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Sociolinguistic coherence of changes in a standard dialect

Sociolinguistic Coherence of Changes in a Standard Dialect

J.K. Chambers

Canadian English (CE) has been a relatively conservative dialect for most of the century or so that it has existed as a focused, standard variety. It is only in the last few years that we have begun to observe significant changes in progress. One of these is (aw)-Fronting, which alters the onset of the diphthong /Au/ in words like *house*, *rouse* and *how* (Chambers 1980, 1989, Hung, Davison & Chambers 1993). Another is (ê)-Lowering, in which the high lax vowel of words like *finish*, *since* and *until* is sometimes heard as mid [E] (Meechan 1996).¹

Simultaneous with these phonological changes are numerous changes involving pronunciation and lexical variants. Though some of these have been recognized as changing for some time from casual observations, we now have the wherewithal to view them systematically by examining their use by a large sample of men and women ranging in age from 14 to over 80 in a large urban region in southern Ontario. The Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe (Chambers 1994) surveys the western tip of Lake Ontario from Oshawa to Niagara Falls, including the conurbations of Scarborough, Toronto, Mississauga, Oakville, Burlington, Hamilton, St. Catharines and Welland. This 250 km strip is the most populous region of Canada, the home of more than one-sixth of Canada's population. The survey sample is a cross-section of 1,015 people, made up of 935 Canadians and 80 Americans across the border in the Niagara Falls-Buffalo region.

In this article, I examine some of the variables which are undergoing changes. The macro-survey method gives us a kind of snapshot of the progress of the change in each case, allowing inferences from apparent-time distribution about the rate of change, its history, and the shifting patterns of currency for each of the variants. In most cases, some real-time evidence is also available. The amount of change is perhaps surprising, but its coherence, as I will show in the final section, is explicable from its social

¹The change may become a push-chain according to both Meechan (1996) and Clarke, Elms & Youssef (1995), lowering all the front lax vowels.

embedding.

In what follows, I discuss three changes: the lexical replacement of *serviette* by *napkin*, the phonological change of yod-dropping in *news* and *student*, and the morphological replacement of *dived* by *dove*.² These changes are interesting in their own right, each with their own histories and complexities. Together, they establish a cumulative pattern of rapid change that might be expected to cause some consternation or evoke comment from the guardians of the culture. The fact that it does not—that it, in fact, appears to be taking place without public awareness—leads to the considerations in the final section.

1. Changes in Standard Canadian English

1.1. Serviette/Napkin

The responses for this lexical item came from two questions on the Dialect Topography survey, viz.:

At meals, people are sometimes given a cloth to wipe their fingers on. What do you call it? _____

At meals, people are sometimes given a paper to wipe their fingers on. What do you call it? _____

Two or three generations ago, most Canadians would have answered *serviette* for both questions. The use of the word *serviette* was generally recognized as one of the ways in which CE differed from American English, in which the standard term is *napkin*. The American respondents at the Niagara border said *napkin* in 95% of their answers to the first question (about the cloth finger-wiper) and 92% to the second (about the paper one). (The other answers were minor ones: *towelette*, *finger cloth*, *dish rag*, and so on.)

Serviette is a British term. It originated as a loanword from French *la serviette*. In Scotland, the word has a long, honorable, unbroken history, though variously spelled (*servad/*

²The Dialect Topography project is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I discussed several other changes as well in my presentation at NWAV at the Sahara, Las Vegas, in October 1996. One of them, the replacement of *chesterfield* by *couch*, is discussed in detail elsewhere (Chambers 1995).

servat and *servet* in Warrack 1911). In England, its history is shorter and less honorable: according to the OED, it became a fashionable loanword in England in the 19th century but fell out of fashion and "latterly has come to be considered vulgar." Its unfashionableness was evident when Ross (1956) placed it on his list of non-U words in an influential discussion of upper-class (U) and lower-class (non-U) words.

Notwithstanding its status in England's haute couture, *serviette* holds its place there as the most popular word for the cloth or paper hand-wiper. The variant term is *table napkin*, with *table* necessarily specified because in England a plain *napkin* is a *diaper*.

