Sounds of the Golden Horseshoe:
Canadian-American differences at the
Niagara border*
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In this paper I present a selection of linguistic items illustrating some of the ways in which Canadian English is coming to resemble American English, and other items illustrating ways in which the Canada-U.S. border remains a linguistic barrier. The data are from the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe. Dialect Topography entails a set of methods through which information about pronunciation, lexical choices and language usage are collected from a representative population from a particular region. The Golden Horseshoe is the heavily populated area around the tip of Lake Ontario from Oshawa to New York State. I present several pronunciation and lexical variables in terms of independent variables such as age and regionality.

The long undefended border between the United States and Canada is unique in its long-standing legacy of peace and co-operation. However, this is not to say that struggle is completely absent. Since the United Empire Loyalists crossed the border to escape the American War of Independence, those on the Canadian side of the border have struggled to maintain their separate identity. Although in 1812-14, this struggle erupted into war, it has usually manifested itself more sedately, as a determined effort to diversify in culture, politics and language.

How well we are succeeding is subtly reflected in the way we speak. In this paper, I will demonstrate some of the ways in which the varieties of English spoken in Canada and the United States seem to be merging and other ways in which the two varieties of English remain distinct or are becoming more so.

I begin by reviewing observations of Canadian/American linguistic differences at the Niagara frontier which indicate that the two varieties of English are becoming more similar. Some of these differences might lead to the conclusion that Canadian variants are losing ground to Americanisms. I continue by reviewing some changes in both the pronunciation and lexicon of Canadian English which demonstrate ways in which the varieties on either side of the border are becoming more similar without necessarily becoming more American. Finally, I consider some changes which show that the Niagara border remains an isogloss. I present in detail two examples

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which have not been discussed in previous analyses. My final example indicates a
trend in which American and Canadian English are becoming more, not less,
distinct.

The data are drawn from the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe.
Dialect Topography is a set of methods for providing information on the regional
use of language (Chambers 1994). Questionnaires are distributed in each region to
people from 14 to over 80 from all economic, educational and ethnic backgrounds.
The questionnaire inquires about items that are known to vary in Canadian English.
For instance, what words do people normally use for certain items of furniture,
clothing, meals, games, etc.? Do people say chesterfield or couch? Other questions
ask how certain words are pronounced. Does lever rhyme with cleaver or clever?
Does vase rhyme with pace, pause, or pays? In this paper, I review some of the
findings of the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe, that is, the region
around the tip of Lake Ontario from Oshawa to New York State (shown on Map 1
below), which illustrate the relationship between Canadian and American English at
the Niagara border.

1. Ways in which Canadian and American
   English are becoming similar.

Some responses to the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe suggest that in
some ways Canadian English is becoming more similar to American English. I
will discuss two examples that illustrate this effect.

1.1 Chesterfield/couch

In the first example, respondents were asked the following question:

Q2. What do you call the upholstered piece of furniture that 3 or 4 people sit on in
   the living room?

Chambers (1995) discusses responses to this question at length. Briefly, of the
eighty respondents from the American side of the Niagara border, 81.2 per cent said
couch. The fifteen remaining responses were sofa (ten), davenport (two), coach
(two) and love seat (one). Among the 1,012 Canadian responses to the same
question, couch was also the most popular term, but at only 54.3 per cent. The
second most popular Canadian response, chesterfield (28.2 per cent), was uniquely
Canadian; it was not given by any of the Americans in the survey. The third most
popular Canadian response was sofa (15.6 per cent). The other nineteen responses
were davenport (four), settee (seven), love seat (two), love couch (one), lounge
(two), divan, bank and chair (one each).

These responses thus show some differences between the Canadians and the
Americans. However, they provide a more revealing pattern when the responses are
correlated with the age of the respondents (Chambers 1995, 161). This is shown
graphically in Figure 1, in which the percentage use of each of these two variants is
plotted by age, decreasing by decade from the left to the right. That is, the pattern in Figure 1 shows that from the oldest to the youngest, *chesterfield* is declining while *couch* is increasing. So, in the speech of young Canadians, *couch* is heavily favoured over the Canadianism *chesterfield*.

