

Language theory, plus English  
and culture Canadian style



# Introduction



- The purpose of this slide show is to tell you about a recent theory of language, and encourage you to apply this theory to English and culture in Canada.

# Four topics for consideration

1. Cognitive scientists tell us that humans are hardwired for language.  
What does “hardwired” mean?
2. If the “hardwired” theory is correct, many of us will have to adjust our ideas about the nature of language and culture.  
Why? How?
3. In the wake of this new theory, will persons who study culture and literature continue to take a purely linguistic approach?  
What means “purely linguistic approach”?
4. Finally, what marks our language and culture as Canadian?

# Topic one: cognitive science

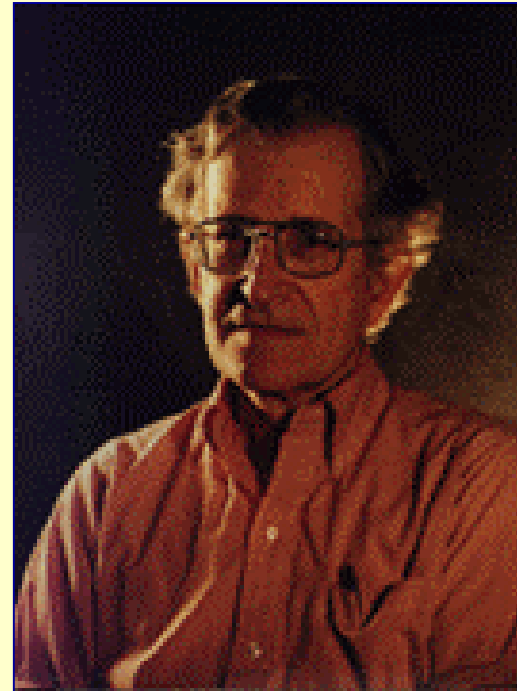
- Steven Pinker is a Professor of Cognitive Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He and others like him are changing our view of language. As academics who study culture and literature owe much to Pinker, so Pinker is indebted to linguist Noam Chomsky.

# Cognitive science

What is it?

It's an interdisciplinary combination of computer science, psychology, neurobiology, philosophy and linguistics for the study of the human mind and artificial intelligence.

# Steven Pinker and Noam Chomsky



# What do cognitive scientists say about language?

That many educated people have some closely held, and entirely wrong notions about it.

## Quotation from Pinker: *The language instinct*

“The recent illumination of linguistic abilities has revolutionary implications for our understanding of language and its role in human affairs, and for our view of humanity itself. Most educated people already have opinions about language. They know that it is man’s [sic] most important cultural invention, the quintessential example of his capacity to use symbols, and a biologically unprecedented event irrevocably separating him from other animals. They know that language pervades thought, with different languages causing their speakers to construe reality in different ways. They know that children learn to talk from role models and care giver ....

They also know that English is a zany, logic-defying tongue, in which one drives on a parkway and parks in a driveway, plays at at recital and recites at a play. They know that English spelling takes such wackiness to even greater heights...and that only institutional inertia prevents the adoption of a more rational-spell-like-it-sounds system.

“In the pages that follow, I will try to convince you that every one of these common opinions is wrong! And they are all wrong for a single reason. **Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the government works. Instead it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains.**”

*The language instinct.*

“An instinct to acquire an art.”

17-18. My bold

## Quotation from Pinker: *Words and rules*

“People do not just blurt out isolated words but rather combine them into phrases and sentences, in which the meaning of the combination can be inferred from the meaning of the words and the way they are arranged....

“Inside everyone’s head there must be a code or protocol or set of rules that specifies how words may be arranged into meaningful combinations. Modern linguists call it a grammar, sometimes a generative grammar to distinguish it from the grammars used to teach foreign language or to teach the dos and don’ts of formal prose.”

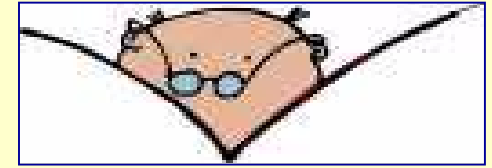
*Words and rules.* “The infinite library.” 4

## What does “hardwired” mean?

“Language is not a cultural artifact that we learn the way we learn to tell time or how the government works. Instead it is a distinct piece of the biological makeup of our brains.”

