



# Canadian English: Background, Features and Resources

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## Introduction

Have you ever been asked either of the following questions: "In Canada, which spelling do you use, British or American?" "Is Canadian English the same as American English?" As a Canadian and an English teacher, I have faced various versions of these questions in the classroom, both in teaching English as a second language (ESL) in Canada and English as a foreign language (EFL) abroad. Thankfully, in university I took courses in Modern English and Canadian English, and I try to keep up in these areas. This background serves me well as I answer my students' questions, like those above, and in this introductory article I will share some gleanings from my reading on and experience with Canadian English (CE). I do this neither as an expert, nor as a model for how to teach CE, but rather to provide Canadian ESL/EFL teachers with a source of information and resources about the language we use and teach. In doing so I will first provide some background from the settlement history of Canada and define some helpful terms for talking about CE. Second, I will outline some features of CE vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and speech. Finally, I will introduce some helpful resources that ESL/EFL teachers and their students may wish to consult for further information about CE and English usage in Canada.

## I. Background

**Settlement History** To understand how Canadian English has evolved, it is useful to consider something of how Canada has been settled over the last 500 years. Although Chambers (1998a) speaks of CE being "250 years in the making", I would argue that we have to go back even further than that to 1497 when John Cabot sighted Newfoundland and claimed it for England. The next date to highlight is 1534, when French explorer Jacques Cartier landed at Gaspé. The pattern continues with Englishman

Sir Humphrey Gilbert's 1583 settlement in St. John's, followed by the first permanent French settlement at Quebec City in 1608. This brief chronology reveals that the early roots of CE are in British English, but the historical involvement of French has also had a major impact on our variety of English.

Chambers (1998a) outlines four main immigration waves that have further influenced the way English has developed in Canada. In the late 1700s there was a major influx of "United Empire Loyalists" after the American Revolutionary War. Then during the 1800s hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Britain settled in Ontario and the Maritime provinces. After Confederation, 1897 marked the beginning of a period of major European immigration to Canada, most of which settled in the west. The fourth wave, after World War II, came mostly from Europe again but also included some immigrants from Asia. Chambers (1998b) notes that since the 1970s, Canada has received what might be called a fifth wave of diverse immigration from all over the world. This last wave has more recently transformed Canadian cities, bringing various cultural and linguistic influences to bear on CE, not only with large populations of ESL speakers, but also through the arrival of English speakers from the Caribbean and other places, such as Hong Kong, where English has been an official or important language. In sum, then, like Canada itself, CE was first established in the eastern and central parts of the country. Furthermore, beyond its early British roots and French influences, English in Canada has developed with the input of English-speakers from the U.S. and other places, as well as of other languages and ESL speakers both within and from outside Canada. (See Mackey, 1998, for a history of languages in Canada).

**Definitions** From a linguistic perspective, a *variety* of a language is typically spoken by a group of language users (Southerland, 1987), but it may be defined more generally as "any

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Chambers (1998b), for example, describes the "standard accent" of CE as "...urban, middle-class English as spoken by people who have been urban, middle-class anglophone Canadians for two generations or more," but he excludes the standard accent of St. John's, Newfoundland (p. 252).

type of identifiable language" (Spolsky, 1998, p. 126). Thus varieties of a language such as English are made up of certain features of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and pronunciation which distinguish them from other varieties within that language. CE is one variety of English, while American, Australian, British, and Indian English are others, to list only a few. A *dialect* is usually a subcategory of a variety. One dialect differs from another in terms of the specific attributes which separate it from other dialects in the same or other varieties of that language, and dialects are most often based on regional or social class distinctions (Spolsky, 1998). Ottawa Valley English (Chambers, 1975), P.E.I. English (Pratt, 1988), and Vancouver English (Esling & Warkentyne, 1993; Gregg, 1995) are just three examples of regional dialects within CE which have been studied, while Newfoundland English is usually considered to be a separate variety and has its own authoritative dictionary (Story, Kirwin, & Widdowson, 1990). In recent years the distinctions between varieties and dialects of English have become somewhat blurred, in part because both varieties and dialects may be based on regional or social class distinctions (Spolsky, 1998). Most anglophone Canadians have some knowledge of, and experience with, different English varieties and dialects since they are exposed to, through the media, many dialects of American, Canadian, or British English.

