

Advancing Aboriginal English

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In this article, we offer a sociolinguistic view of where Aboriginal English (AE) and its use in the classroom are situated in the wider domain of minority variety linguistics. We provide a sketch of some of the grammatical features of AE varieties in British Columbia and its importance to cultural identity. We also survey the literature focusing on what has been done in the past to “correct” Aboriginal students’ speech and comment on why this approach is both culturally offensive and pedagogically damaging. We round out the article by providing a brief overview of initiatives that have been taken to conduct classes in AE in British Columbia and some of their positive outcomes, and we propose a modified immersion program in which the language of the classroom for Aboriginal students is Aboriginal English.

That’s just how Indians talk. I like it. (Secwepemc student in an Introduction to Linguistics class, fall 2008)

Introduction

The above quote reveals one woman’s appreciation for the variety of English spoken by the members of her community. It was made during a classroom discussion where one of us (Fadden) was introducing phonetics and helping the students to discover how vowels and consonants differ not only between languages, but between varieties or dialects of the same language. The class was introduced to some of the differences between Aboriginal English as it is fairly widely heard throughout western Canada and “standard” English, or the English that is found spoken elsewhere among much of non-Aboriginal Canada.

- (a) Bring dem here.
- (b) Bring ‘em here.
- (c) Bring them here.

“First one’s how I’d say it,” says one student. Fadden was trying to get to the phonetic differences, namely, that the second word in (a) begins with a voiced alveolar plosive consonant or a *d*; in (b) it has no initial consonant; and in (c) the same word is pronounced with the voiced interdental fricative and in *the*. She asked what the differences were specifically, and the answer she received, “That’s just how Indians talk,” which although not linguistic was encouraging in terms of the appreciation for Aboriginal English. Unfortunately, not everyone shares her positivity, and so students who speak Aboriginal English (AE) can and do encounter social and educational challenges that others do not.

Children whose parents speak the dominant variety of English in the home enjoy the benefit of transitioning into their formal education with the convenience of hearing, reading, and using their home variety in their school environment. For them there is no linguistic shock where they must become accustomed to a teacher or other students speaking something other than what they are used to hearing and using. Aboriginal students coming from families that speak a variety of English that differs from what is often used in the education system do not have the advantage of arriving at their primary schools and hearing their home language. The effect of this can cut two ways: Some students may find the new variety jarring, and it may interfere with their ability to engage fully in their education; and educators unaware of the linguistic legitimacy of an Aboriginal English dialect might discourage its use.

In this article, we offer a sociolinguistic view of where Aboriginal English and its use in the classroom are situated in the wider domain of minority variety linguistics. We provide a sketch of some of the grammatical features of AE varieties in BC and its importance to cultural identity. We also survey the literature that focuses on what has been done in the past to “correct” Aboriginal students’ speech and comment on why this approach is both culturally offensive and pedagogically damaging. We round out the article by providing a brief overview of initiatives that have been taken to conduct classes in AE in BC and some of their positive outcomes, and we propose a modified immersion program in which the language of the classroom for Aboriginal students is Aboriginal English.

Aboriginal English

English spoken across Canada varies greatly. Broadly speaking, Western Canadian differs from Central Canadian, which differs from Eastern Canadian. In these areas, rural and urban differences are found, as are differences among socioeconomic groups and culturally bound groups (Boberg, 2005; Chambers, 1998; Labov, Ash, & Boberg, 2006). The notion that there is a standard English is slippery, but as is generally accepted in the linguistic literature and for our purposes here, we refer to standard English (SE) as that language that is spoken and written in mainstream media and that is often found spoken in classrooms and other institutions such as legal settings, government, social and medical services, and the like.¹

Aboriginal varieties of English date back to the time of contact with Europeans when linguistic codes arose, merging features of Indigenous languages with the language of the colonizers. Although Craig (1991) provides a relatively thorough account of the possible trajectories that Aboriginal English varieties have taken since contact in the United States, and Leap (1993) presents the similarities and differences between AEs across the country, only minimal mention is made of AEs in the Canadian context. The gist of the studies thus far suggests that pidgin varieties

arose,² merging English vocabulary with elements of Indigenous sound systems and grammars, later yielding creoles³ that lost features of the Indigenous languages as more English features were integrated. Some contemporary varieties of Aboriginal English still maintain a few linguistic features of the languages from which they much earlier stemmed (Leap; Mulder, 1982; Tarpent, 1982).