Based on this case study, the evidence seems to indicate that the Canadian linguistic identity is disappearing as peculiarly Canadian variants are being replaced by the variant favoured by Americans across the border. However, further research has revealed that this is an oversimplification of what is actually taking place. Chambers (1998) presents six other changes in progress in Canadian English: *leisure* with [ɛ] or [iː], *serviette*/napkin, yod-dropping, *dived*/dove, *sneaked*/snuck, and preaspirated WH-loss. Two of these new variants are Americanisms, namely: *leisure* with [iː], and *napkin* for *serviette*. The other variants with increasing use in Canada, “are not endemically American by any definition” (Chambers 1998, 31). That is, they involve variants that have occurred in Canadian English since the earliest records, and moreover the same changes are occurring in English outside of North America. Of these, I will review the clearest example, yod-dropping.
1.2 News/student (yod-dropping)

Information on yod-dropping was obtained through the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe in the following two questions.

Q42. Does NEWS sounds like nyooze or nooze?
Q52. Does the u in STUDENT sound like the oo in too or the u in use?

The distinction in pronunciation between ‘nyooze’ [njuz] and ‘styooodent’ [stjugldnt] on the one hand and ‘nooze’ [nuz] and ‘stoodent’ [stuudnt] on the other, is the presence or absence of yod. The change from [ju] to [u] after coronals is called yod-dropping.

Figure 2.

Absence of yod in news and student in the Golden Horseshoe (Chambers 1998, 19)

Figure 2 plots the responses as a function of the age of the respondents, looking only at the Canadians. It shows the yod-less variant of both news and student to have been well established in use by Canadians of all ages for the last 70 years. Even the oldest group, the people over 80, use the yod-less variant at least 40 per cent of the time. Hence, yod-less variants are not Americanisms newly introduced into Canada, but have been in use by at least a minority of Canadians as far back as the historical evidence goes.

As Figure 2 also shows, yod-dropping is increasing, that is, the youngest Canadians hardly ever say ‘nyooze’ or ‘styooodent’. This is not surprising. It is
increasing in all the standard accents of English throughout the world except Scots (Chambers 1998, 31).

2. Ways in which Canadian and American English remain distinct

In other ways, the Canadian-US border remains a linguistic border as well as a political one. From the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe it is clear that certain shibboleths are being maintained in the Canadian and American English on opposite sides of the Niagara border. So far, we have identified eight pronunciation differences: ant[i]/ant[ai]; a[s, z]phalt/a[s]phalt; aven[ju]/aven[u]; l[ij]ver/l[ε]ver; num/mom; sem[i]/sem[ai]; sh[a]ne/sh[o]ne; [vaz]/[veiz]/[veis]; and five lexical differences: face cloth/wash cloth; running shoes/sneakers; pop/soda; and zee/zed. Most of these are discussed in Chambers (1997). I will look closely at two others, l[ε]ver/l[ij]ver, a pronunciation difference, and running shoes/sneakers, a lexical difference, that are described here for the first time.

2.1 l[ε]ver/l[ij]ver

According to Scargill and Warkentyne (1972, 51), the pronunciation of lever to rhyme with beaver, that is, l[ij]ver, is associated with British English, whereas the pronunciation of the same word to rhyme with never, that is, l[ε]ver, is associated with American English. The first variant also occurs in the US as a minor variant, but only the first is considered standard in Britain. The figures from Scargill and Warkentyne’s 1972 survey of Canadian English in Table 1, indicate that the British variant, l[ij]ver, is also standard in Canada, although a minority of Canadians use either the American pronunciation, l[ε]ver, or use both pronunciations interchangeably. The similarity between the figures for adults and for students in Table 1 indicates that this is a stable variable rather than a changing one.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>l[ij]ver</th>
<th>l[ε]ver</th>
<th>either</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>adults</td>
<td>83.5%</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students</td>
<td>72.5</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data from the Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe indicates that twenty years later, there is only a slight change in usage by Canadians. Of the Canadians who indicate a preference, 75 per cent say l[ij]ver while the remaining 25 per cent use l[ε]ver. The following discussion details the distribution of the Canadians who say l[ij]ver by region and age.