The general use of *serviette* across Canada could have come from England but might well have come from Scotland, as one of the linguistic vestiges of the Scottish presence in Canada from the earliest times.

Whatever its source, *serviette* prevailed in the first half of the century. By the time of the first concrete evidence of its use in a Canadian study, Avis's survey (1954) of a small sample along the Canada-U.S. border, it was already losing currency; this is not surprising, since usage surveys pick on changing features rather than stable ones. Avis's results at mid-century were as follows:

<i>serviette</i>	<i>napkin</i>	both
69%	21%	10%

The decline of *serviette* and the rise of *napkin* is obvious in a comparison with the Golden Horseshoe responses about 42 years later in 1992:³

	<i>serviette</i>	<i>napkin</i>	both
cloth	16%	80%	4%
paper	37	60	3

It is clear, first, that the American word, *napkin*, is supplanting

³These figures amalgamate the responses according to headwords, so that answers such as *paper serviette* or double answers such as *serviette/paper towel* count as *serviette*, and answers such as *table napkin* and *napkin/finger towel* count as *napkin*. In all, there were 50 different answers but over 90% had either *serviette* or *napkin* as the headword.

serviette, and, second, that the decline has been slower for the paper object than for the cloth object. But these figures are gross from a sociolinguistic viewpoint because they treat the respondents as an undifferentiated mass. When we break the respondents into social groups, as in Figure 1, the social dynamics of the lexical replacement become clearer.

Figure 1, like all the other figures in this article, divides the 935 Canadian respondents in the Golden Horseshoe by age, with the oldest (octogenarians and a few nonagenarians) on the left and the youngest (teenagers) on the right. In between, the respondents are grouped by decades. Figure 1 plots the ascendancy of *napkin*; the figure for the decline of *serviette* is, needless to say, its mirror image.

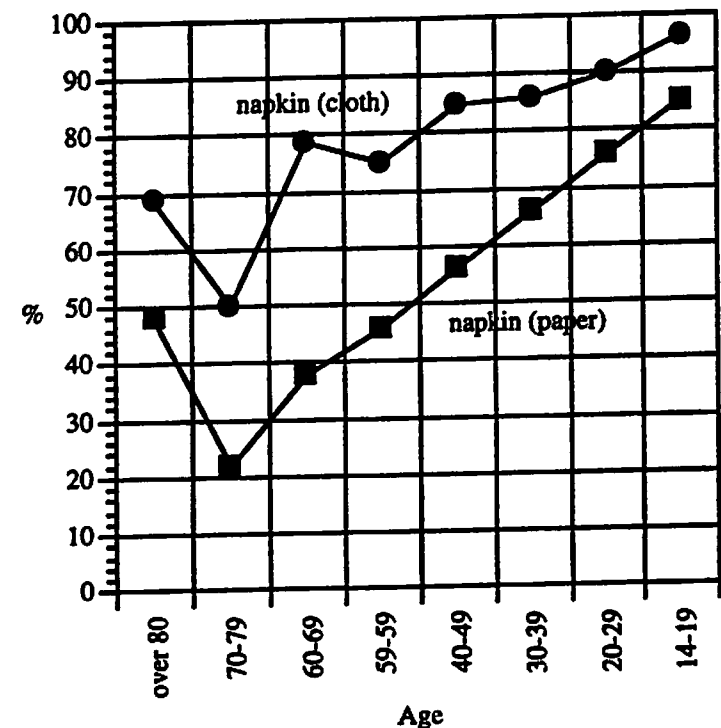


Figure 1—Use of *napkin* for the cloth object and the paper object by Canadians of different ages in the Golden Horseshoe.

