Nooz or nyooz? The complex construction of Canadian identity

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Though Canadian English is historically closely related to American English, the politics of national identity have led to its construction as a distinct linguistic variety. This construction relies on a number of salient markers, among them “Canadian Raising,” as well as espousal of British-like as opposed to American-like variants, particularly with respect to lexicon and orthography.

Among the pronunciation features occasionally cited as emblematic of Canadian linguistic identity is the retention of the palatal glide in words like news and student – a feature which, paradoxically, today represents a low frequency variant in the casual style of many Canadians, particularly younger generations of speakers (see e.g. Chambers 1998). Using self-reported dialect topography data, Chambers (1997, 1998) concludes that the glided variant no longer holds symbolic value for the vast majority of Canadians. Yet other studies, based on both self-reporting (Owens and Baker 1984) and actual speech (Woods 1999) data, suggest that glided variants are more highly valued by Canadians than glideless pronunciations, and more characteristic of formal styles.

This paper attempts to resolve the apparent paradox through examination of glide usage in several recent Canadian corpora. These include a corpus of self-reported data assembled in 2003 from over 1000 respondents, along with a media corpus containing more than 2000 speech tokens. Analysis reveals a complex situation in which conservative glided and innovative glideless variants index different social values for different segments of the population (on this point, see e.g. Boberg 2000, Wassink and Dyer 2004). These values are interpreted within a framework of linguistic globalization (cf. Meyerhoff and Niedzielski 2003).

References