*Canadian English* refers to the variety of English generally spoken and written by educated anglophones in Canada, particularly in urban settings and west of Newfoundland. Chambers (1998b), for example, describes the "standard accent" of CE as "...urban, middle-class English as spoken by people who have been urban, middle-class anglophone Canadians for two generations or more," but he excludes the standard accent of St. John's, Newfoundland (p. 252). CE is distinct in that it has language features found only in CE, as well as other characteristics typically found in either British English or American English, or both (McConnell, 1979). Canadian English is noted both for great *variety* and *variation* within it, as stated in Clarke's (1993) introduction and evident in the papers in her collection. Despite its early British roots, however, CE is clearly a North American variety of English, and this is

how it has been viewed in the past (i.e., Bloomfield, 1948; Orkin, 1970; Scargill, 1974) and is currently classified by linguists such as Chambers (1993) and Crystal (1995, p. 107).

A *Canadianism* has been defined as "a word, expression, or meaning which is native to Canada or which is distinctly characteristic of Canadian usage though not necessarily exclusive to Canada" (Avis, 1967, p. xiii). For example, *Winnipeg couch* ("a couch with no arms or back that converts into a double bed", Barber, 1998, p. 1668) is an expression native to Canada, while *chesterfield* ("any couch or sofa", Barber, 1998, p. 245), though not native to Canada, is nonetheless typical of CE usage. Both are classified as Canadianisms by Avis (1967) and Barber (1998). There were some 10,000 Canadianisms in Avis' (1967) *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*, but many of these reflect regional usages across the country. More recently, Barber's (1998) *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* boasts 2,000 current, typical Canadianisms, based on a corpus of more than 20 million words of CE text.

## II. Some Features of Canadian English

Having briefly introduced the above background on Canada's settlement history and key definitions, I will now outline some common features of Canadian English.

**Vocabulary** Our anglophone ancestors in Canada encountered new plants, animals, and landscapes, thus creating new CE words, and the process has been taking place ever since. As with all varieties of English, there are generally three popular ways of generating new CE vocabulary. The first is to extend or change the meaning of words already in the English language. Examples here include political words such as *Confederation* (the Canadian federation in 1867) or a *riding* (electoral district), as well as personal terms like *Canuck* (Canadian) or *grit* (liberal) and metaphor names such as *Bluenosers* (Nova Scotians), a *brown cow* (the drink), or *Spud Islanders* (from P.E.I.).

The second major way that CE vocabulary has expanded is through borrowing new words from other languages. Loan words from aboriginal languages include *caribou* (both the animal/meat and a Quebec drink of wine/whisky), *chipmunk* (from Ojibwa), *igloo* (Inuktitut

'house'), and *mukluk* (first an Inuit boot). Popular French words borrowed into CE include *lacrosse* (originally an Indian game), *prairie(s)*, *to sashay* (walk nonchalantly), *toque* or *tuque* (the hat), *tourtière* (meat pie), and *voyageur*, reflecting a large French influence on CE.

A third way that CE vocabulary has grown is by creating words from the resources of English. Compound examples that come to mind are *First Nations*, *Nanaimo bar*, *new Canadians*, and *Separate school*. Blends involve *medicare* (i.e., medical + care), *permafrost*, *Petrocan*, and *splake*. Shortenings in CE include words like *Expo* (from exposition), *hydro*, and *Mountie*. Popular CE coinages, often describing new inventions, are reflected in *blueberry buckle*, *dew-worm*, *eavestrough*, *humidex*, *insulin*, *kerosene*, *loonie*, *ski-doo*, and *Velcro*. While not all of these Canadianisms may form part of one's everyday vocabulary, I expect that anglophone Canadians are at least familiar with and even use many of them. As Crystal (1995, p. 342) declares in his *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, however, a number of these Canadianisms and others (i.e., *kayak*, *parka*, *reeve*, *skookum*, technical terms in hockey, etc.) have become so widely used that they are part of what he calls World Standard English.

