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New-dialect formation in early Canada:

The modal auxiliaries in Ontario English, 1776-1850

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*to my dad, who would be so proud,
to my mom, who is*

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Abbreviations

*	unattested form
**	grammatically incorrect form
/ /	phonemic transcription (level of phonology)
[]	phonetic transcription (level of phonetics)
< >	graphemes
AAVE	African-American Vernacular English
AmE	American English (ARCHER-1)
AmE-1	American English, period 1
AusE	Australian English
BrE	British English (ARCHER-1)
BrE-1, BrE2+3	British English, period 1, period 2+3
BNC	British National Corpus
CanE	Canadian English
CanEs	Canadian Englishes
CanE-1, 2, 3, 2+3	Canadian English, periods 1, 2, 3, 2+3
CLA	Canadian Linguistic Association
COD	Canadian Oxford Dictionary
CONTE	Corpus of Early Ontario English (periods 1-5)
CONTE-pC	Corpus of Early Ontario English, pre-Confederation section (periods 1-3)
d1, d2, d3	diary genre, periods 1, 2, 3
DAI	Dissertation Abstracts International
DCHP	Dictionary of Canadiansims on Historical Principles
DNE	Dictionary of Newfoundland English
DPEIE	Dictionary of Prince Edward Island English
DTC	Dialect Topography of Canada
EModE	Early Modern English
l1, l2, l3	letter genre, periods 1, 2, 3
L1	first language
L2	second language
LC	lower class
LModE	Late Modern English
MC	middle class
ME	Middle English
n	absolute frequency
n1, n2, n3	newspapers genre, periods 1, 2, 3
NW-BrE	Northwestern England British English
NZE	New Zealand English
OE	Old English
OntE	Ontario English
PDE	Present Day English
SCE	Survey of Canadian English
SLU	Strathy Language Unit, Queen's University, Kingston, Ont.
SVEN	Survey of Vancouver English
UBC	University of British Columbia
UC	upper class
UVic	University of Victoria, B.C.

Canadians have become used to hearing and identifying various dialects of British English (including Scottish and Irish), Australian English, American English, and other ‘Englishes’, but seldom give much thought to their own ‘Canadian English’.

(McConnell 1978: 2)

1 Introduction

If one intends to discover some details about the history of Canadian English, one is bound to find out rather sooner than later that not much material is available. This holds especially true for descriptions and findings based on linguistic data rather than on the settlement history of the country.

This fact is perhaps best illustrated by juxtaposing two contributions on diachronic Canadian English. On the one hand, Scargill’s (1956) paper is typical of some early linguistic work on Canadian English: while it is entitled “Eighteenth century English in Nova Scotia”, it is a mere five-paragraph miscellany that hardly deserves its grandiose title. With the field left largely neglected by specialists, writers without linguistic background attempted to fill the gap that was left by linguists: Orkin’s (1970) *Speaking Canadian English*, a 276 page monograph on the variety, including its origins, is the most prominent example (cf. also Thain 2003, Mazerolle 1993, Orkin 1971). However, Orkin’s book provides a very select view of the variety as it almost exclusively focusses on vocabulary. With the exception of a 1978 school book (McConnell 1978), Orkin (1970) remains the only monograph overview of CanE, and diachronic studies are confined to miscellanies.

The present study aims to fill this void with a systematic study of one area, the modal auxiliaries and attempts provide diachronic information on one central area of grammar as used in early Ontario. It aimed to supply CanE with a diachronic dimension that has hitherto been largely missing.

What is probably best known about the linguistic situation in Canada is that it is an officially bilingual country and that Canadians speak English and French (and many more languages without official status). What is less known, perhaps, is a rift between English and French Canada in terms of language awareness, which finds its expression in everyday life: while French Canadians usually think of themselves as speakers of *Canadian* French, the language of the majority of Canadians is usually considered to be just plain ‘English’. If

asked what kind of English, possibly only a few Anglophones would give ‘Canadian English’ as an answer, and many would be somewhat puzzled. H. A. Gleason puts this sorry state of language awareness poignantly and identifies a culprit:

Perhaps because of preoccupation with such largely political and social problems, Canadians seem to direct much less attention than one might expect to the language itself – at least on the English side (Gleason 1982: 1)

While considerable accomplishments have been made since this statement was written, which are evidenced in the publication of major reference works such as the *Gage Canadian Dictionary* in 1983 (Avis *et al.* 1983), a style guide for Canadian English (Fee and McAlpine ¹1997 [²forthc.]) and the highly successful *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Barber ¹1998 [²2004]), language awareness remains, judging by anecdotal experience, relatively low. By working with older CanE, it will be shown that CanE has had its own characteristics for more than one and a half centuries and that little language awareness is not a consequence of missing linguistic idiosyncrasies.

