

A (Socio-)Linguistic Description of First Nations Englishes

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The aim of the project is to provide a linguistic description of English dialects spoken by First Nations community members. The focus is rather unconventional because linguistic research in First Nations communities has strongly focused on their indigenous languages. This is important and necessary because many indigenous languages are strongly endangered today as a result of the enforced assimilation of First Nations to Anglo-Canadian norms. As part of the colonial endeavour to 'civilise' indigenous people, children were forced to give up their native languages and shift to English in residential schools. It is undisputable that severe culture loss went hand in hand with this language loss but at the same time there are also signs that First Nations people have restructured English to make it suit their cultural needs. It therefore seems as if new dialects of English have emerged in times of language shift and language reclaiming. These English dialects may express aspects of indigenous identity even though not on the same level as the indigenous languages.

Research on the existence and linguistic structure of these indigenized varieties of English is scarce. There are some applied-linguistic studies with a focus on language pathology and teaching that address issues involved in differentiating between dialect and language delay in language assessment and disadvantages speakers of non-standard dialects face in the Canadian school context (cf. Ball & Bernhardt 2008; Fadden & LaFrance 2010; Sterzuk 2011; Blundon 2016). However, so far there are only few linguistic descriptions of these varieties that could serve as the basis for this type of research. Some notable exceptions are Mulder (1982); Tarpent (1982); Genee and Stigter (2010); Newmark, Walker, and Stanford (2016); and Kinsey (2017). Mulder (1982) for example studies interference in phonology, while Tarpent (1982) takes a closer look at the construction *them Fred* ('Fred and people associated with him'), which derives from the plural marker *dim* in Tsimshian. A more recent study by Genee and Stigter (2010) investigates grammatical variation in a written manuscript from the 1950s and in essays and exercises written by Blackfoot university students from the late 2000s. Based on these data, they establish features of Blackfoot English and search for structural similarities in Blackfoot language that may explain their existence. While Genee and Stigter (2010) focus on grammatical variation in their study, Newmark, Walker, and Stanford (2016) focus on prosodic features of what they call the 'rez accent'. They argue that Native American communities in the US and First Nations communities in Canada share one accent – even though they are geographically dispersed. This accent is marked by a L*+H stress pattern, with low pitch in stressed syllables and high pitch in unstressed syllables. In another study, Kinsey (2017) analyses Witsuwit'en English through storytelling and finds phonological and morphosyntactic variation such as TH-stopping (e.g. *dey* instead of *they*) and omission of past tense marking.

As the overview shows, there is an urgent need for more linguistic groundwork from which applied linguists can deduce implications for language assessment and teaching. Consequently, the objective of my study is to broaden the descriptive basis for these dialects. With the help of written archival material and present-day audio recordings, I aim to investigate similarities and differences between dialects of First Nations English spoken at different points in time and in different communities. A preliminary investigation of written resources from Ontario shows features that are typical of a learner variety with strong grammatical variation that can be traced back to transfer from the structures of the speakers' community languages. This type of variation cannot be found in more recent audio material, which is marked by more subtle variation on the prosodic level rather than by strong grammatical variation. This is hardly surprising given the fact that grammatical variation was arguably targeted first in the residential school setting while prosodic variation may have been less prone to overt criticism. But more data are needed to substantiate this claim.

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