**Grammar** As English grammar is rather standard across the board, there are not as many specific CE grammatical features. Let me simply mention two. The first is that CE speakers/writers can and do use either the *-t* or *-ed* form, or both, for the English past tense and/or past participle in some verbs, as in *knelt/kneeled*, *leapt/leaped*, *learnt/learned*, etc. Not offered as a standard, but as one person's experience, I use some of these interchangeably (*burnt/burned*, *spelt/spelled*) but others are more fixed. "I dreamed" sounds strange to me, so I tend to use "dreamt", and similarly *knelt* and *leapt*. CE dictionaries list both *-t* and *-ed* forms, but to my knowledge no study has been carried out to date on the frequency of each, especially in speech. A second grammatical feature of CE that is obvious is the way that the word "Canada" is used. On the one hand, this noun is often used as an adjective, as in the *Canada Council* or *Canada Cycle Corporation*. On the other hand, "Canada" is also often used in CE with French syntax in the names of government organizations (Statistics Canada, Parks Canada), busi-

nesses (Air Canada, Petro Canada, Bell Canada), and magazine titles (*Nature Canada*, *Ski Canada*).

**Spelling** It is difficult to make generalizations about what Pratt (1993) calls "the hobgoblin of Canadian English spelling". CE dictionaries often offer various options, but it appears that there are two large divisions of features. First are the mostly invariable forms that people typically use, such as *-ize* in verb endings (nationalize, publicize, synthesize), *-re* in noun endings (as in theatre, centre, fibre, metre, etc.), although *center* is no longer infrequent, and standard English spellings for some individual words (i.e., *axe*, *catalogue*, *cheque*, *dialogue*, *plough*, etc.), while some other individual words follow usual British spellings (*syrup*, *pyjamas*) and still others use the typical American spelling (*jail*, *tire*). Second, beyond these largely invariable forms are other more variable ones which change with individuals or regions, as in *-our* vs. *-or* (*colour*, *honour*, *neighbour*, *armour*, etc.) in most of Canada but the *-or* ending is more popular in the west (i.e., Alberta). Similarly, there is variety in how Canadians deal with doubling of the final "l" in words such as *enroll*, *enthrall*, *fulfill*, *traveller*, etc. To complicate the matter, Canadians (particularly abroad) frequently refer to non-Canadian reference works or use word processing spell checks based largely on American dictionaries. Small wonder we find ourselves questioning the spelling habits we acquired in school. Pratt (1993) thus concludes: "All that can be safely asserted of the contemporary conventions of standard Canadian English spelling, when there is a British/American choice, is that the norm is not yet to choose either indifferently for the same word in the same text" (p. 59).

**Pronunciation/Speaking** CE speaking is perhaps the clearest indication that someone received their English education in Canada. Various examples of typical CE speech are evident, and I will review a number here. First, for CE speakers *pronunciation* of some words can follow either the American or British model, or both, as in *interesting* (inTEResting vs. inTRESTing), *laboratory* (LABratory vs. laBORatory), *schedule* (SKedjul vs. SHedjul) and *tomato* (tomeHto vs. tomAHto). Second, *Canadian raising* with the first element of diphthongs from /a/ to /ə/ or /ʌ/ with /- / and /-u/ is

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Though not unique to CE, speakers of CE tend to use a *voiced flap or tap* more frequently than those of other varieties of English. In this case, a 't' spelling in a word will often become a /d/ sound in CE speech, as in the example words that follow: better, butter, Ottawa, water, etc.

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There are a number of words that many CE speakers simply pronounce differently from those in other English varieties. These *pronunciation innovations* include such words as *arctic*, *khaki*, *placate*, *resources*, and *species*.

customary before voiceless consonants (such as stops /p/, /t/, and /k/ and fricatives /f/, /θ/, /s/, and /tʃ/). This is the case with words such as *about*, *like*, *out*, *type*, and *house*, *ice*, *south*, *wife*, etc. Third, CE speech shows a *lack of distinction* in the low back vowel. For CE speakers this typically means that words like *cot* and *caught*, *don* and *dawn*, or *holler* and *hauler* have the same pronunciation, while speakers of other varieties of English, such as American English, would distinguish these words through the vowel sounds they use in pronouncing them. In a short but helpful article Esling (1998) notes this distinction, provides helpful vowel charts for CE and American English (with which my students are often familiar), and talks about some pedagogical implications of phonetics in the ESL/EFL classroom. Currently there is some evidence, however, to suggest that a vowel shift is taking place in CE, including variable rounding of the unrounded vowel (see Clarke, Elms, & Youssef, 1996).