The linguistic situation south of the US-Canadian border has been very different for both historical and social reasons, however. American patriots like Noah Webster and H. L. Mencken managed to ensure that America is perceived as a country with its ‘own’ variety of English. Like in so many other cases, Canadians have taken a subtler approach. In Canadian English, the lack of an undisputed standard has so far, in comparison to other countries, not been a big issue. There are a number of reasons for this state of affairs, such as a Canadian aversion towards *prescribed* linguistic standards as proposed by Chambers (1986: 3), or a certain unwillingness of Canadian educational institutions to address the issue of language standards in earlier times. While the former scenario is an expression of a highly salient cultural feature, the latter may be the result of a general lack of language awareness among Canadian English (CanE) speakers.

Whatever the reasons, CanE has a sociolinguistically different status than American English (AmE). In an early article the *raison d’être* for the study of CanE is found in the fact that “a knowledge of Canadian English is of importance in the investigation of the history of American English” (M. Bloomfield 1948: 4). This attitude has been frequently echoed in the half-century since the publication of Bloomfield’s article and even today, in otherwise excellent linguistic work on New World emigration patterns, the justification and

the importance of Canadian English is still occasionally ignored, relegating Canada to a “point of entry” (Hickey 2004a: 11) for immigrants who migrated to the US, where the real focus lies.

In 1951, Partridge and Clarke published their book on 20th-century British and American English and broke with the tradition of “ignor[ing] the English spoken in Canada, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand” (1968 [1951]: 1); they included a full chapter on Canadian English (Priestley 1951). Even more than half a century later, however, historical linguists tend to subsume CanE studies under “American English”. Raven I. McDavid, the American dialectologist, rebuts such attitudes:

it can no longer satisfy the serious student of North American English, whatever his nationality, and only a little knowledge of Canadian history is necessary to suggest that it was never an accurate statement of the facts. Like the English of the United States, Canadian English is far too complicated to be dismissed with a single categorical statement. True, Canadian English developed out of the familiar kind of colonial experience, borrowing new words and reshaping or recombining old ones to fit new experiences and new needs for communication. True again, there have always been currents of migration flowing in both directions across the border.

[...]

But this is not all. At the same time there has been a continuous flow of immigration from the British Isles, some of it resulting in rather homogeneous settlements with strong British traditions in speechways

[...].

And even this is not the whole story. One must reckon with Canadian nationalism, arising from autonomy attained not through a break with the Crown but by evolution within the Commonwealth and therefore less obvious than the nationalism derived from the autonomy which the United States achieved through armed revolt. (McDavid 1963: 469f)

These excerpts from McDavid’s abridgement of Mencken’s *The American language* are more than 40 years old, but are more precise than more recent contributions on the genesis and status of CanE in the literature (e.g. Lilles 2000).

1.1 Colonial Englishes and Canadian English

Research into colonial and postcolonial Englishes is, with the exception of American English, a comparatively recently research agenda. As late as the early 1990s, Merja Kytö (1991a: 186) had to state that the study of “extraterritorial varieties of English [is] a field of

study still largely neglected by the mainstream of historical Anglistics”. While this is certainly true for European English linguistics, to which the term *Anglistics* refers to, American linguists have, per definition, always focussed on their own postcolonial variety of English.

In comparison to other colonial Englishes, research on CanE is a late comer, and CanE itself is some considered by some as the “least documented of all major varieties of English” (Halford 1996: 4). Australian English can show a considerable research history and has received scholarly attention even before WWII (Partridge 1968 [1951]: 85), at a time when research on CanE was practically non-existent. More recently, research on New Zealand English has gained momentum with the discovery of the ONZE tapes (Trudgill 2004, Gordon *et al.* 2004), and, more generally, southern hemisphere Englishes have become a focus of Late Modern English (LModE) research since the late 1990s. Amidst these trends, it seems that the study of CanE, despite considerable efforts since the mid 1950s, has been relatively neglected.

Since the late 1990s increased research into what is generally referred to as LModE, i.e. English between c. 1700 to 1900, and its logical extension of focus to colonial varieties of English, provides a vital field for the study of diachronic CanE. Hickey (2004a) is a collection of essays that focusses on the “core 200-year period” (Hickey 2004b: 1) from the early 1600s to the mid-1800s that lay the foundation for post-colonial Englishes¹. This and other recent work reflect a change from a research paradigm that usually focussed on the dominant varieties of English, BrE and AmE. As Watts and Trudgill (2002: 2) poignantly put it, histories of English have usually largely “been sociolinguistically inadequate, anglocentric and based on Standard [British] English” but today there is no excuse for the treatment of one or even two dominant varieties at the expense of other LModE varieties.