To date, Aboriginal varieties of English (AE) have been given comparably little attention, particularly in Canada, compared with other culturally and ethnically bound varieties. AE varieties, like any variety of a language, differ slightly from region to region and the degree to which they are adhered to by speakers. Some of the more salient linguistic features found to be relatively common across regions, at least in BC, are listed in Table 1 as observed by ourselves and as a point of comparison; SE corresponding forms are given to illustrate the perceptible differences between the two varieties.⁴ The differences are grouped by type where phonetics refers to the pronunciation of speech segments, prosody refers to the pitch contours of the voice during speech, and discourse refers to conversational convention.

The summary of differences between general AE and SE in Table 1 is scant at this time owing to a lack of formal study of the AE variety. The literature that addresses sociolinguistic variation in AE in North America,

*Table 1
Summary of Contrastive Properties in Aboriginal English and Standard English in British Columbia*

AE	SE
Phonetics	
	[ð] (as in <i>these</i>)
	[θ] (as in <i>think</i>)
	[r] less retroflex
	[o] farther forward in the mouth
	[a] farther forward in the mouth
Prosodic	
	wide intonation contour on declarative sentences
	intonation peak earlier in contour
Discourse	
	turn overlap tolerated
	fewer pauses
	subject agreement on tag questions
	"John's here, isn't he?" "We're not, are we?"

and in particular Canada, is still minimal, we believe, for two reasons. First, where Aboriginal language use is concerned, more effort is placed on the description and preservation of Indigenous languages, and for good reason as language endangerment is an ongoing and time-sensitive problem. Second, it is our experience personally that a number of other scholars, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, are resistant to the notion that there are indeed phonetic, prosodic, and discourse differences between the English spoken by many members of First Nations communities and that spoken by the larger established education community, and some even protest linguistic equity between the two varieties. We intend to explore this variety and regional subvarieties in subsequent projects.

Today, in conjunction with Indigenous languages, but more often disturbingly in the absence of these languages, AE is the linguistic element that reflects and helps bind a community, synchronous with other elements of cultural identity such as history, spirituality, locale, and so forth. This point is not lost on some AE-speech community members who view using SE as a threat to their cultural heritage, and sending children to school in a system that is not supportive of AE and in which students might adopt SE, then, is a denial of their ethnic, racial, and social backgrounds (Falk, 1973). Therefore, the identification and recognition of culturally bound minority language varieties is of significance given that a unique linguistic code serves a community by binding its members and setting it apart from others linguistically (see Silverstein, 1979, for foundational work). That these varieties exist to serve their communities as a means not only of communication, but also of identifying community membership and expressing cultural identity is of the utmost importance, and certainly any education system that strives for equitable inclusion should be aware of this. Some are, and some are not, which we address below.

Approaches to Minority Dialects in Institutional Settings

Taking steps to remove the discrimination and disadvantage experienced by speakers of minority varieties of English is not a new idea. Sociolinguists have fought the tide for decades to dispel the racist myth that minority or "nonstandard" dialects are linguistically defective, having been widely criticized for being "ungrammatical," "illogical," and even "ugly." One only need skim the literature on African-American vernacular English (AAVE), or Ebonics as it was earlier named, to see that leaders of African-American communities and linguists have worked tirelessly to promote the use of AAVE. Sociolinguists have pointed to the public discourse, poetry, prose, and today's lucrative hip hop scene to demonstrate not only the grammatical regularity, but also the aesthetic richness and cultural identity tied to it (Smitherman, 2000, 2004). Attempts have been made in the US to conduct classes in AAVE for African-American students, which predictably and unfortunately were met with considerable

opposition not only from white education administrators, but also from some members of the Black community who rejected the notion that AAVE carries much linguistic and cultural merit with a history and an important binding role in the communities in which it is used (Ramirez, Terrence, de Klerk, Lee, & Wright, 2005). The debate continues.