Map 1 shows this distribution on a map of the Golden Horseshoe. The large, bold numbers in each region of the map indicate the percentage of respondents who use l[ij]ver in each region. The smaller numbers are Goldvarb factor weights. It is
clear from the map that the international border marks the difference in usage of the variants of lever. Speakers from Niagara Falls use /[ij]ver with the same frequency as speakers in Oshawa, at the other end of the Golden Horseshoe, yet across the US border in neighbouring Buffalo, the frequency of /[ij]ver drops off significantly.

Map 1.

Figure 3 looks at exactly the same distribution with a different graphic representation. It shows the geographical distribution of /[ij]ver as a bar graph, moving from Oshawa, on the far left, around the end of the lake and across the US border into New York State, on the far right. American regions are identified as NY1 (near the Niagara border) and NY2 further from the border. Figure 3 shows the change dramatically in the marked drop in height of the black bars across the border.
Regional distribution of [ij]ver in the Golden Horseshoe and across the U.S. border.

Figure 4 shows the distribution of respondents according to their age groups in order to illustrate the stability of the usage of [ij]ver by Canadians. The slope of the line is relatively flat. In this respect it contrasts with the slope of the line in, for example, Figure 2 which slopes steeply from the oldest Canadians on the left, to the youngest on the right. In Figure 4, there is never more than a 5 per cent difference between any two contiguous age-groups.

Pronunciation of lever with [ij] by Canadians in the Golden Horseshoe by age.
2.2 Running shoes/sneakers

Another variable with similar properties comes from the answers to the following question:

Q39 What do you call the rubber-soled shoes you’d wear with [exercise clothes].

Respondents offered 34 different responses to this question plus various combinations. The most popular response among the 1,015 respondents is running shoes, which was the single response of 552 people. Significantly, only one of these respondents lives on the American side of the border. The second most popular response is sneakers. It was given as the single response of 176 people; significantly, again, 70 of them are Americans. The third most common response is runners, which was offered as the single response of 132 Canadians, and by no Americans. Other responses included track shoes, jogging shoes, tennis shoes, training shoes, various brand names including Adidas, Reebok and Nike, and a few anomalous responses such as galoshes and overshoes. None of these other responses was given as the single response of more than 14 people.

This choice of variants is generally consistent with Zeller’s study of Canadian-American differences at the Windsor/Detroit border. There, she found that running shoes is by far the preferred Canadian variant (Zeller 1990, 61). The only Canadian respondents who did not use running shoes were from the border cities of Sarnia and Windsor. She also found that the term runners is exclusively Canadian. Sneakers is preferred by more Americans than Canadians and by more speakers over 50 years of age than under.

Map 2.

Use of running shoes or runners, shown as percentages and GoldVarb factor weights.
For purposes of analysis, I consider only single responses of *running shoes* and *runners*, which hereafter are collapsed together as *running shoes*, and *sneakers*, which altogether account for 789 of the 972 responses. Map 2 shows the percentages of respondents choosing *running shoes* or *runners* rather than *sneakers* in each of the regions of the Golden Horseshoe. Again, the border marks a clear difference in usage from one to the other. Significantly, the respondents from the three Canadian regions closest to the border, St. Catharines, Welland and Niagara, have the lowest likelihood of using *running shoes* of all the other Canadian regions (factor weight less than .6). This too is consistent with the findings of Zeller.

Figure 5 shows the marked drop-off in the use of *running shoes*, represented by the black bars, at the Canadian-American border. Each bar represents the percentage of respondents who use the variant in each region of the Golden Horseshoe from Oshawa on the far left around the tip of Lake Ontario to New York State on the far right.