In line with this widening perspective, it is becoming more and more customary to include references to Canadian English in work on North American English. A recent report on *Needed Research in American Dialects* (Preston 2003) frequently mentions the necessity to study CanE in its own right (e.g. Ash 2003).

¹ Cf. Dollinger (2005) for a review.

1.2 Ontario English

Chambers (1991: 92) states that both Newfoundland English (NE) and mainland Canadian English “appear to have established themselves as autonomous national varieties”. For historical reasons, the distinction between NE and mainland CanE is sound on both external and internal grounds: Newfoundland only joined the Canadian Federation in 1949, after having remained a British colony under self-government for centuries, which is reflected in the island’s quite distinct linguistic varieties (Clarke 1991: 108).

There is general consensus for the separate treatment of inland Canadian English and Newfoundland English as distinct varieties of CanE and this is reflected in the organization of major reference works (cf. Algeo 2001b: xxvi). In the present study, with the exception of one chapter, Canadian English is used here as a synonym of the English of Ontario, Ontario English. Only in chapter (2), in which the literature will be reviewed, I will address the regional character of CanE and ‘CanE’ is used as a hyperonym there.

Ontario English is a historically important variety in the Canadian context. While it was not the first mainland Canadian variety of English, since parts of the Maritimes were settled earlier, it is a variety of long standing. Most importantly, it was the variety that was, with the coming of the railway, carried further west in the second half of the 19th century (Chambers 1998a: 256). Given its historical importance, it is likely that Ontario English played a key role in the formation of Standard Canadian English, which is best shown in a uniform accent across mainland Canada (Chambers 1998a: 252). It seems therefore a natural choice to focus on the probably single-most important Canadian regional dialect: early Ontario English.

1.3 Aims of the present study

This study attempts to achieve two general goals: first, to provide a description of the use of the modal auxiliary complex in early Ontario English, from 1776-1850, and second, to shed light on theories of the formation of early Ontario English. The study is organized into two parts. Chapters (2-5) comprise the background and theoretical basis, while chapters (6-9) present the empirical data.

Chapter (2) reviews the literature on CanE and puts the present study in relation to previous research. It provides a research report that strives to incorporate as many studies as possible (Avis 1973a, Chambers 1979c, Chambers 1989, Chambers 1991, Chambers 1998a and Brinton and Fee 2001 are all rather concise reviews).

Chapter (3) provides an account of Ontario's external language history from 1776 to 1850. Wherever possible, special focus will be given to different immigrant groups and their numerical strengths. At the end of the chapter, the theories on the origins of Ontario English will be reviewed. Chapter (4) introduces the *Corpus of Early Ontario English*, whose pre-Confederation section is the empirical base of the CanE data. This is followed by the presentation of a theory of new-dialect formation (Trudgill 2004), which is the most detailed account of the formation of new varieties in colonial settings to date that will be tested against the empirical data in chapters (6-9)

The empirical part deals with ten core modals and one semi-modal in CanE. Chapter (6) provides the general background to the empirical part, lays out the rationale behind the choice of variables and explains the methodology. Chapters (7), (8), and (9) present the data on, in total, eleven modals. In chapter (10) both parts, empirical as well as theoretical, will be synthesized and compared to previous findings.

Chapter (10) will attempt to answer five sets of basic questions to meet the two basic goals of the present study, a description and developmental scenario of the modal auxiliaries in early OntE. These questions are:

- 1) How can the use of modal auxiliaries be characterized in early CanE?
- 2) How conservative is early CanE modal usage? Does it undergo a colonial lag? How far does the founder principle apply?
- 3) Which of the existing theories on the origin of CanE, to be reviewed in chapters (2) and (5) fits the data better?
- 4) To what extent provide the modals in CanE evidence for existing models of new-dialect formation?
- 5) When did CanE focus, i.e. become a distinct variety that began to be perceived as distinct by some of its speakers?

It will be shown that the modal auxiliaries in early OntE show an array of phenomena that cannot be captured, not even approximately, by popular notions such as colonial lag. The modals on OntE are the product of a diverse set of influences, including parallel and individual developments in comparison to other major varieties. While existing

developmental scenarios for CanE focus on one or two factors as the major source of influence, we will see that CanE, often described vaguely as a *mélange*, a hybrid of features, can be described and traced in its development more accurately. Recent models of dialect development in colonial settings provide a useful theoretical underpinning. Finally, based on these findings, an attempt will be made to date the origin of CanE as a distinct variety. We will see that early OntE, as an important early CanE variety, displayed a number of modal distributions not found in other varieties in the early 1800s and that by the second half of the 19th century CanE is probably best described as a new, focussing, colonial variety of English.