The trajectory of the two lines on the graph, one line for each of the questions asked, shows a similar upward trend from oldest to youngest with a fairly steep decade-by-decade increase in the use of the word *napkin*. (I have no explanation for the anomalous responses by the 80-year-olds. Clearly, they are bucking the trend of the data, but the result cannot be accidental because it recurs in both questions.) *Serviette* evidently lost ground first as the name of the cloth hand-wiper. In the 70-year span of the Golden Horseshoe respondents, it is not the majority usage for any age group, whereas for the paper hand-wiper it remains the majority usage for people over 40. For many of these older people, then, the word *serviette* took on a specialized meaning as a paper finger-wiper while the new word *napkin* meant a cloth one. A new general-purpose dictionary, *Gage Canadian Dictionary* (1997), defines *serviette* simply as "a paper napkin," thus embalming the distinction made by its middle-aged readers. That dictionary is already outdated for younger readers. Figure 1 shows that for people 30 and younger the gap between the two words narrows to the point where they use the word *napkin* almost exclusively for both forms, but the few who use *serviette* do not restrict it to either cloth or paper.

The process of change is most dramatic for the cloth object. The replacement of *serviette* by *napkin* took place abruptly in the speech of the people born in the 1930s, that is, the ones who are now in their 60s. The change between them and the people born in the decade before, the 70-year-olds, is great—about 30% of them replaced *serviette* with *napkin*. The main locus of this change, then, appears to be the 1940s, the formative years for the 60-year-olds in the survey.

1.2. Yod-Dropping

The merger of /u/ and /ju/ after coronals is nearing completion in many parts of the English-speaking world, including middle-class England, the northern U.S., and Canada.

The generality of this linguistic change would normally deprive it of special interest in a discussion of changes taking place specifically in CE but this change may be more significant in Canada than in some other places. Two commentators claim that yod-retention—the pronunciation of /ju/ after coronals—is a prestige feature in CE. Thus, according to Pringle (1985: 190):

...there is one shibboleth of pronunciation which Canadians use to mark their difference from Americans: the pronunciation of 'u' and 'ew' spellings after t, d, and n. Canadians think they know that Americans invariably say 'toon' for 'tune', 'doo' for 'dew', 'nooz' for 'news'. They also believe that the British do not do these things. Consequently when they want to stress how their English differs in sound from American English, they are particularly likely to settle on these sounds.

Clarke (1993), citing Pringle, suggests that "glide retention constitutes a stereotypical Canadianism in the North American linguistic context" (p. 86) and calls it "an apparently highly salient marker of Canadian linguistic identity" (p. 87).

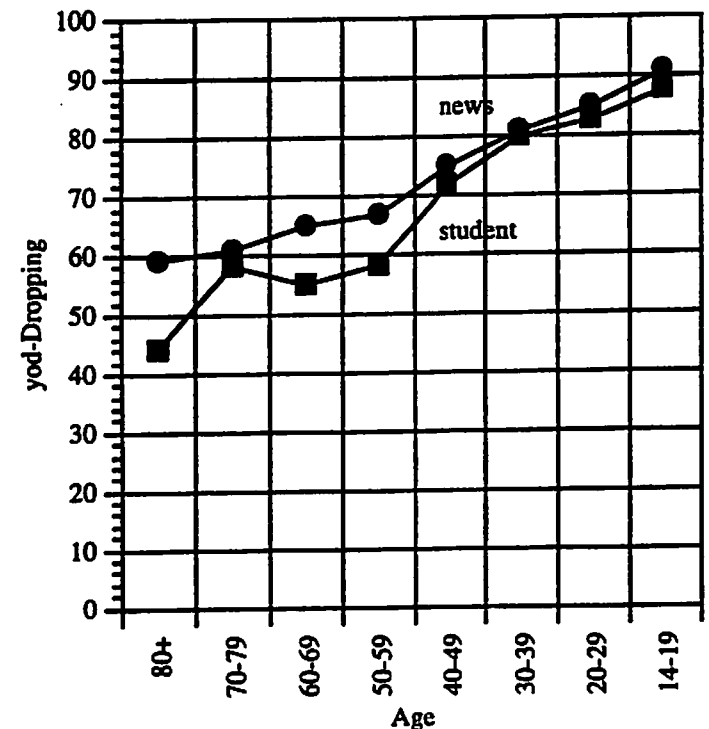


Figure 2—Absence of yod in pronunciations of *news* and *student* by Canadians of different ages in the Golden Horseshoe.

