Canadian English – Phonology

So, let’s talk about the phonology! First off, I want to start with a few basic points:

- Canadian English and Standard American are actually really similar; as Clair said, Canada leans towards the Standard America dialect – so, for instance, Canadian English is considered a rhotic language because the syllable-final r is pronounced in words like car and farm in most of the Canadian states, just like in America. I’ve actually read an interesting theory about this in a journal published by the Queen’s University in Ontario that states that the English spoken in Canada and America – the rhotic languages, in other words – pronounced the ‘r’ because they were colonized far earlier than the southern hemisphere colonies. Between colonizing North America and colonizing, for example, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, the English spoken in Britain underwent a huge change – like dropping the pronunciation of the ‘r’ final-syllable, for example. The table you can see here – let me make it a little bigger so it’s clearer – is the Canadian variation of John Wells’ lexical sets; as you can see, they’re a set of 24 words that are used, in phonology, to analyse different accents in the English language. Wells chose them specifically for their clarity – it’s impossible to mistake them for any other words.

- Now, pre-rhotic vowels – such as the ‘o’ in the words ‘sorry’ and ‘borrow’ are a unique feature of Canadian English pronunciation. In American pronunciation, there is a tendency to replace the ‘o’ in a word with an inter-vocalic ‘r’ with an ‘a’ – so, sorry, tomorrow, borrow, sorrow, are all said with an ‘a’ rather than an ‘o’. In Canada, however, the [o] is maintained before the intervocalic [r]. So whereas an American would say sari and baro, the Canadian pronunciation is actually sori and boro.

- Despite retaining the o before r, Canadian English has, however, lost the distinction between [ae] (ah) and e (e) when they occur before an inter-vocalic ‘r’ – Howard Woods, in a study of Ottawa residents, found that this was primarily older speakers, who tended to pronounce marry as ‘maeri’.

- The only state that does not actually pronounce the ‘r’ is Nova Scotia, one of the Atlantic Provinces.

Intervocalic T

- The t is voiced intervocally -- When voicing a ‘t’ after a stressed syllable, usually it becomes pronounced as a ‘d’ – for example, city becomes sidi; little is lidel, like the shop, and it is one of the most distinct structures of Canadian English. According to Chambers’ 1993 report, “Lawless and Vulgar Innovations”, this dated back to Victorian views of the Canadian dialect which were, on the whole, not very favourable.

Merger of Low-Back vowels
• The merger of low back vowels – low back vowels are the vowels you produce by dropping the jaw down to a low position. In Canadian English, the low-back vowels [ɑ] (oh) and [ɔ] (aw) are pronounced entirely alike; the distinction between them in British English doesn’t get translated into Canadian English. For instance, cot [ɑ] and caught [ɔ] are both pronounced as cot.
• This is also known as the Canadian shift.
• Similar to this is the disappearance of vowel contrast in words which use the same letters – so, for example, logger and lager both sound like they have the same vowel – (trudgill and Hannah, 1982). However, the Canadian Shift does not occur in all of Canada – the Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland)
  [ In a nation-wide survey (over 14000) Canadians, Scargill and Warkentyne reported that an average of 85% of Canadians responded ‘yes’ when asked if cot and caught rhyme. In Newfoundland, the rate dropped to 60%. ]
• In foreign words, Canadians almost exclusively use the /ae/ pattern, whereas in British English, words such as falafel, karate, llama, and so on, can either have an /ae/ sound or /a:/, depending on where the stress of the word falls. So, whereas in British English, pasta would be pronounced with an /ae/ whereas llama would be pronounced with an /a:/, in Canadian English the two are both pronounced in the same way. The only exception occurs in words with final stressed open syllables, such as foie gras, spa, where the /ae/ sound cannot appear.