Australia's Aboriginal English varieties too have seen enough attention in the literature to warrant appropriate consideration, more so in legal settings than in other institutional settings, particularly after a number of criminal cases have been prosecuted in which it has been demonstrated that atrocious miscarriages of justice have occurred as a result of miscommunication between speakers of standard Australian English and Australian Aboriginal English (AAE).⁵ In AAE, for example, scholars note the discourse practice of "gratuitous concurrence" (Eades, 1993, 2008; Mildren, 1999). In this AAE, any disagreement is dispreferred, so a speaker will simply agree with a proposition as presented so as not to incite a face-threatening or otherwise linguistically hostile speech act even if it is false. It is easy to see, then, how the accused would be railroaded in police questioning or during cross examination at trial.⁶

With respect to Australian Aboriginal English in the education system, Aboriginal students who speak Torres Strait Creole are achieving success in acquiring more than one dialect, which allows them to maintain and enhance community ties held together by local culture and nonstandard dialect use while participating in the mainstream education system. Eades and Siegel (1999), for example, point to much success for speakers of Torres Strait Creole, where literacy is taught in both their AAE and standard Australian English. The outcome is a community of bi-dialectal speakers who shift their variety according to the context. We return to the notion of bi-dialectism below.

Aboriginal English in BC Schools

Approaches to helping Aboriginal English-speaking students in BC are split roughly into two categories: damaging and promising. In this section, we first address some of the difficulties that arise for AE-speaking students in mainstream education, particularly with respect to misdiagnosis of language problems, and then explore some of the initiatives that show promise for the positive integration of AE in the classroom.

The Challenging Learning Environment: Dialectal Damage

It is well documented that speech pathology regimens and remedial education are disproportionately prescribed for young Aboriginal students (Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006). This is largely due, they claim, to lack of understanding and recognition of the variety of English used by this group of speakers. In their report, they cite several examples in BC and surrounding areas in which AE speakers are diagnosed with language impairment. In one study, phonetic differences between AE and SE are

shown to be central to the misdiagnosis of pathological speech (Russel, 2002). Speech-language pathologists were targeting Tlinglit English, and working to “correct” pronunciation problems. This type of misdiagnosis is as egregious as attributing Newfoundlanders’ regional dialect to language impairments.

In another study that focused on lexical (vocabulary) development, Philion and Galloway (1969) show Aboriginal children underperforming due not to actual ability, but rather to the vocabulary items being tested, because the items tested were not part of the children’s everyday lives. In a subsequent study, Fletcher (1983) shows that with localization, that is, culturally appropriate testing materials, Aboriginal children performed on a par with non-Aboriginal children.

Discourse practice and conversational norms that are not understood can lead to misdiagnoses of learning or engagement problems. Because it is typical for many speakers of AE to pause longer between turns and to tolerate longer silences than SE speakers, the AE speaker can be interpreted as being disengaged, or in worse cases, demonstrating cognitive deficit, that is, “slow,” when in reality the speaker is employing culturally appropriate politeness strategies. Walsh (1994) and Malcolm (2001a, 2001b) both point to this regrettable misinterpretation for Australian Aboriginal English, which like Canadian AE allows for more silence and longer pausing in discourse.

Needless to say, wrongful identification of language and speech problems when there are none negatively challenges students, and in fact treating what does not require treatment amounts to an institutional assault on important cultural property: a community’s language. Wolfram, Adger, and Christian (1999) and Adger, Wolfram, and Christian (2007), in discussing the implications for misdiagnoses on the basis of language variety, suggest that students who are told they have learning difficulties will exhibit learning difficulties.