There is serious disagreement among philosophers and scientists about “why” and “how” it has happened, but the fact itself is clear: humans have **evolved** into speakers. Being born with a grammar protocol in our heads (which enables us to “grow” a language) has nothing to do with culture.

# Speech and literacy are not the same thing.



- Note: Don't confuse reading and writing with talking and listening.
- Some people have trouble reading and writing because these skills work in a different mental category than speech. Indeed, cognitive scientists suspect that so-called "dyslexia" is not a visual problem, but an aural one.

For more information on cognition and language,  
check out these sites.

*Steven Pinker*

- <http://www.edge.org/documents/archive/edge3.html>

*Noam Chomsky*

- <http://www.zmag.org/chomsky/index.cfm>

*Daniel Dennett*

- <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/papers/sheffield.htm>

*Randy Allen Harris*

- <http://www.linguistlist.org/issues/4/4-274.html>

*Ray Jackendoff*

- <http://www.brandeis.edu/departments/psych/jackendoff.html>
- <http://www.nature.com/neuro/>

# Something to ponder.

If you tell your parents that “I can’t get no satisfaction” is not only a great tune, but also a grammatical sentence, what will they say? And then, what will you say?

If they are horrified, you can quote Shakespeare. Celia in *As you like it* says, “I pray you bear with me, I cannot go no further” (ll.iv.8).

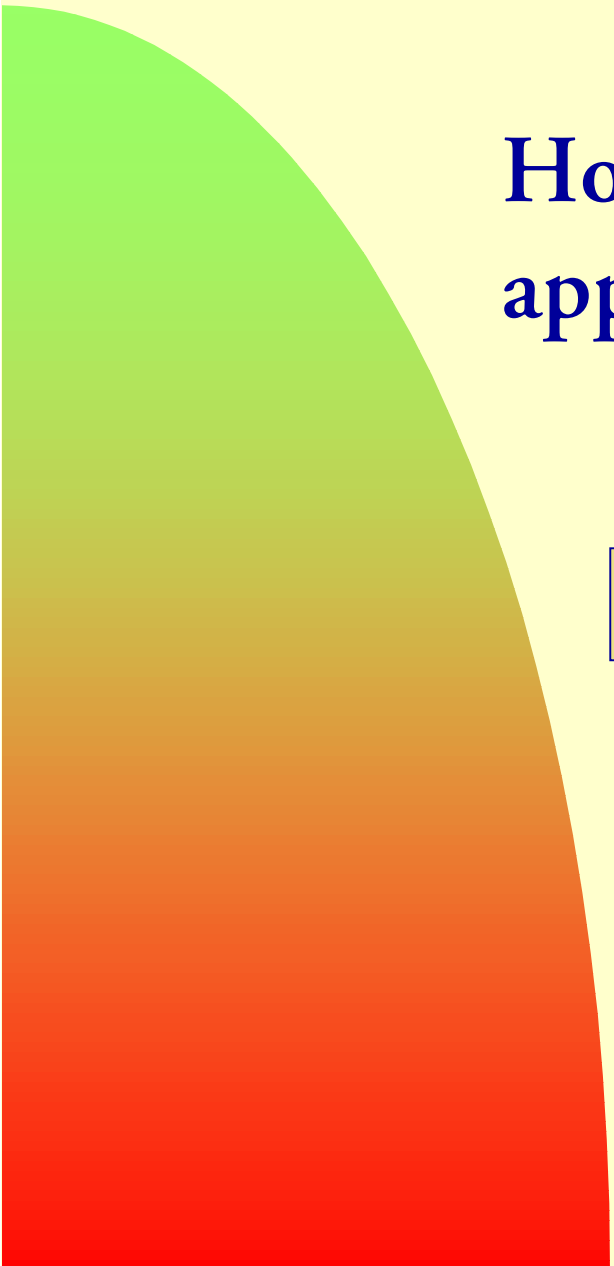
Or you can remind them that French uses a double negative, “ne...pas.”

You can tell them that some dialects allow for triple negatives for emphasis:

“But you said you wanted to go.”

“Not no more I don’t!”





# How does the double negative apply to Canada?

- Go to topic two.