I must say that these opinions are not corroborated by my experience. I have never heard anyone extol the pronunciation *st[ju]dents* for *students* or *n[ju]s* over *news*—not teachers or parents or even nuns. They are also not corroborated by my survey data as shown in Figure 2, which shows that yod-dropping is on the increase but that it has been a majority feature for at least the 70 years of this survey and presumably longer than that.

The trajectory of change in Figure 2 is very mild. The percentage of yod-dropping is relatively high for the oldest respondents and it inches higher for the younger ones. It is a change that appears to be nearing completion. For people under 40, the pronunciations of both words occur without yod for more than 80% of the respondents. Among people over 40, the word *student* retained its yod somewhat longer than *news* did, but after that the two words converged. Although the slope of the line shows that yod-dropping is still increasing at the present time, it also shows that it is a minority pronunciation even for the 70-year-olds, that is, even for people born in the 1920s.

If Canadians were in the habit of 'putting on airs' by pronouncing *students* as *st[ju]dents* and *news* as *n[ju]s*, they would surely do so when answering the language-survey questionnaire for the Dialect Topography project. They do not. Yod-dropping appears to be both common and unmonitored.

1.3. Dived/dove

The form of the past tense of the verb *dive* appears to be one of the oldest variables in CE. In 1857, ten years before Confederation, the Rev. A. Constable Geikie complained about the form *dove* as a "lawless and vulgar innovation" (Chambers 1993). More than a century later, the two forms *dived* and *dove* were still contending with one another with roughly equal numbers as indicated by these survey results:

	<i>dived</i>	<i>dove</i>	both
Avis (1954)	38%	59%	3%
Scargill & Warkentyne (1972)			
adults	48	45	6
students	39	49	12
Chambers (1979: 175)	53	47	—

These figures appear somewhat erratic, probably because of

inconsistencies between the samples. Avis polled students and acquaintances mainly (but not exclusively) in the Kingston area. Scargill & Warkentyne surveyed high school students and their parents across the country. Chambers surveyed older, educated night-school students in Toronto (profiled 1979: 172). The numbers do show significant representation for both variants, suggesting that the *dived/dove* variability was stable throughout the three decades covered by the surveys, with roughly half choosing the innovative *dove* form.

The Dialect Topography of the Golden Horseshoe asked respondents to supply the past tense of *dive* in two different sentences:

Yesterday he _____ into the quarry.
The submarine _____ to the floor of the sea.

The reason for asking for two responses is that some speakers claim to use *dove* with animate subjects only (as in the first sentence), and *dived* with inanimates. The responses provided only mild support for that distinction, with 9.3% answering that way. The decisive result is in the predominance of *dove*: only 8.2% used *dived* in both sentences but 74% used *dove* in both.

The century-long competition between the two variants has tipped decisively in favor of *dove*. This change has been noticeable in casual observations for a few years now. For instance, an undergraduate linguistics student told me last year that she doubted that *dived* was used by anybody. "It just sounds like baby talk," she said—like *bringed* and *goed*.

The new dispensation is evident in Figure 3, which plots the *dove* responses for the two sentences (he.dove for the animate subject, sub.dove for the inanimate) according to the age of the respondents.

Figure 3 shows that more than 82% of all respondents use *dove*, and about 90% of respondents under 30 use it. For people under 60, the graph shows a relatively flat trajectory. The significant adoption of *dove* takes place with the 50-year-olds, people born in the 1940s. The graph looks like the top of an S-curve, suggesting that we are viewing the change in its final stages. The two oldest groups appear to be transitional. Although the change to *dove* was well advanced in their formative years—the 1920s and 1930s—their inconsistency suggests that they are aware of the its novelty and perhaps sensitive to its 'correctness'.