Fourth, though not unique to CE, speakers of CE tend to use a *voiced flap or tap* more frequently than those of other varieties of English. In this case, a 't' spelling in a word will often become a /d/ sound in CE speech, as in the example words that follow: better, butter, Ottawa, water, etc. Fifth, not only Canadians but also other anglophones are aware that CE speakers use "eh" differently. This is because CE speakers use *eh* 1) more frequently than speakers of other English varieties, and 2) often either as a continuer in narrative speech (i.e., "I was goin' down the street, eh, and this guy...") or to ask for confirmation in a tag question ("It's \$2, eh?"). Although these uses for *eh* serve grammatical functions, they are typically only found in CE speech, not writing. Finally, in addition to the distinctions noted above, there are a number of words that many CE speakers simply pronounce differently from those in other English varieties. These *pronunciation innovations* include such words as *arctic*, *khaki*, *placate*, *resources*, and *species*. Compare your CE dictionary's pronunciation guide for these words with those for other English varieties. While you're at it, use your CE dictionary to consider the other CE features and variations noted here for vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and speech.

In sum, this profile of common CE features is by no means complete, but serves rather as an introduction. What is intriguing to me is the

way that these features appear so consistent, even in their variety, and that CE has maintained this consistency and variety despite the dominance of largely American media in Canada. For example, in the recent debate about Bill C-55 (concerning split-run American magazine editions in Canada), it was often noted that U.S. magazines represent 80 per cent of those on newsstands in Canada (*Maclean's*, February 15, 1999 [112(7)], p. 31).

### III. Canadian English Resources

Since appropriate CE reference works are not always easy to find, especially overseas, in this section I will introduce a number of resources that I and my ESL/EFL students find useful. Not intended to be exhaustive, this list simply highlights some helpful CE resources.

**Introductory Works/Overviews** The introduction by Chambers (1998a) provides a short, non-technical, and interesting reading which I have used as background for students in Japan. Similarly, the survey chapter by Chambers (1998b) offers a more detailed historical overview, but recognizes the current ethnic diversity of Canada and its impact on CE. To provide a non-Canadian perspective on CE, sections of Crystal's (1995) encyclopedia are particularly useful, including the introduction on 'Canada' (p. 95), some photos of Canadian English on signs (pp. 284-285), and the brief but good section on CE (pp. 340-343). The most thorough work I have found is McConnell's (1979) *Our Own Voice: Canadian English and How It Is Studied*. Though dated now, it is a wonderful introduction to CE and linguistics, with fine sections on regional variations within CE, and it uses Canadian examples to discuss dialects, dictionaries, etc.

**Language/Linguistic Studies** For those interested in language and education, *Language in Canada*, edited by Edwards (1998), is an expensive but crucial resource. This book provides chapters on bilingualism, multiculturalism, English and French in Canada, heritage language education, and surveys of languages in each of the 10 provinces and two territories (Nunavut had not yet been created when it was published). In addition to Chambers, contributors include Berry, Clarke, Cummins, Genesee and others. For more linguistically-oriented read-

ers, Clarke's (1993) *Focus on Canada*, volume 11 in the 'Varieties of English Around the World' series, brings together various studies on CE vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, lexicography, and sociolinguistics, with contributions from many of Canada's top linguists.

**Dictionaries** Although an increasing number of English dictionaries, such as the *Encarta World English Dictionary* (Soukhanov, 1999), occasionally include Canadianisms, for both breadth and depth coverage Canadian teachers and students alike need to have access to a CE dictionary. Among the various "Canadianized" English dictionaries, a good recent one is the *ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary*, adapted from the popular *American Heritage Dictionary*, edited by Friend, Keeler, Liebman, & Sutherland (1997). Since the early '90s, however, a number of excellent Canadian dictionaries have appeared. Paikeday's (1990) *Penguin Canadian Dictionary*, for example, uses a simple pronunciation guide and defines words in context (rather than more abstractly). If you also grew up with the *Gage* as your CE authority, you may be happy that a revised and expanded *Gage Canadian Dictionary* has been published (DeWolf, Gregg, Harris, & Scargill, 1997). Although it does not have as many examples for words as one might like, it does provide usage notes and offers some drawings and pictures that make meanings clear (see Block, 1999, for a review). Like the *Penguin*, Barber's (1998) *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is based on a Canadian corpus. From the student's perspective, a major weakness is that it does not provide examples for entries, though it defines them well. Both the *Gage* and the *Oxford* include some Canadian biographies and place names, adding an encyclopedic dimension. Though still most comfortable with the *Gage*, I often consult the *Oxford* now as well, simply to compare how each treats the word, spelling, or pronunciation that I am verifying.

