

research snapshot

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“Ethnolects” and Varieties of Canadian English

What is this research about?

“Ethnolects” is another way to describe dialects or ways of speaking that are associated with specific ethnic groups. In a diverse city like Toronto, settlement patterns have created a number of spaces for different ethnic groups where they can use their heritage language. Some have argued that these ‘enclaves’ hinder a child’s ability to learn Canadian English, which others predict may alter the nature of English in Canada. Does a person’s ethnic background affect their English?

What did the researchers do?

The researchers focused on the two largest ethnic groups in the city of Toronto: Italian- and Chinese-Canadians. The languages of these groups fit well with their study because of their phonological (sound) differences from English. They recruited 60 participants, representing Italian or Chinese ethnic origins. They were divided into first generation and second/third generation, and by sex. Another 20 participants were recruited as a baseline for comparison. They represented Toronto’s founding ethnic groups: English, Scottish and Irish.

The speech patterns of first-generation Italian- and Chinese-Canadians were compared with

What you need to know:

‘Foreign’ language features of first-generation Canadians do not persist in their children and grandchildren. ‘Ethnolects’ should be viewed as ways that speakers of different ethnic backgrounds construct and convey their identity, rather than an inability to acquire English.

second- and third-generation speakers. Since the first language of first-generation speakers is the heritage language, they transfer features of their first language into English. That is, they have a ‘foreign accent’. The researchers wanted to know if these heritage language transfers persist in subsequent generations. They also compared these speakers with those of English, Scottish and Irish ethnicity. They wanted to see if there were differences in their English because of these language transfers.

What did the researchers find?

An Ethnic Orientation (EO) questionnaire categorized speakers based on how much each person identified with their ethnic background. The researchers distinguished between those with a high EO and a low EO. This was influenced by:

- The ethnic composition of their social networks;
- How much interaction they have with their grandparents;
- Their experiences with discrimination at work and in housing.

The divisions between speakers with a high EO and low EO had an effect on their language use. The researchers focused on two language patterns that occurred with all ethnic groups: the deletion of the sounds t and d at the end of a word (TD); and the Canadian Vowel Shift (CVS), an ongoing change in the vowel system of Canadian English. They found that first-generation speakers did not show the same patterns of TD as native born speakers. They also did not participate in the CVS.

Within each ethnic group, the researchers found that language transfer does not persist beyond the first generation. In subsequent generations, Italian- and Chinese-Canadians partake in the CVS and TD to different degrees. However, younger speakers in both ethnic groups have the same linguistic conditioning of the CVS and TD as the English-, Scottish- and Irish-Canadian participants. This demonstrates that they have all acquired the same system of Canadian English.

How can you use this research?

This research may be useful for educators and community workers. This includes those who work in ethnolinguistically diverse contexts. It underlines the importance of distinguishing between the linguistic behaviour that reflects a child's development in language skills, and behaviour that reflects the child's sociolinguistic environment. This research suggests a need to

recognize Toronto's linguistic landscape in the 21st century. Thus, multilingualism should not be treated as a 'problem' to be addressed by remedial education.

About the Researchers

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