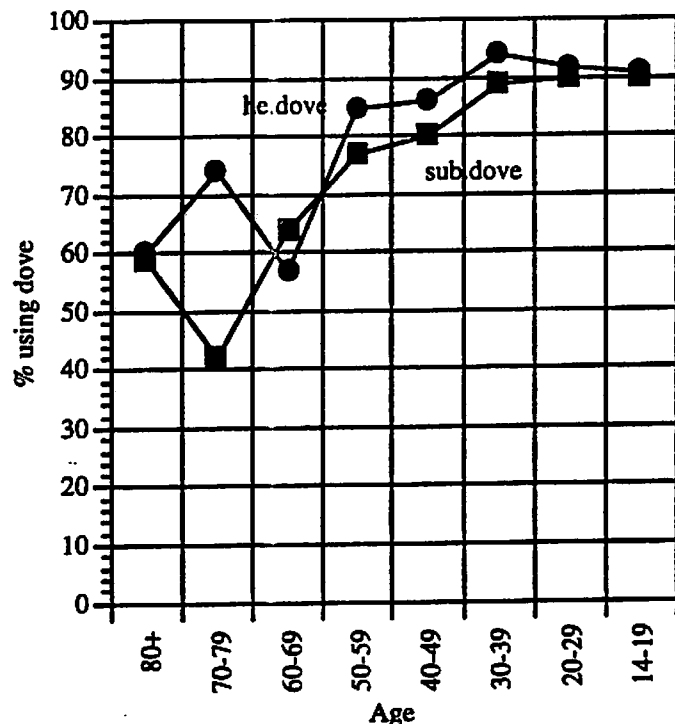


Figure 3—Use of *dove* not *dived* by Canadians of different ages in the Golden Horseshoe.

The ascendancy of *dove* over *dived* in the Golden Horseshoe represents an American incursion in CE. *Dove* is the form used on the American side of the Niagara border almost unanimously, as these figures for the American sample in the Dialect Topography show:

	<i>dived</i>	<i>dove</i>
animate subject	2.5%	97.5%
inanimate subject	4	95

But *dove* is not a General American form. Historically, it originated as a Northern form (Davis & McDavid 1950: 270), and its currency until recently was mainly in the northeastern quarter of the United States. Now it has spread not only into Canada but also into the American South. Bernstein (1994) reports that Texas A & M students show "almost universal preference...for *dove*," and high

school students in Silsbee, Texas, also prefer it in significant proportions:

	<i>dived</i>	<i>dove</i>
Texas students (Bernstein 1994)	27%	73%

The importance of this development in the American South will be discussed in the final section.

2. Aggregating the Changes

We have looked at only a few cases of change in progress in CE. Several others might have been discussed as well, including phonological changes as well as additional lexical and pronunciation variables (see note 2). But these few cases are sufficient to provide a useful approximation of what appears to be a headlong rush to remake standard CE at the approach of the millennium.

Figure 4 aggregates the variability we have discussed above to provide a simultaneous image of the progress of the changes.

One clear conclusion that emerges from Figure 4 is the coherence of the change. In sociolinguistics we have long been aware that group results are more revealing than the results for any individual in the group if the phenomenon underlying those results is empirically sound. In other words, the more you aggregate data for a sociolinguistically significant change, the more coherent it becomes. Figure 4 emphasizes the striking diagonal trend in what might otherwise appear to be disparate data. In effect, the figure smoothes out the vagaries of idiosyncratic developments such as the anomalous behavior of the octogenarians adopting *napkin*, the retention of yod in *student* by some speakers after losing it in *news*, or the minor influence of subject animacy on choices of *dived* or *dove*. Those effects are still visible in Figure 4—the data is exactly the same there as in the previous figures—but their relevance in the larger scheme of the changes is put into perspective.

The diagonal thrust leaves the lower-right half of the figure completely empty. (If we got a result like this in a regression analysis, we would be gratified by such a robust positive trend.) Obviously, the result is not exactly linear: it is megaphone-shaped, broad at the left and narrowing gradually rightward. In fact, the 70-year-olds have a range of about 55% (20%-75%) but the

teenagers have a range of only 15% (83%-98%). In other words, the speech of older people is less predictable than the speech of younger people.

