Sociolinguistics in Canada

Elaine Gold

Introduction

Canada, a vast country with a relatively small population, is extremely rich in languages. There are two official languages, English and French, many indigenous language families, and increasing numbers of immigrant languages. More than 200 mother tongues were reported in the 2006 census (Statistics Canada 2007).

Table 2.1 lists the official languages and some of the larger immigrant and aboriginal languages. Anglophones make up 58 per cent of the population and francophones 22 per cent overall; allophones, those reporting neither French nor English as their mother tongue, constitute one-fifth of the population. About 200,000 Canadians report an aboriginal language as their mother tongue.

These languages are not spread evenly across the country. Most of the French speakers live in the province of Quebec; the 5.9 million francophones there make up 80 per cent of the population. There are francophones in every other province, with the largest group outside of Quebec, 490,000, in Ontario. Francophones form a particularly large minority in New Brunswick, where the 233,000 French speakers make up one-third of the population.

Table 2.1 Mother tongues spoken in Canada rounded to the nearest thousand

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English 18,056,000</td>
<td>Chinese languages 1,034,000</td>
<td>Cree 77,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French 6,892,000</td>
<td>Italian 477,000</td>
<td>Inuktitut 30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>German 467,000</td>
<td>Ojibway 22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Punjabi 383,000</td>
<td>Dene 10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spanish 362,000</td>
<td>Montagnais-Naskapi 10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arabic 287,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tagalog 286,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Portuguese 229,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polish 218,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most of the speakers of immigrant languages live in or near the large urban centres of Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver; the speakers of aboriginal languages live mostly in rural areas, particularly in northern Canada and in the west. For a good background on the languages of Canada, consult the volume *Language in Canada* (Edwards 1998).

The main focus of this chapter is on research into the variation and status of Canadian English and Canadian French and the contact between them. A brief section at the end outlines some current research on gender and language. It is impossible to adequately cover all of the sociolinguistic research in Canada in this limited space; only some of the current research and recent publications on these topics have been included.

**Canadian English**

This section outlines four areas of research in Canadian English: the nation-wide Dialect Topography project; several projects focused on the urban centres of Toronto, Montreal, and Winnipeg; research on the regional dialects of Newfoundland and the Maritimes; and projects from the Sociolinguistics Laboratory in Ottawa, which bridge research in Canadian English and Canadian French. A recent issue of the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* (Avery *et al.* 2006), devoted to Canadian English, contains papers on many of these topics.

**Dialect topography surveys**

Much of the sociolinguistic research into Canadian English has been based upon surveys. The Survey of Canadian English (Scargill and Warkentyne 1972) was the earliest, providing data from 14,000 students and their parents from across the country. This was followed by two extensive surveys in Ottawa and Vancouver that examined variation in lexicon, pronunciation, grammar and language attitudes across age, socio-economic levels and formality of speech (Woods 1980; Dodds de Wolf *et al.* 2004). These surveys together gave strong evidence for the homogeneity of speech across Canadian urban centres and pointed to common patterns of change. They underline the unique position of Canadian English in its combination of British and American elements and its ready acceptance of variation.

Jack Chambers of the University of Toronto has made an enormous contribution to variation studies of Canadian English through his Dialect Topography research. This project began in 1991 with a survey of the Golden Horseshoe region of Ontario, a region that includes Toronto and has over five million residents. Since that time the same survey has been conducted in locations across Canada: in Montreal, the Ottawa Valley, Quebec City, Greater Vancouver, the Eastern Townships, New Brunswick and again in the Golden Horseshoe, in 2000 (Chambers 1998; Chambers and Heisler 1999; Boberg 2004). The survey has also been conducted on the American side of the Canadian border in the states of New York, Washington, Vermont and Maine. The project results are available on the Dialect Topography website (www.dialect.topography.chass. utoronto.ca) which is designed for easy analysis of the data for the independent variables of age, location, sex, social class, occupational mobility, regionality, education and language use. This research project is contributing to an understanding of trends in language change in Canadian English as well as variation between regions in Canada and between Canadian and American speech.
**Urban studies**

Sali Tagliamonte, at the University of Toronto, has created a corpus of 1.8 million words of Toronto English based on speech samples from over 200 Toronto-born men and women between the ages of 8 and 92. This corpus has provided data for tracking change in Toronto speech, including young people’s use of quotatives, intensifiers and tags such as *like*, *really*, *so*, *right*, and *whatever* (Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2007).

Tagliamonte is expanding the Toronto corpus by collecting data from two other groups: established populations in rural communities, and immigrants within Toronto. She plans to investigate whether changes observed in the Toronto corpus are also occurring in these populations.

