to other standard Englishes, this percentage is highly significant. In contrast, British standard RP accents (think Queen Elizabeth II, Prince William, Richard Dawkins or David Attenborough) are spoken by only 3–5% of the British population (Trudgill and Hannah, 2002: 2), and Standard American English pronunciation is tied to the non-localizable pronunciation of the

Table 1: Canadian Census data 2006: Type of education for those 15 years and older

Type of Education	n	%
No certificate, diploma or degree	2,323,155	7.82
Certificate, diploma or degree	13,698,020	46.09
High school degree or equivalent	4,180,300	14.07
Apprenticeship or trades certificate or diploma	1,897,680	6.39
College, CEGEP or other non-university certificate or diploma	3,290,735	11.07
University certificate or diploma below bachelor level	761,880	2.56
University certificate, diploma or degree at bachelor's level or above	3,567,430	12.00

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078411000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'most highly educated speakers' (Kretzschmar, 2008: 43), which is likewise a small proportion of the population. StCanE pronunciation, in contrast, is spoken by a growing population in Canada due to acculturation of the second generation, who seem to share, regardless of their heritage languages, a somewhat homogeneous language variety, Standard Canadian English (Hoffman and Walker, 2010). This tendency may, of course, be countered by the natural diversification of dialects over time, but until now the strong pan-Canadian communication networks along the East-West axis seem to effectively hinder the diversification process at least to some degree (Chambers, 2009: 71–3).

Describing Standard Canadian English

But what is StCanE in terms of its features? Among others who offer insights from StCanE speakers in various places, Boberg (2010) provides the most detailed description of a national standard. At this point, one might ask how Standard Canadian English has been localized for the purpose of teaching the language in ESL classes, as this may provide a practice-based answer to the question. Indeed, many Canadian ESL teachers would like to teach StCanE, if they could. However, the problem is that typically they are left alone to define what StCanE is, and often arrive at conflicting conclusions. While questions of a pedagogical nature cannot be addressed here, what can and should be discussed is the public dissemination of specialist findings on CanE. This, typically, is the role of applied linguistics as mediator between linguistics and the teaching profession and the public. In public discourse, however, basic linguistic distinctions, as between accent and dialect, are almost never made. Instead, members of the public usually talk about 'language' or 'English' or 'lingo' or 'slang' in a somewhat vague fashion. Indeed, in 1985 Chambers claimed that even 'educators, policymakers, linguists, and others' in Canada had not given much consideration to 'matters of language standards and standard dialect and standard accent' (Chambers, 1986: 2–3). Chambers' assessment came only a year or two after the publication of the *Gage Canadian Dictionary* in 1983, which through the early 1960s had contributed original material to the *Gage Canadian Dictionary* series of school dictionaries, including the first edition of the *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*. From that point on until the present, the Gage dictionaries (now published by Nelson) have been the leaders in the high school market, although the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* also began publication in 1998 and has gained an increasing market share.

The Canadian standard: dictionary wars

The Gage dictionaries are important testaments of the potential for professional linguists to communicate directly with the public (see Gregg, 1993). The *Gage Canadian Dictionary* was often referred to by Canadian journalists in the 1980s and early 1990s, but it has recently been eclipsed, in terms of public relations, by the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. This was based on the 8th edition of the British *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, and the public relations genius of Oxford which won the Canadian dictionary battle of the late 1990s and early 2000s, at a hefty price. By crushing the good reputation of the Gage (now Nelson) dictionaries, for reasons that do not withstand scrutiny, they succeeded in causing the company severe financial losses (for the *ITP Nelson Dictionary*, in particular), and thereby contributed to the demise of a great Canadian dictionary tradition. While it was certainly a publishing success, the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* may have therefore damaged the study of CanE rather than promoting it. Souring the climate in the Canadian publishing business beyond healthy competition certainly does not help the cause. In late 2008, the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* unit was actually closed, and with no lexicography staff remaining at Nelson, no one is left researching the lexicon of contemporary Canadian English. Indeed, today, for the first time since the 1960s, Canada does not have a publisher with a lexicographical unit researching present-day Canadian English, although very few Canadian citizens are aware of this fact.[3]

How, one might wonder, could such a long tradition of lexicography die – or at least be put on hold – so quietly? Perhaps we find some answers in Chambers' (1986) suggestion that in Canada attention to a 'standard' had been avoided, 'because there is a sense in which the notion of *standards* is alien to – perhaps even repugnant to – our national character'. Chambers acknowledged the 'neutral' sense of the standard, as a 'connotation – repugnant, surely, to no one – in which a standard is simply an average or conventional property'. He also invoked the 'quite different connotation', the one that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078411000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Mr Strathy might originally have meant in his endowment to the unit, the one 'that turns us [Canadians] off' which is 'an imposition by some authority on one's behaviour or activities. We feel this meaning when educational institutions declare that they will *raise their standards* or make their *standards more exacting* [. . .] and even when the height of *high-jump standard* determines one winner and many losers' (1986: 2–3).