Besides the obvious drop-off from Niagara to New York, there is also a smaller drop across the Canadian regions from Oshawa to Niagara. This difference is significant in GoldVarb. Specifically, a step up/step down analysis reveals that if we divided the Golden Horseshoe into two geographic regions, the North Shore (Oshawa to Hamilton) and the Niagara Peninsula (the Peach Belt to the border), they have significantly different variant preferences (p < .05). That is, those Canadians on the south shore of Lake Ontario and in close proximity to the United States border are significantly more likely to say *sneakers* than their fellow Canadians further removed from the border.

Another independent variable, the Regionality Index (RI), also proves to be significant (p < .05). The RI is a seven-point scale which indicates how well or how poorly each respondent represents his or her region. Scores are calculated based upon the respondents’ place of birth, place raised from ages 8 to 18, place living, and parents’ place of birth. People who live all their lives in the place where their parents were born are likely to be really good representatives of that region. Such
people will have an RI score of 1. At the opposite end of the scale, a score of 7 indicates interlopers. That is, people with an RI score of 7 have relocated to the region sometime after adolescence. RI is a continuum, so intermediate values indicate profiles which fall somewhere between these two extremes. For a more detailed description of RI see Chambers and Heisler (1998).

Table 2 shows the respondents who use either the running shoes or runners variant as a function of their RI scores, by percentage and factor weight. Factor weights were calculated by a one-level binomial analysis in GoldVarb. There is a clear correlation in the data. That is, higher RI scores vary directly with higher percentages (and factor weights) while lower RI scores vary directly with lower percentages.

Table 2.
Regionality Index for running shoes or runners by percentage and factor weight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RI</th>
<th>RI1</th>
<th>RI2</th>
<th>RI3</th>
<th>RI4</th>
<th>RI5</th>
<th>RI6</th>
<th>RI7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weight</td>
<td>.602</td>
<td>.587</td>
<td>.562</td>
<td>.452</td>
<td>.489</td>
<td>.420</td>
<td>.322</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear from Table 2 that respondents with RI scores of 1-3 are very similar to each other and that respondents with RI scores of 4-6 are also similar to one another. These clusterings are indicated by double lines. What this means is that people who are born and raised in the region they are living in are highly likely to use running shoes or runners as their name for rubber-soled exercise shoes. Conversely, people who have moved into the region either as adolescents or adults are less likely to use these terms. This result establishes running shoes and runners as terms that presumably come into the vocabulary early and get imprinted there.

Figure 6.

Use of running shoes or runners in the Golden Horseshoe by age.
The third independent variable which is significant in discovering the usage pattern for *running shoe* is age. Figure 6 shows that *running shoes* has been well established in the vocabularies of Canadians of all ages in the Golden Horseshoe for more than 70 years. The trend evident in the figure is that the younger Canadians on the right side of the graph are using the term *running shoes* or *runners* more than the older Canadians to the left. The converse also holds: the older respondents are more likely to use *sneakers* than are the younger ones. Similarly, Zeller found that the use of the word *sneakers* was more prevalent among those over 50 years of age (Zeller 1990, 64).

This pattern of usage is quite unlike the usage of *couch* and *chesterfield* (Figure 1) and *news* and *student* (Figure 2) in which younger speakers increasingly use the American variant. Here, the use of the traditional Canadian variant is increasing among the youngest speakers. That is, in the case of *running shoes* and *sneakers*, Canada and the US are becoming more, not less, distinct. So far this is the only variable we have discovered in which younger Canadians are increasing their use of a variant that is expressly Canadian and are thus becoming more distinct from their American neighbours.

3. Border Talk

The data I have reviewed in this paper exemplifies some clear trends in the English of North America. The standardization occurring across the Niagara border has been well documented and projected to a wider application. However, variables such as *l[i]ver/*[l][e]ver indicate that Canadian and American English are maintaining their distinctness. Furthermore, the trend towards a continental standard is balanced by increasing distinctness in other variables, as I have shown from the example of *running shoes*. This is not a case of the older, more conservative populace holding on to the past, but of the young up-and-comers maintaining their identity apart from the Americans on the other side of the Niagara border.

References


