WORD CHOICE IN TWO CANADIAN URBAN SURVEYS

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This paper will discuss the choice of lexical item, with the requirement of semantic sameness, as it relates to socio-economic status, age and sex and compare the effect of geographic distance relating to this word selection in urban surveys in two Canadian cities several thousand kilometres apart. I hope thereby to illustrate cross-Canadian socio-cultural and sociolinguistic similarities in lexical choice.

The geographic and social distribution of lexical items in North America has been of especial interest since Kurath's (1949) research on vocabulary in the Eastern United States revealed three main dialect divisions with eighteen regional varieties. It is an interest confirmed once more with the recent publication of volume I of the long-awaited *Dictionary of American Regional English*, edited by Cassidy (1985).

Indeed, it is primarily through the lexicon that Canadian English has been differentiated historically from the northern speech area of the United States, and established as an independent branch of World English. In terms of frequency, meaning and usage, certain words or word forms, such as [ˈkʰɑːɹki] versus [ˈkʰæki.], and /zed/ rather than /zi/ are considered to be typical of Canadian speech. Thus, Avis' (1954) study of speech differences along the Ontario-U.S. border demonstrated a strong preference for the British (or U.S. Midland) form in a number of synonymic word pairs, e.g., *tap(s)* versus *faucet*, and *blind(s)* versus *shade(s)*, with *chesterfield*, a Canadianism, chosen by almost 90% of the informants over the more usual *sofa* of neighbouring New York or Michigan. This study of lexical pairs establishing the incidence of characteristic British versus American forms in Canadian speech was extended to Montreal English by Hamilton (1958), and to the middle border region, i.e., from northwestern Ontario to southeastern Saskatchewan by Allen (1959).

Studies within Canada have also indicated social, as well as regional, variation in usage: Scargill and Warkentyne's (1972) report on the national Survey of Canadian English in which respondents were grouped according to location (i.e., province), generation and gender, suggested certain lexical shifts in the high school population, while Gregg (1973), in a survey carried out by H. Woods of over a hundred adults and teenagers in the

Kootenay region of British Columbia, reported an increasing preference among the young for the term *couch* over *chesterfield* (a trend also noted by Metcalf 1972 for Southern California, where *sofa* was the dominant word).

Two recent symbiotic Canadian sociolinguistic surveys, one on the Pacific Coast, and the other on the Ontario-Quebec linguistic border, with sound stratified random sampling techniques, have elicited lexical items which allow a comparison of word choice to be made in cities several thousand kilometres apart. In the first urban socio-dialectal survey to be reported on in Canada, Woods (1979), with one hundred informants, investigating the speech of Ottawa, the capital city, found ordered differentiation with respect to age, sex or class in the choice of typical Canadian terms, such as *tap(s)* and *blind(s)*, while Gregg (1984), with two hundred and forty informants in the Survey of Greater Vancouver English (SVEN), presented a detailed sociolinguistic analysis of certain vocabulary items which confirmed the declining use of the term *chesterfield* among younger speakers.

It is perhaps useful from the perspective of Canadian English as a whole, to compare the occurrence of lexical items in word sets from these two surveys, as this choice relates regionally to location, and socially to age, sex and socio-economic status in order to find areas of agreement and conservatism, or patterns of change. On the basis of earlier work, we might hypothesize, for example, that older speakers, females, and those of higher status will retain to a varying degree an established term or a traditional value, and that change will be initiated in the younger group, or with those socially less well established. By combining lexical data from the Woods and Gregg surveys, and dichotomizing the informants on the basis of location, gender, generation, i.e., plus or minus forty, and socio-economic status with two groups, a Higher, Group II, and a Lower, Group I (giving a total of sixteen cell groups), co-variation with a lexical item may be investigated.

To avoid semantic confusion (Underwood 1968), comparable lexical items were chosen from Picture (or Audio-Visual) style, with a similar pictorial representation in either survey used to evoke the desired referent. Words offered in response to a particular visual stimulus thus may be considered part of a semantic set, as, for example, *sofa/chesterfield/couch/lounge/divan* or *frying pan/fry pan/skillet/spider*. Once co-variation with a sociological parameter can be established, particular values may be considered to comprise a linguistic variable. Other such word sets include household items *tap(s)/faucet*; *blind(s)/shade(s)/curtain(s)*; *silverware/cutlery/flatware*, and outdoors, the terms *railway/railroad*.

Of the six typically Canadian terms to be discussed, there are four with considerable agreement in overall score between Ottawa and Vancouver. These are *frying pan*, *tap(s)*, *cutlery* and *railway* versus *railroad* where the frequency counts for Vancouver and

Ottawa respectively, for each item are as follows:

Lexical Item	Vancouver	Ottawa
frying pan	82%	79%
taps	67%	59%
cutlery	46%	44%
railway	39%	54%
railroad	37%	43%

To predict the incidence of variability in the population at large, a logistic model from the SAS[1] or Statistical Analysis System programme package was used. In each set, items with relatively high frequency counts were tested, while words with a low response, or multiple answers, were not included in the analysis. In the case of items such as *frying pan*, for example, where, despite the incidence of household flyers advertising *skillet* (Kimball 1963), the overall response for which in both Ottawa and Vancouver surveys was approximately 80%, any expected variation might be considered to arise from the performance of different cell groups in choice of that term rather than from widespread selection of the alternative, *fry pan*, which was chosen by only 10% of the informants. (*Skillet* and *spider* were the other choices in Ottawa, while *skillet* and multiple choices of *frying pan* with *griddle*, and *fry pan* with *skillet* were offered in Vancouver.) Thus, older men of lower status in Vancouver choose *frying pan* more often than would otherwise be expected, and lower status older men in Ottawa less often.