## Topic two: changing our ideas about language and culture



Some people from central and western Canada might think that a Newfoundlander, who may say something like “I be into bed but I don’t be asleep,” is speaking “poor” English. The central Canadian is going to be offended by the double negative too, as in “We never got none.” Putting a qualitative judgment (good or bad) on someone’s else’s speech and culture when it is different from your own needs rethinking in the light of the current linguistic theory.

**No group of individuals speaks an ungrammatical language or dialect.** Prince Charles’s ideas on language notwithstanding, Newfoundlanders speak as competently as Albertans, and vice versa. Members of both groups speak as correctly as Londoners or Boston-ites.

**What a dialect is NOT.**

It is NOT sloppy or careless usage.

Every speaker of a language uses a dialect.

What dialect do you use?

# Prescriptive correctness

Telling your child not to say “ain’t” or not to use a double negative is to acquaint him or her with the prestigious dialect in your area.

This has everything to do with manners and nothing to do with linguistics

# Changing our ideas about culture



- Pinker explains that Benjamin Whorf's theory that language "infects" as in "alters" thought is not empirically evident (see *The language instinct*, 59-64).
- Culture is enhanced by language, but it is not scientifically correct to think that a culture needs a language to exist. In fact, it has recently come to light that chimpanzees have different cultures. (Do not confuse animal communication with generative human language.)
- Imagining cultures existing without language is a new way to think of culture.
- Can you imagine a culture without language?

Thanks to Noam Chomsky and his language analysis, cognitive scientists have come to disagree with some literary theorists. For more information on the so-called “Chomskyan Revolution,” see *The linguistic wars* by Randy Allen Harris.

Some literary theorists hold with the idea that human cultures are intimately intertwined with language. In fact, some theorists exclusively base their methodology on language. They argue that language affects and creates culture. People in this group are called structuralists.

## Go to topic three to consider the connection between culture and language

- Point to ponder.

Do Canadians who speak English hold exactly the same values and have the same manners as Americans, Britons and/or Australians who also speak English?

## Topic three: linguistic based theories of culture and literature

Many theories of culture and literature hold that there is no such thing as a consistent human nature that stands apart from language and culture. Robert Scholes explains this theory using Roland Barthes' idea of context as an example:

“For [Roland] Barthes there is no such thing as a pure context. All contexts come to man[sic] already coded, shaped and organized by language, and often shaped in patently silly ways. The great error of the ‘realist’ in literature or in criticism is to assume that he is in touch with some ultimate context, while in reality he is simply transcribing a code.”

*Structuralism in literature.*

“The structural analysis of literary texts.” 150

Do you agree with Barthes, or do you think there is such a thing as human nature that is not “already coded, shaped and organized by language”?

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If you disagree with Roland Barthes, then you might agree with the cognitive scientists. They do not believe that human nature is nothing more than context. Cognitive scientists do not hold with Barthes' kind of relativism when it comes to language and culture.



All functioning human individuals speak, and know what it means to be polite.

# Topic four:

## English and Culture Canadian style



- Language of the second separation
- Canadian and American speech differences and cultural differences
- Primary research, it's up to us

Unlike Australian English, which comes directly from the United Kingdom to the land down under, Canadian English is of the second separation. English comes to Canada, via America. It arrives in Upper Canada with the loyalists, late loyalists and American settlers of the late 1700s and early 1800s. By 1812, it is estimated 80% of British North Americans are of American origin. The base of the English we speak today is from this period.