While Tagliamonte charted the use of tags in a corpus of collected speech, Elaine Gold, at the University of Toronto, investigated the use of the tag *eh* through self-reporting surveys. *Eh* is widely considered a marker of Canadian speech, and is found in a very broad range of speech acts, from set expressions, such as *Thanks, eh?* and *I know, eh?* to opinions, exclamations, questions, commands and interjections in narratives.

Gold’s survey of University of Toronto students indicates that contemporary reported usage is as high as that reported in the earlier Canadian surveys and that the same types of expressions are reported to be used most frequently, that is, *eh* following opinions and exclamations (Gold 2008). The research also suggests that new immigrants quickly pick up *eh* and view it as marker of Canadian nationality.

James Walker and Michol Hoffman of York University, have initiated a project entitled ‘Ethnicity and Language in Toronto’ to investigate the effects of language contact in Toronto’s multicultural milieu. Walker and Hoffman are considering variables of ethnic origin, generation, and degree of affiliation to one’s ethnic group, in their investigation of the ways in which ethnic identity is expressed through linguistic variation.

Research has also been underway on the ethnic enclaves of Montreal. Charles Boberg, at McGill University, heads a project at the McGill Dialectology and Sociolinguistics Laboratory entitled ‘English as a Minority Language: Ethnolinguistic Variation and the Phonetics of Montreal English’. This research focuses on pronunciation variation in native English speakers from the three largest Anglophone ethnic groups: people of British/Irish, Italian, and East-European Jewish ancestry. Boberg has found that these groups can be distinguished by their pronunciation of English, even after several generations of living in Montreal.

There are currently two other research projects at the McGill Dialectology and Sociolinguistics Laboratory. The ‘North American Regional Vocabulary Survey’, focuses on vocabulary that reflects contemporary popular culture, such as words for fast food and modern technology. Through the 5000 responses collected to date, variation can be traced within Canada and between Canada and the United States. The second project ‘The Phonetics of Canadian English’, uses students at McGill University, who come from across Canada, as a resource to investigate regional differences in the phonetics of Canadian English.

The phonetics of Canadian English continue to be the focus of much research. Robert Hagiwara, at the University of Manitoba, is overseeing ‘The Winnipeg Vowel Project’, a project which is investigating the phenomena of Canadian Raising and the Canadian Vowel Shift in Winnipeg. Canadian raising, the process of raising the onsets of the diphthongs [aj] and [aw] before voiceless consonants, and Canadian shift, the backward shift of front lax vowels, are discussed in several articles in ‘Canadian English in a Global Context’ (Avery et al. 2006) and in Boberg (2005).
English of Newfoundland and the Maritimes

The most distinctive dialects of Canadian English are found in eastern Canada, the areas first settled by English speakers. Newfoundland English was the first Canadian English dialect to be the subject of a regional dictionary (Story et al. 1990) and has been of much interest to sociolinguists. Gerard Van Herk holds the Canada Research Chair in Regional Language and Oral Text at Memorial University in Newfoundland and is investigating issues of language retention during this time of rapid change for Newfoundland English. Sandra Clarke, also at Memorial University, researches variation in Newfoundland Vernacular English, identity issues, and Newfoundland residents’ attitudes towards their own dialect (Clarke 1997).

The eastern provinces are well known for their dialect pockets and the range of language contacts: from the influence of Irish English in Newfoundland, to Scottish Gaelic in Cape Breton, French influence in New Brunswick, and German and New England influence in Nova Scotia. Less known is the speech of the black communities of Nova Scotia. Shana Poplack and Sali Tagliamonte investigated the speech of two communities of African-Canadians in Nova Scotia, whose history dates back over 200 years. Their quantitative study of grammatical traits of African Nova Scotian English (ANSE) provides strong evidence that the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) of the early nineteenth century was closer to the standard English of its time than contemporary AAVE is to today’s standard varieties (Poplack and Tagliamonte 2001).

The Sociolinguistics Laboratory, University of Ottawa

The interviews from the ANSE research are housed at the University of Ottawa’s Sociolinguistics Laboratory, which is directed by Shana Poplack. The University of Ottawa is a bilingual university situated in Canada’s capital city, on the provincial border between English-speaking Ontario, and French-speaking Quebec. The Laboratory has a special research focus on language change arising from language contact and has investigated many issues in both Canadian English and Canadian French. The Laboratory has developed extensive corpora in Canadian English and Canadian French, and has collections of English and French grammar texts and usage guides dating from the sixteenth century.

The English corpora include interviews with 463 residents of the Ottawa-Hull region, and 164 anglophones native to Montreal and Quebec of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. There is also a collection of African diaspora English which includes, in addition to the ANSE recordings, interviews from the African-American community in Samana, Dominican Republic, and recordings of ex-slave speech. These recordings are supplemented by a collection of early African-American correspondence written from Sierra Leone, Liberia and the United States, most of which has never been published (Van Herk and Walker 2005).