The most interesting word sets are those in which several alternative terms may be tested for variability, as in the case of *sofa/chesterfield/couch* where 72% in Vancouver, and 44% in Ottawa opted for the characteristic Canadian term, with *sofa* and *couch* dividing the remainder. With respect to the choice of a particular value of this linguistic item (Hudson 1980), it was found that the explanatory variables of location and age were both very highly significant (at the level of $P<.0001$), with an interaction of location, sex and class significant at the level $P<.02$. There were also indications of a tendency towards interaction of all four independent variables, with class alone just over the level of 5% significance.

As other studies have noted, and with some regional disparity, the use of *chesterfield* is on the decline among those under forty, with *couch* the generational preference. Although *chesterfield* is still the predominant form in Vancouver, with *couch* second, in Ottawa, *couch* is chosen more frequently by those

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[1] I am greatly indebted to Virginia Green, Statistical Consultant, Arts Computing, University of British Columbia, and Jean Wu, formerly of Arts Computing, UBC, for their technical advice and assistance with this programme package.

under forty of low status, with *sofa* equally favoured by those of Group II. *Chesterfield* is strongly preserved by those over forty in Vancouver, and by those over forty of higher status in Ottawa, where it is the prestige term (Woods 1979: 263). The choice of *chesterfield* and *couch* vary in accordance with the age parameter. Regionally, the use of *sofa* is somewhat more frequent in Ottawa.

In the case of *blind*(*s*) versus *shade*(*s*), 64% of those in Ottawa and 85% in Vancouver opt for the typically Canadian term *blind*(*s*). Again, both location (P<.0001) and age (P<.0005) are very highly significant in choice, with an indication of interacting effects of location, age and class, and of location, sex and class. For example, in Vancouver, lower status males under forty in particular, and young women of the same status, choose *blind*(*s*) much less often than other cell groups. In Ottawa, the highest scores for *blind*(*s*) are for older men of low status with the lowest choice occurring in high status younger men. Among women choice of *blind*(*s*) appears to co-vary with socio-economic status. Among those under forty in Vancouver, the term *shade*(*s*) is slowly gaining ground among those of lower status, while in Ottawa, *blind*(*s*) could be considered a prestige term, preserved by those over forty of higher status. With regional differences in choice, these terms co-vary along the parameter of age.

In the case of *tap*(*s*) versus *faucet*, the term *tap*(*s*) was chosen by two-thirds of the Vancouver informants, and 60% of those in Ottawa, although 8% of those in the Vancouver sample admitted to using both terms equally. Age (at the level of P<.003) and gender (at the level of P<.02) were both highly significant, with location, as a factor, just over the 95% confidence level. In Vancouver, the lowest score for use of *tap*(*s*) occurs among males under forty, and the highest among older women. Stratified by age and class, women in Vancouver choose the term *tap*(*s*) more frequently than men in comparable status groups. In Ottawa, where its use is less frequent, the term *faucet* is chosen by more than 50% of those under forty of high status, though *tap*(*s*) is strongly preserved in the speech of young women of Group I.

With respect to *silverware/cutlery/flatware*, *cutlery*, the characteristic Canadian term and predominant form, was chosen by 46% in Vancouver, and 44% in Ottawa. In choice of the term, class (P<.001) and age (P<.01) are both highly significant, with location and an interaction of sex, age and class also indicators of choice. While in both cities higher status young women choose the term *cutlery* more often than those of lower status, an ordered co-variation in women occurs on the basis of age in Vancouver, and on the basis of socio-economic status in Ottawa. The term *flatware* is also chosen equally by women over forty in Vancouver, and the term *silverware* more often by those of lower status in Ottawa, where *silverware* is generally a second choice. The choice of *cutlery* is reasonably consistent among men in Vancouver, although lower status young men are also apt to choose

the term *silverware*, the typically Canadian term being retained most often by older men of high status. The parameters of variation for these terms are age and socio-economic status.

While the non-household terms *railway/railroad* occur almost equally often in Vancouver speech, *railway* is chosen by slightly more than 50% of the Ottawa informants. The significant correlates are with class (P<.02) and with an interaction of age and class (P<.04). While there is no significant variation on the basis of location, among women in Vancouver, the choice of the term *railway* is ordered according to status, with a greater preference shown for *railroad* among younger women of Group I. The term *railway* is thus preserved by those over forty of higher status in both cities. In Ottawa, males over forty of high status and young men of low status are retaining the term relative to women. Young women tend to choose *railroad* with a frequency of 55% although its highest use is among lower status older men (at 75%). These terms vary along parameters of age and class.

In reviewing the correlates of variation in these six word sets location, the regional variable, is very highly significant in the choice of only two: *sofa/chesterfield/couch* and *blind(s)/shade(s)* and indicative of a tendency in the choice *tap(s)/faucet* and *cutlery/silverware/flatware*. Of the four independent variables, age or generation is an important factor in choice of four of the six word sets. For example, age, like location, is very highly significant in the choice of *chesterfield* and *blind(s)*; highly significant in the choice of *tap(s)* and significant in the choice of *cutlery*. Class is an important factor in two word sets. It is highly significant in the choice of *cutlery*, and significant in *railway* versus *railroad*, where an interaction of age and class also occur. Gender is significant in choice of one word set: *tap(s)/faucet*. It is indicative of a trend, however, in the *sofa* variable, where an interaction of location, sex and class was also significant. It would seem from the small number of word sets tested that generation is the most often occurring factor, followed by location and socio-economic status, while gender and a combination of factors are important in single linguistic items.

It has been hypothesized (Hudson 1980: 45) that vocabulary and syntactic items might be used to identify our current status in society. It would appear, from the evidence of certain word sets, that there is a trend to a weakening of Canadian influence on lexical choice among those under forty.

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