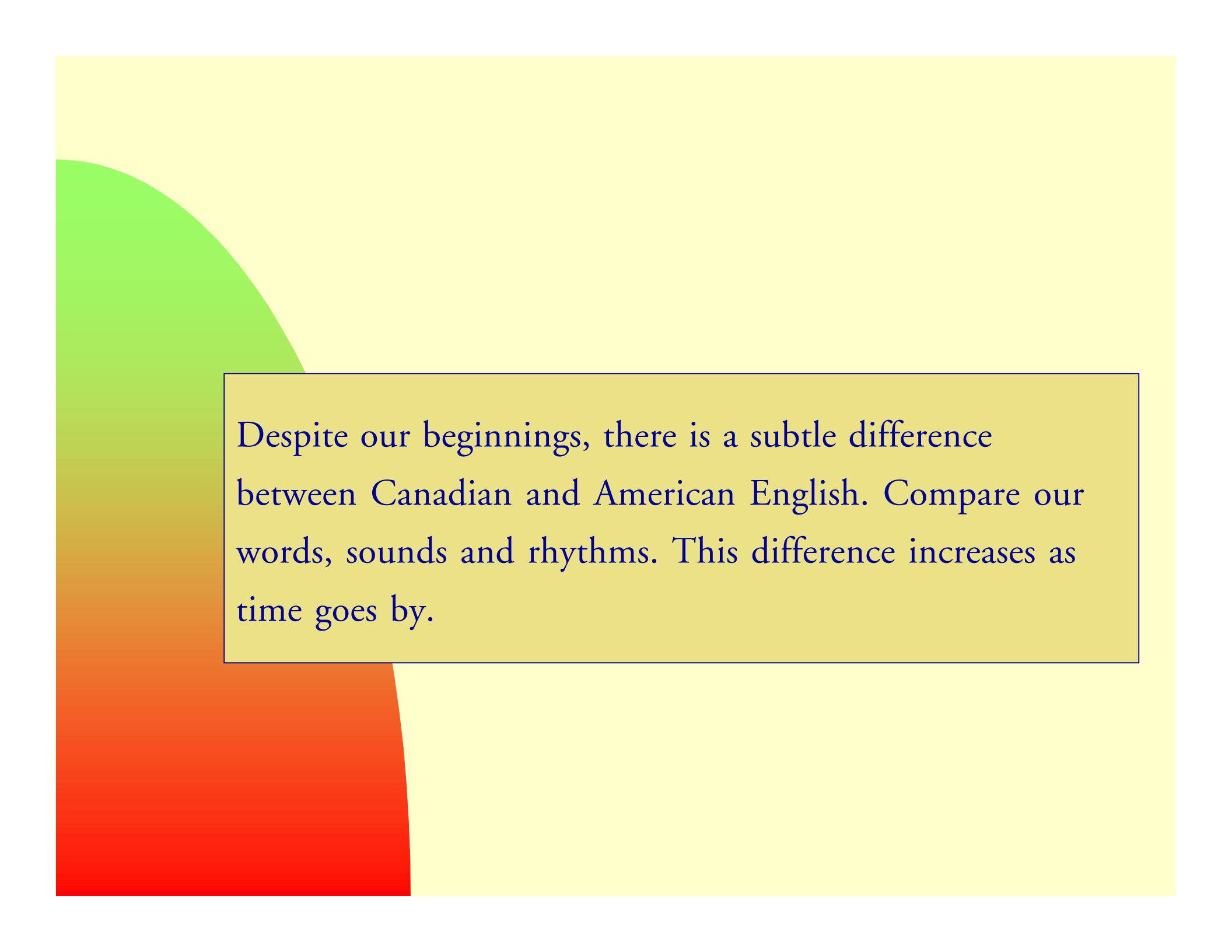


Depending on your politics, this news may be unwelcome. Consider this, however. Young Canadians speak to each other in a Canadian way, not just an American way.



# Do you make this mistake?

- Do you think the loyalists join a group of English speaking people already living and working in Upper Canada? Do you think Toronto is a thriving community before the first wave of immigrants, circa 1784.
- This is not so.
- The loyalists are pioneers. Among these pioneers are the Iroquois, led by Joseph Brant.
- See Christopher Moore's *The loyalists*, for more information.



Despite our beginnings, there is a subtle difference between Canadian and American English. Compare our words, sounds and rhythms. This difference increases as time goes by.

# Will the customs officer catch the Canadian who is pretending to be an American? Take this test yourself.

“Pronounce the last three letters of the alphabet,” the [customs] officer requests.

The “American” does so.

“O.K. will you read this little paragraph for me?”

The “American” reads the paragraph handed to him: “I have taken a wrong route. I am not a juvenile nor hostile. I live in a house with a roof. I am now out and about.”

Fergus Cronin. *“Do you speak Canadian?”* (1965)

What are your results? Do you speak “Canadian”? Try this test on your parents and friends.

Americans tend to say zee instead of zed. Canadians tend to say hostile and juvenile in a way that rhymes with Nile, whereas Americans say hos-tull and “juve-null.” In saying “out” and “about,” most Canadians start the diphthong “ou” with an “u” as in but. Depending on the region they come from, Americans start it with an “a” as in pat. As for roof and route, Canadians tend to say “rooof” and “root,” whereas Americans tend to say “ruf” and “rowt.”

