

Extending the use of written questionnaires: Some new variables in Canadian English

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A long tradition in dialectology has demonstrated the utility of written questionnaires for investigating lexical variation: most recently, Boberg (2005) reported data from a lexical questionnaire bearing on regional divisions of Canadian English. Previous surveys of Canadian English, e.g. Avis (1955), Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) and Chambers (1994), have attempted to extend the field of inquiry addressed by questionnaires to other domains of linguistic variation, including syntax, though sociolinguistic theory casts doubt on the value of the data produced by this approach, given the effect of self-monitoring on syntactic variables in particular. Notwithstanding these limitations, written questionnaires typically collect larger amounts of data from more people over wider areas than sociolinguistic interviews, giving them a continued utility, if properly handled, even within a sociolinguistic context. This paper examines the utility of a written survey for collecting data on three types of non-vocabulary variables: word or compound stress; spelling; and syntax.

A dialect survey circulated by undergraduate students from all over North America returned 262 Canadian and 142 American responses. In addition to demographic questions, the survey investigated eight examples of variation in word stress; nine of British/American differences in spelling; and fifteen sentences involving of seven syntactic variables. Canadian and American response frequencies were compared using chi-squared tests, while the influence of region, age, sex and education on the variation within the Canadian sample was analyzed with Goldvarb.

The data indicate that the questionnaire was able to identify both national differences and social variation within Canadian English. The word stress variables did not show social variation but revealed a regular national difference, with Canadians choosing initial stress more often than Americans in variables like *address*, *adult* and *turkey sandwich*. The spelling variables, beyond the obvious national difference, showed regional variation, with American spellings chosen more frequently in Quebec and Atlantic Canada and less frequently in Ontario and Western Canada; education also influenced spelling, with American spellings preferred by respondents without a university degree. The American spelling of *center* was preferred by young men, possibly indicating covert prestige in opposition to the Canadian standard. The most dramatic social variation occurred with the syntactic variables, three of which appeared to be changes in progress, with younger respondents favoring innovative or non-standard forms: *he came with John and I* vs. *with John and me*; *did you already finish eating* vs. *have you already finished*; and *once I'm done my breakfast* vs. *finished my breakfast*. The last of these also shows a clear national difference, as Americans can accept *done* with a verb (*done cleaning*) but reject it with a noun, as well as complex social and regional conditioning, being favored in Ontario and on the Prairies, by men and by those without a university degree, perhaps another change associated with covert prestige. In general, these data indicate that written questionnaires have considerable utility beyond the investigation of lexical variation.

References:

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