The Canadian French corpora include over 500,000 words of vernacular Quebec French from recordings of speakers born between 1846 and 1945; these recordings are an important resource for the study of language change in Quebec. There are also two corpora of contemporary spoken French: 3.5 million words from informal conversations with 120 francophones native to the Ottawa-Hull region, and over one million words of interviews with Ottawa teachers of French and their students.

Poplack is currently supervising projects investigating the influence of prescriptive norms on Canadian French and the effects of language contact with French on Canadian
English spoken in Quebec. One issue being investigated is whether there has been more influence of French on Quebec English since the introduction of the French Language Charter in 1977, which legislated widespread use of French in business and education in Quebec. Early results from this project suggest that there is surprisingly little evidence of French influence on the grammar of Quebec English, and a relatively low rate of French borrowings.

**Canadian French**

The following discussion of current research in Canadian French is divided into two parts: the first part describes studies of Quebec French; the second, research into three varieties of French outside of Quebec – Acadian French, Ontario French and the French of Alberta. Major topics of research include language variation, language contact with English, and issues of language identity in minority contexts.

**Quebec French**

France Martineau at the University of Ottawa researches the historical sociolinguistics of Quebec French in its centuries of development in Canada and its origins in continental French (Martineau and Maugeon 2003). Martineau is currently involved in two major projects. The first, ‘Modeling Change: The Paths of French’, involves a large international, cross-disciplinary team. The project’s goal is to examine the evolution of French from its beginnings in the Middle Ages through to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when it began to be established in Canada. A corpus is being developed to reflect a wide range of social spheres; this will allow research into the differing levels of influence that various social groups have had on language change. This project will also examine the development of diverging French norms, changes in linguistic and cultural identities, and the role of language in bilingual and multilingual societies.

In the second project, Martineau is working with Alain Desrochers and Yves Charles Morin to investigate the development of, and variation in, Quebec French from the 1700s to the 1900s. This research is based on the informal French found in letters written between family members in those centuries, which provides evidence both for grammatical variation and for issues of language and identity.

Diane Vincent is the director of the Laboratory of Sociopragmatics (LaSic) at Laval University in Quebec City. LaSic has a special focus on Quebec French and on discourse in the workplace, and houses the largest corpus of spontaneous oral French speech in Quebec, made up of 300 hours of Montreal francophone speech. This comprises three corpora: the 1971 Sankoff-Cedergren corpus of 60 sociolinguistic interviews; the 1984 corpus of follow-up surveys with the informants from 1971, and the 1994 Montreal corpus, which includes some interviews with informants from the earlier surveys along with family and workplace discourse recordings. These corpora have provided data for research on language change in real time, such as changes in the personal pronoun paradigm (Blondeau 2001). The workplace recordings have supported research into the interactions between health care professionals and their patients, which include lying and rebukes (Vincent et al. 2007).
French outside of Quebec

Ontario French

Raymond Mougeon of Glendon College, York University, is currently involved in two major projects that build on years of research in the field. His main focus is on Ontario French – both that used by speakers with French as their first language, and that learned by students enrolled in French immersion programs. Mougeon’s projects are in association with the Centre for Research on Language Contact, at York University, a research centre with a multidisciplinary approach to language contact.

The first of Mougeon’s projects is entitled ‘A Real-Time Study of Linguistic Change in Ontario French’; his co-investigators are Terry Nadasdi from the University of Alberta and Katherine Rehner from the University of Toronto. This study is based on two corpora, one collected in 1978 and the other in 2004-05, of the speech of francophone students enrolled in French language high schools in four Ontario communities. The communities were chosen for their different sizes of French population and the different amounts of French-English language contact. The research incorporates a range of sociolinguistic variables, including the social and ethno-linguistic backgrounds of the students and their parents, the students’ use of French in and outside of school, and the students’ linguistic identity.

Mougeon’s other focus has been on the speech of anglophone students enrolled in French immersion high school programs in Ontario. His research group has compared the sociolinguistic variation of the French of immersion students with variation in the French of francophone students their own age, to see if the L2 students are acquiring native-like sociolinguistic variation and are affected by the same social factors as are the L1 speakers (Mougeon et al. 2004). The same team of researchers is investigating the treatment of variation in French in the classroom and plan to amass corpora both of teachers’ speech in the classroom and of the teaching materials used.

Acadian French

Much sociolinguistic research has been done on varieties of Acadian French, both inside and outside of the province of New Brunswick. A recent issue of the Canadian Journal of Linguistics is devoted to this topic (Balcom et al. 2008). Louise Beaulieu of the Université de Moncton and Władysław Cichocki, of the University of New Brunswick are currently collaborating on research into morphosyntactic variation in the Acadian French of north-east New Brunswick. Their work focuses on features considered unique to Acadian French, such as the third person plural verbal inflection—ont. They have also looked at the variation found in the rural areas where these dialects are spoken (Beaulieu and Cichocki 2005). This work was based on a corpus of adult Acadian speech that Beaulieu collected; she is currently developing a corpus of pre-adolescent Acadian speech. Cichocki also researches the social factors responsible for regional variation of phonetic features of Acadian French based on dialect atlas data (Péronnet et al. 1998).