If you are interested in the way Canadians speak English, you can conduct a primary research experiment. Go to your friends and family (and an out-of-town English-speaking visitor[s] if you know one), and ask them questions about the words they use (their meaning and sound) and the way they pronounce these words in a sentence. Also ask about the intonation of their questions. Compare speakers and origins. You will turn up some interesting results. Guaranteed.

## Check these sites for Canadian English!

*Carleton County Colloquialisms* – humorous collection of

■ *Bag of Rubber Hammers from Prince Edward Island* – Whether you're feeling "as stupid as a bag of rubber hammers" or "useless as a screen door on a submarine", you'll find an expression to suit your condition.

■ *Canadian Raising and Other Oddities* – audio samples of phonological processes characteristic of several varieties of Canadian English. Describes the pronunciation of about-aboot.

■ <http://www.yorku.ca/twainweb/troberts/raising.html>

■ *Cornerstone's Canadian English Page* – compares Canadian, US and UK spelling; lists some uniquely Canadian words; and discusses pronunciation.

■ *Dave's Truly Canadian Dictionary of Canadian Spelling* – provides a chart comparing Canadian, American, and British English along with French and Spanish.

■ *Geist.com: Canadian Phrasebook-In-Progress* – explores regional variations in Canadian speech.

■ *Words: Woe and Wonder* – an in-depth look at the words we use, including unique Canadian contributions. From CBC News.

# Canadians a-fixin' to merge language with Americans, eh?

By Ray Conologue in the *Globe and Mail*, Wednesday, April 25, 2001

“Are Canadians talking more like Americans? We worry that we are, and a new linguistic study of the Niagara frontier would seem to say: be worried, but don't necessarily be very worried.

“Yes we're dumping the word 'chesterfield' for the comfy old U.S. 'couch.' And the British schedule (shed-jule) is giving way to the American sked-ule, with nine out of ten young Canadians preferring the U.S. pronunciation.....

“A Canadian habit is melting British and U. S. pronunciations to create new variants. Right now we're fleeing both the stuffy British pronunciation of 'vase' (rhymes with 'cause') and the bizarre U.S. 'vase' (rhymes with 'face'). Instead, we're saying 'vase' to rhyme with 'daze'.

Researchers: Professors Jack Chambers, Mary MacKeracher

University of Toronto

Study to be released in August 2001

## Are there ways to study literature and culture that don't depend entirely on language?

You can analyze some aspects of individual and group conduct that don't necessarily include language, such as

- civility
- power/leadership
- compliance/followers
- risk
- conditions: political, environmental
- enemies: internal, external

**In Canada, who are the language experts?**

**Who are the cultural experts?**

You are.

I am.

We are.

Noam Chomsky assures us that if we want to know what a group of people considers a grammatical (correct) expression, we should ask them. One might ask this question: “Would you say, ‘There’s nothing in the gossip’ or ‘There’s nothing to the gossip’ ”?

The same might be said for culture. If you want to know what a group of people considers polite, ask them. “Do you remove your shoes before entering the house, or not?”

What would YOU say and what would YOU do?



# How well do you know your Canadian self?

You can analyze Canadian conduct in ways that don't necessarily include the study of Canadian English.

From your experience,

- What constitutes Canadian civility?
- What traits do you want in a political leader?
- What risks do you want your country to take?
- What are current political, social and environmental conditions?
- Who do you think are our internal and external enemies?

# The hunt for human universals

- Instead of looking for things that divide us, perhaps we should seek out those things that unite us.
- Can you think of any human universals, that is, aspects of our nature that are common to all, in human societies?

# Summary

- Cognitive scientists argue that no group speaks an incorrect or ungrammatical language.
- There is no scientific proof that language “infects” thought.
- The base of Canadian English comes from the loyalist and American settlers who populated this country in the late 1700s and early 1800s.
- Despite trade and TV, American and Canadian English continue to diverge.
- Should we spend more time seeking out human universals than picking out cultural differences?

Power point show based on  
*Canadian Studies 406,*  
*Topics in Canadian Studies: English and Culture Canadian Style.*  
*Compiled by Susan Minsos PhD*

