

*It's like "So cool, right?"*  
Canadian English entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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What changes have been taking place in Canadian English over the last century and how are they reflected in Canadian English today? Who uses innovative forms and who lags behind? Further, how does Canadian English figure amongst the world's major varieties of English?

In this paper I introduce a new research program on linguistic variation and change in contemporary Canadian English. The goal is to investigate the origin of 'new' features, their origin, diffusion and current state of development. The data come from a 3/4 million word corpus of Canadian English as spoken by people born and raised in Toronto, and stratified by age, sex, and education. If, as Chambers (1995:5; 2004) argues, Canadian English focussed in the early 20th century, then this corpus gives us the opportunity to tap in to the first century of change.

Indeed, the corpus reveals remarkable differentiation in apparent time. The standard Canadian English form for quotation, *say*, is virtually non-existent amongst the under 40 year olds (Tagliamonte & D'Arcy 2004), as is the intensifier *very*. 'New' features such as quotative *be like*, as in (1), intensifier *really* and *so*, as in (2), and extension particles such as *stuff* and *right*, are incoming.

- (1) I *'m like*, "I'm going to blend in today." I *was like*, "But I won't." (2/c)
- (2) It was *so* bad 'cause I was *really* nervous. (2/x)
- (3) It's about like, animals *and stuff, right?* (2/d)

However, these salient, and often high profile, features are not the only linguistic features undergoing change. There are also ongoing adjustments in core areas of grammar, e.g. future temporal reference, (3), the modal auxiliary system, (4), and relativization, (5).

- (3) I'll show it in one sec... but I'm *gonna tell* you something ... (TOV/H)
- (4) ...you *must* apply, but you always get over-ruled ... you've *got to* understand from my point of view. (TOV/ ~)
- (5) ...a woman *who* runs a exercise place to a guy *that* works in a nursery. (TOV/j)

Put into a broad social and historical context, these changes should not be surprising. The changes in Canadian English mirror changes that are ongoing in other varieties of English. However, precisely how these changes are evolving in the Canadian context is the next step for our research project. Perhaps more surprising given the received wisdom, the use of *be like*, *really*, *so*, *right* and '*stuff like that*', are embedded in the evolution of the language too, just like all the other changes. Taken together, these findings interesting and exciting developments for Canadian English in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

References

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