Linguistic tolerance?

We are left wondering whether Canadians truly exhibit such linguistic tolerance or whether the lack of a fully-accepted, homogeneous and explicit standard in terms of prescriptions and usage rules might be the result of other phenomena. A possible scenario is that Canadians are tolerant of variation rather than rebellious against authority. The 'tolerance' thread is a common one in characterization of the Canadian character, which is often invoked in self-representations of political and social issues. However, the ability to listen to dissenting opinions and make an effort to meet them should be called a strength in the language realm. What, for instance, if the suggested linguistic 'tolerance' was just laissez-faire, or downright neglect? One example of this attitude is the choice of reference texts in schools. In general, schools and teachers have been relatively free to choose reference texts since the founding of the country. Historically, American, British, or Irish texts were used for the most part (Parvin, 1965; Dollinger, in press). Even since Canadian reference works made by Canadians for Canadians became available in the 1960s, they have by no means always been preferred. A random internet check (Percy, 2009) reveals that in a school supply list for all of the grades in a Saskatchewan school, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* competes in the higher grades with the *Gage Canadian Dictionaries* that dominate the supply lists for the primary grades in that school. Possibly, some notion of *Webster* as being 'better', 'more useful', or 'more complete' stands behind the change of preferences in the higher grades. At the other end of the educational system, at the University of Toronto's Graduate English department, 'Canadian English' and 'consistent spellings' are officially 'the standard for all Ph.D. dissertations'; 'the Canadian Oxford English Dictionary' is the official guideline. No mention is made of which grammar guides to follow. So, what does this standard really look like? Pratt (1993) convincingly shows that variation is omnipresent in Canadian writing, and even spelling has not been standardized across the country. It seems like a matter of each teacher's personal preference as to which norms to follow. All of which might suggest laissez-faire rather than tolerance.

Linguistic laissez-faire?

If the Canadian public has indeed been raised in an attitude of laissez-faire, what is this public's attitude to standards? Public comments on language found in the Canadian press are one source of information. Comments posted on the CBC website in response to the Oxford University Press Canada's closure of its lexicography department, the compilers of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, show a variety of opinions, which do not all display an attitude of linguistic tolerance.

In many readers' comments, a provocative and prominent thread is that there really is no need for a Canadian dictionary, because there is not a distinctive variety of Canadian English. Some readers mock the prominence of key Canadianisms in media discourse. For instance, ThomasD explained the layoffs as 'I guess because Canada hasn't come up with a new word since 'eh' eh!' (one replied by saying 'I know you're joking'). Aminhotep added, 'So what extra words are there? Poutine, Tuque, Zamboni [. . .] Anything else?' Clearly, there is a great deal of scepticism. Aminhotep continues to make his point clear:

> Get over it, gals. There may, indeed, be a few genuinely native English-Canadian words. However, the idea that there is a language called Canadian English is ridiculous, a fantasy spun by bureaucrats. We speak North American English with a variety of regional accents. Perhaps Oxford was tired of subsidizing those career nationalists in the colonies who haven't heard the news, that Queen Victoria died. (Aminhotep, cbc.ca online forum, 2008)

A similar opinion was expressed in this journal (*English Today* 62), when Lilles wrote an article on 'The myth of Canadian English', describing it, in somewhat hostile fashion, as a 'nonsensical notion'. Lilles' judgements were later challenged in *ET* by Sutherland (2000) and Upward (2000), but, unfortunately, Lilles' prejudices may reflect the broader attitudes of the general public. Language debates in Canada are almost entirely occupied with discussions of English versus French, and attendant political issues, but rarely focus on Canadian English as such.