**Reference/CE Style** If you value just the right word when you write, you will appreciate Pratt's (1998) *Gage Canadian Thesaurus*. Designed to be used along with the revised *Gage Canadian Dictionary*, this thesaurus is aimed at Canadians, so it "incorporates vocabulary unique to Canada, uses Canadian spellings, and omits usage and vocabulary that are strictly British or American" (Pratt, 1998, p. vii). In

terms of CE written style, there are various resources. *The Little English Handbook for Canadians*, by Bell and Corbett (1982), is now dated but still very useful for explaining grammar, mechanics, and research paper writing to students. There are also handbooks produced by and for Canadian newspapers, such as *The Globe and Mail Style Book* (McFarlane & Clements, 1998), but I would recommend *The Canadian Style: A Guide to Writing and Editing* (Public Works & Government Services Canada Translation Bureau, 1997). Not only for journalism, this useful reference outlines how to attend to details like abbreviations, hyphenation, and punctuation, as well as ways to write or edit traditional communications (including e-mail), correct common errors of usage (ever pondered the difference between *flaunt* and *flout*?), and provides many helpful lists (such as a bilingual English-French one of 'names of pan-Canadian significance', pp. 268-270). For academic writing, Fee and McAlpine's (1997) *Guide to Canadian English Usage* is as indispensable as a CE dictionary and thesaurus. Based on a corpus of CE from books, magazines, journals, and newspapers, it is written as an A-Z guide which includes Canadianisms and pronunciation challenges when relevant, but is most helpful for its entries discussing grammar points (apostrophes/possessives), difficult expressions (*whet the appetite*), foreign phrases (*ad hoc*, *hara-kiri*), and so on. In addition to Fee's thoughtful introduction, the simple pronunciation guide and the recent CE examples (late '80s to mid-'90s) are highlights.

One possible CE resource that does not yet seem to be very developed is the Internet. In the fall of 1999, several attempts with a number of search engines did not reveal any very sophisticated CE websites, but instead a number of commercial ones or those listing individuals' interesting but anecdotal observations about CE. However, one noteworthy site is Cornerstone Creative Communication's CE page, at <http://www.web.net/cornerstone/cdneng.html>, which includes brief sections on spelling, place names, French, and a list of some CE vocabulary.

## Conclusion

Canadian English is constantly changing and developing. This fact emphasizes the need for more up-to-date research on standard CE and CE usage. One way that ESL teachers in

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For, as Chambers (1998b, pp. 270-271) suggests, immigration will continue to influence CE, especially through the impact of ESL speakers, and variety and diversity will most likely persist.

Canada can involve students in this task is to have them identify CE topics of interest and then to assist them as they undertake informal surveys of the patterns of CE in their communities. Groups or individuals could feasibly investigate various topics such as pronunciation (How do you say the words written here?), spelling (Could you please write down these five words?), or vocabulary (What do you call...?), and sharing the findings in class is certain to lead to interesting discussions and revelations. For, as Chambers (1998b, pp. 270-271) suggests, immigration will continue to influence CE, especially through the impact of ESL speakers, and variety and diversity will most likely persist. Declaring that tolerance has formed the linguistic basis of CE variability, Chambers' concluding observation is a fitting one to close with here: "In any case, in Canada the way people say things - ['ijð ] or [ajð ], tom[ej]to or tom[a]to, *chesterfield* or *couch*, *wedgie* or *gotchie* or *rooney* - occasionally draws a comment but seldom causes an argument" (Chambers, 1998b, p. 271). May this be your experience, too.

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