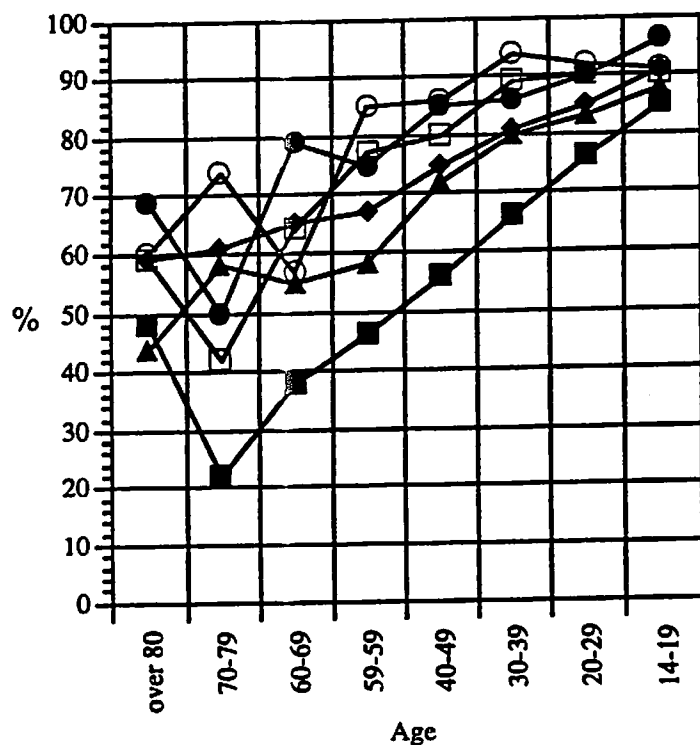


Figure 4—Variable use of *serviette/napkin*, yod-dropping and *doveldived* by Canadians of different ages in the Golden Horseshoe.

Figure 4 also demonstrates the liberating effect of viewing sound change as a dynamic process. If we had only a static view of these changes—one record from, say, the 1920s and a comparable record from the 1990s—we would surely have to conclude that the change in CE in these years was cataclysmic. We would undoubtedly speculate that individuals living through such a linguistic upheaval must have been disoriented and confused. Instead, when we see the changes as a continuous process embedded in the social fabric, we recognize that they are taking place as an

orderly progression, with small—and socially manageable—increments along the age continuum.

While the poles of the continuum—the very oldest and the very youngest people in the society—sometimes differ by as much as 70 points, the intermediaries—represented here in decade intervals—seldom differ by more than ten.

The linguistic result may be cataclysmic but its social embedding is structured and lucid.

Finally, changes such as these are often in the direction of American variables. Several commentators, myself included, have concluded from this that CE is becoming Americanized. That view now seems simplistic. In the replacement of *dived* by *dove*, for instance, we have a prototype for a change that is unmistakably in favor of an American variant. It is, in fact, the Northern variant. However, we also discovered that Texas English and other southern American varieties are making exactly the same change as CE by adopting *dove* as the past tense form of the verb. Are we to conclude, then, that Texas English is 'Americanizing'? Obviously not.

What is happening is the development of a continental standard language in North America. The old regionalisms remain to some extent: varieties such as Southern American, Northern American, New England, and Canadian remain identifiable by the presence of certain features. But a number of features are regularizing under the influence of increased mobility that brings people from various regions into face-to-face contact with unprecedented frequency. Often this regularization favors Northern American features, but it does not always do so. For instance, a change that is spreading rapidly in the United States right now is the merger of the low back vowels /ɔ/ and /ɑ/. This change is an incursion into Northern standard speech that is spreading from CE and a large region of the western States including California. In a few generations, it appears that CE will lose the distinction it now holds as the only standard variety of English in the world that pronounces *cot* and *caught* the same. It will be a feature of North American English, the new continental standard.

Will we then say that the Northern U.S. accent has 'Canadianized'? We could, though we probably will not. Modesty forbids it, but more important it is not accurate. Neither is it accurate to say that CE is Americanizing as it adjusts to the continental standard that is reshaping many middle-class varieties in North America.

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Department of Linguistics
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario
CANADA M5S 1A1
chambers@chass.toronto.edu