Part of the impetus to treat Canadian English as a variety in its own right, one can say, came from

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078411000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press

outside of the country. Since the 1980s, Canadian English has benefited from the academic study of world Englishes, which has helped it gain recognition, combined with the efforts of Canadian sociolinguists led by Chambers (but including many others, such as Avis, Gregg, Scargill, and, more recently, Clarke, Boberg, Poplack and Tagliamonte). The comments posted on the CBC website discussed above indicate the ongoing divergence between public and scholarly perceptions of Canadian English as a distinctive variety. Discussions of Canadian English in the media tend to foreground the 'weirdness' of certain Canadian linguistic items (Dollinger, 2011). In this context, Eric Thay's *Weird Canadian Words*, a popular book published in 2004, epitomizes the approach of popular books on the subject, where Canadian English is defined by its words only, and, in this view, such words are regarded as 'strange' or 'weird'.

Knowledge transfer and the media

As noted above, some members of the public seem convinced that Canadian English is simply not worth valorizing or even discussing. However, in their own way, the print media have promoted the idea of a distinctive form of Canadian English. A common thread in online newspaper articles in the Canadian Newsstand database (200 plus newspapers in full-text coast to coast) identifies many stories that promote the distinctiveness and even the uniqueness of Canadian English (on the 'uniqueness fallacy' in CanE, see Dollinger, 2009). Many of these stories focus solely on lexical items and simply reprise Katherine Barber's dynamic promotions of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Now, with this dictionary (and its PR machine) gone, the issue has become invisible on the Canadian Newsstand database since 2008.

Other media stories have also reported on work on Canadian English by linguists. Interviews with Charles Boberg relate to his work on the *Atlas of North American English*, in which Canadian phonology is put in contrastive context and identified as its own speech area, and Sali Tagliamonte and J. K. Chambers have also managed to keep the media on message. Yet the Canadian media sometimes mediate the work of professional linguists in a way that overly simplifies or misrepresents their work. Reflecting the common Canadian preoccupation with their neighbours to the south, one story spun Jack Chambers' careful classification of changes in Canadian English of 'continentalism' as 'Americanization'. Yet regardless of how accurately a journalist might report a linguist's work, the general reading public remains relatively deprived of intelligent information about Canadian English, delivered in an appropriate format.

What to do

What can a linguist do? I believe the solution lies in public outreach. Not as an add-on, but as a requirement. Since academics' work is usually publicly-funded, there is an imperative to give back to the community – the Canadian public and public at large. Outreach is costly (you spend half a day with a reporter only to find a 5-second clip in the news coverage) and there are few incentives to take this on, since academia rewards academic publications, but, by and large, attaches little or no importance to 'outreach'. Courses on Canadian English, its structures and history, are still surprisingly few across the country. This is remarkable as it could (and should) be considered a birthright of Canadian schoolchildren to learn about their own vernacular – the Standard Canadian English, or another variety, which they speak.

We all use language, and most of this journal's readers are not just interested in languages, but highly passionate about them. We need to ensure that this passion has the opportunity to be harnessed positively, rather than to be hung up on whether 'harmonise' or 'harmonize' is 'correct' in a particular context. As Russell Smith, a fashion writer for *The Globe and Mail*, says: 'Nothing that I write gets as big a response as my ramblings on language' (Smith, 2007: R1). So, if we believe Mr Smith that not even the length of skirts, or questions of how late in the year to wear white shoes, or even articles on Omega 3 fatty acids, trigger more responses to his columns than his 'ramblings on language', don't linguists have a role to play? Don't we linguists owe it to the public to share our knowledge in ways that appeal to them? I think we do. ■

Notes

1 A related paper on the broader issues was presented as Dollinger and Percy (2009). I would like to thank Prof. Carol Percy for giving me the opportunity to present at her conference a joint paper, and also for setting me free to pursue these thoughts independently. All thoughts and shortcomings of the present paper are entirely my own and may not reflect Prof. Percy's views. Thanks go to Lars Hinrichs who commented on a draft of this paper. All faults and misconceptions are, as always, entirely my own.

2 Speakers of StCanE can, and most likely will, be multidialectal and/or multilingual speakers. The

capability of speaking and writing StCanE does not preclude, of course, other linguistic behaviour.

3 The 2010 publication, *Collins Canadian Dictionary*, is not an up-to-date dictionary, as it lacks coverage of many distinctive Canadianisms. If you do find some, as for instance the word *toque*, you'll find no new information that was not in the *Gage Canadian* or other 1990s dictionaries.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078411000472 Published online by Cambridge University Press