Canadian Raising

• Canadian Raising is the chief unique feature in Canadian English, and that is the pronunciation of diphthongs. Diphthongs are a two different vowel sounds combined in such a way that they only seem like one – such as ‘ou’ in house, the ‘oy’ of boy, and the ‘ie’ of died. Canadians actually pronounce both diphthongs, rather than one, by pushing the first part of the diphthong to the centre of the word and making it a far more noticeable feature. This mostly happens when the vowels are followed by a voiceless consonant such as p, b, t, k, and so on, though it doesn’t mean that a voiced consonant will not lead to pushing the vowels up. In RP, when saying ‘house’, the ‘ou’ of house is longer and lower than the Canadian variant, which not only lifts the vowels to the mid-range, but also shortens the glide between one and the other.
  o Based on the Great Vowel shift that happened in the 15th and 16th century when English shifted from Middle English to Modern English though nobody quite knows where Canadian English came from.
• One unique word pronunciation is khaki. Khaki, an Indian word meaning ‘dust’, is pronounced completely differently from the British and American versions. Whereas the British draw out the ‘a’, thus kaahki, and the Americans create a diphthong in the middle, khaki (keeki), Canadians add
an ‘r’ after the ‘a’ to make karki – similar to car key. This is probably due to the Canadians growing accustomed to the British dropping the ‘r’ before a consonant.

- Several other examples of phonemic differences:
  - There’s also the pronunciation of the letter ‘z’ as ‘zed’ – similar to England. In fact, in an article by Bill Casselman, he points out the incredulity of an American customer attacking a Canadian waitress for using the word ‘zed’ instead of ‘zee’, claiming that the form ‘zed’ is actually the authentic pronunciation of ‘zed’ – he also points out that more and more Canadians are pronouncing ‘z’ as ‘zed’ instead of ‘zee’.
  - Words of French origin are pronounced as though they are in French – so, clique would be clique, and not clique [click];
  - Sometimes, the ‘i’ vowel in words such as milk and lick is pronounced as an ‘e’ – so, to certain speakers, a Canadian saying ‘milk’ would actually sound as though he is saying ‘melk’.
  - In words ending with ‘ile’, all letters are pronounced – for example, instead of saying fertil, Canadians say fer-tile.
  - In the case of words such as shone, lever and schedule, Canadians go with the British pronunciation – so, shone [gone], leever and xedule.

**Conclusion**

To conclude our presentation, Canada is the second largest nation in the world, populated by 29 million people. It was discovered by the French, who named it Acadia, and it was given to the British after the Treaty of Utrecht resolved Queen Anne’s war, part of the French and Indian wars fought between the French and the British. The French were deported and British, Irish and Scottish immigrants took their place. It is this diverse background of immigration that led to Canadian English.

Although most of the phonology, phonetic, lexis and other qualities mimic North America, there are a few differences between Canadian English and Standard American – this is also not taking into account the Maritime provinces, whose influence seems to be more Scottish based than American. These differences make Canadian English the noticeable variety of English that as it is spoken today: the low-back vowel merger, where the vowels are pronounced by dropping the jaw to a lower position, the various rules governing the pronounciation of pre-rhotic symbols, and Canadian Raising, where the diphthongs of a word are ‘raised’ to a mid-vowel, resulting in words such as ‘hoose’ and ‘aboot’.

With regards to spelling and pronunciation, they lean more towards the British variants than the American versions, and they have retained some native place names and the names of flora and fauna indigenous to the area – such as Pugwash, Ottawa, tobacco, potato, caribou. However, Quebecian English is different from standard Canadian English by borrowing a great deal from French; in Canada, Quebec is a predominantly French-speaking state, and this may account for it.

Their syntax is quite unique. Among others, Canadian English uses a great deal of the ‘after’ and the past participle – as Michaela said, they like to say ‘I’m after
doing the dishes’, and to use ‘anymore’ as an ending to a positive sentence. They also over-exclaim a fact, using ‘ever’. Furthermore, the usage of the word ‘eh’ – parodied on many, many, many shows – is used to end a questioning sentence. Another unique feature is the extension of the past perfect (she’s been six years dead) and the do + be negative – I get that, but I don’t be out of breath.

I hope you enjoyed our presentation on Canadian English. Thank you.

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