Both Gisèle Chevalier and Sylvia Kasparian at the Université de Moncton are engaged in research on Acadian French. Kasparian is currently investigating verbal constructions in the French of south-east New Brunswick; Chevalier is focusing on language contact between Acadian French and English (Chevalier 2002).

Ruth King of York University and Terry Nadasdi of the University of Alberta are investigating Acadian French outside of New Brunswick in a project entitled ‘Acadian
French in Time and Space. This project focuses on grammatical variation in the Acadian French spoken in the provinces of Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, based on corpora collected by King. King’s earlier research has shown a number of morpho-syntactic differences between Acadian French and Quebec French and has looked at the linguistic results of language contact in Acadian communities (King 2000). The current project includes diachronic data to allow for the reconstruction of earlier stages of Atlantic Canada Acadian French. This will allow comparisons with the development of Quebec French and Cajun French in Louisiana and help trace the evolution of French in North America and the consequences of French–English language contact in all areas. Sylvie Dubois of Louisiana State University and France Martineau of Université d’Ottawa are collaborating on this project as well.

French in Alberta

The topic of English–French language contact has also been investigated in the minority French communities of Alberta. Douglas Walker, at the University of Calgary, has focused on the effects of language contact on the retention and pronunciation of Canadian French. His research is part of an international project on the usage, varieties and structure of contemporary French (Walker 2003).

French language and identity

The minority status of French in Canada has precipitated much discussion of issues of language and identity. Monica Heller and Normand Labrie at the University of Toronto edited a collection of papers on discourse and identity in French Canada (Heller and Labrie 2003). Annette Boudreau at the Université de Moncton works on linguistic identity, language maintenance and revitalization in Acadian French communities (Boudreau 2005); Boudreau and Lise Dubois at the Université de Moncton have two papers on Acadian French in the Heller and Labrie collection. Boudreau is part of the Research Group on Cultures in Contact at the Université de Moncton, and, with Dubois, is working on a comparison of the attitudes of English and French speakers to their own and to the other official language. Boudreau and Dubois are also co-researchers on a large research project headed by Heller at the University of Toronto that is exploring the changing relationships between language and identity in Canadian Francophone communities in this time of rapid change and increased mobility of information and people. One aspect of this project is a comparison of the changes in vernacular and standard French in Ontario and New Brunswick.

Language and gender

Many Canadian scholars have researched issues of language and gender. Henry Rogers and Ron Smyth of the University of Toronto have been investigating sociophonetic variation in vowel and consonant articulation with respect to gender, gender identity and sexual orientation. In particular, they have focused on identifying the phonetic characteristics that make speech sound gay. They found several acoustic correlates that listeners use to judge a voice as gay-sounding: longer and higher frequency of fricatives /s/ and /z/; longer aspiration of voiceless stops; a clearer /l/. Similar characteristics have been associated
with female speech and Rogers and Smyth suggest that young boys with gay-sounding speech have subconsciously acquired phonetic characteristics of women’s speech (Smyth et al. 2003).

Susan Ehrlich at York University also works on language and gender. Ehrlich’s recent work focuses on the way that language is used in legal settings, in particular the discourse of testimony and judicial decisions associated with cases of sexual harassment and rape. Ehrlich argues that underlying preconceptions in courtroom language affect the outcome of the trials (Ehrlich 2001).

Deborah James at the University of Toronto researches gender differences in language use. Her earlier work looked at the different ways in which men and women use derogatory terms (James 1998). James has amassed a large corpus of graffiti taken from washroom walls, and she is currently analyzing the similarities and differences in men’s and women’s use of graffiti.

Another scholar in the field of language and gender is Bonnie McElhinny at the University of Toronto (McElhinny 2003). One focus of her work is the different interactional styles of men and women in the workplace. McElhinny has studied the speech of women who are working in traditionally male-dominated workplaces, such as police departments, to see whether women adapt more ‘masculine’ styles of interaction.

Conclusion

This is a brief overview of some of the sociolinguistic research being carried out in Canada today. Research into Canadian English and Canadian French is increasing; both fields have had conferences dedicated specifically to them in the past few years. Many Canadian linguists are currently working on issues of language maintenance and revitalization, in particular among the aboriginal languages of Canada. With the latest statistics showing that one in five Canadians has a mother tongue other than English or French, topics of multilingualism, language contact, language retention and language and identity will doubtless continue to be important areas of research for Canadian sociolinguists.

References