The Promising Future

Since 1981, the Ministry of Education in BC has recognized the struggle that many Aboriginal students face on arriving at school to find themselves immersed in a language context that is similar enough to be intelligible, but dissimilar enough to create divisions between speakers of dominant and non-dominant varieties. To alleviate this problem, the ministry has allocated funds to offer English as a second dialect (ESD) programming (BC Ministry of Education, 2009), under the larger umbrella of BC’s ESL Framework, which addresses the needs of ESL students.

The idea behind this approach is to offer students whose community and home language is AE courses in ESD, so that without eradicating or attempting to eradicate AE, educators can not only acknowledge, but also encourage the use of AE while giving some instruction in SE. The BC Ministry of Education Policy leaves room for a range of adaptations to

meet students’ needs, as long as adapted programs ensure the learning outcomes of the regular curriculum (BC Ministry of Education, 2009). ESD for Aboriginal students requires resources that are community-specific and multifaceted because of the diversity in the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, which necessitates a holistic approach in the development of ESD support and services. The flexibility built into this initiative is a positive shift away from the problem areas outlined above because it does not prescribe a one-size-fits-all approach and is a call for much research in how best communities’ educational needs would be served so that AE-speaking students’ varieties are appropriately represented.

In order to obtain the funds for ESD programming, school districts must assess proficiency in SE and design instruction plans that will address the needs of the students in order to improve their proficiency. An ESL specialist must be involved in service planning and delivery, and districts are expected to use culturally relevant resources to provide services.⁷ There is no requirement that the funding be dedicated exclusively to services for the designated student. The flexibility built into the approval process allows school districts to use these funds in a variety of community-based ways. Examples are shown in Table 2, which lists four examples of the programs dotting the BC Aboriginal landscape, showing the diversity of approaches being taken to address local needs.

Although offering ESD programming is an opt-in for individual school districts, and it is not clear whether all school board administrations are even aware of it, Battiste, Friesen, and Krauth (2009) point out that ESD programming is catching on. They report a substantial increase in the number of districts that have elected to offer ESD programming, and the number of students within districts has also grown. For example, in 1999 only four districts were assigned at least 5% of grade 7 students, whereas in 2004 16 districts were doing so. In some areas, the increase in the number of students was staggering. In Nisga’a and Stikine, for example,

Table 2
Examples of Community-Based Projects Integrating AE Into the Curriculum
(Battiste et al., 2009)

<i>School District</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Initiative</i>
Nechako Lakes	2006	specific pedagogical strategies for vocabulary development
Vancouver Island North	2008	specialized oral language instruction; acquired reading materials with Aboriginal content
Haida Gwaii/ Queen Charlotte	2008	integrate oral language into regular literacy programs
Cariboo-Chilcotin	2009	specialist teachers that provide classroom teacher support and develop program materials

the number of students enrolled in ESD jumped from fewer than 5% to 60% between 2001 and 2002.

As encouraging as the increase in ESD enrollment is students' improved performance on Foundations Skills Assessment (FSA) tests.⁸ In particular, they report that the overall achievement on reading exams is higher for those in ESD for one year than in earlier scores, and the difference is statistically significant (Battiste et al., 2009). They also found that the more funding a district receives (allocated on a per student basis), the greater the increase in student improvement. It is not clear from Battiste et al.'s study why improvement as such is the case, nor was it their goal to outline the causes, but it is tempting to suggest that if students are feeling that they are strong in number and that their language is accepted and used in school, they may feel included and encouraged rather than excluded or pathologized. We might suggest, then, that enrolling as many AE-speaking students as possible will have more positive effects overall, making districts eligible for more ESD funding, and an economy-of-scale effect will see further enhancement for AE programming, benefitting still more communities.

A Modified Immersion Model to Address AE Needs?

As districts are free to use the funding they obtain for ESD programming and as Table 2 shows, there is significant latitude for a variety of approaches to incorporating AE in the classroom. Here we make the case that districts might adopt a modified immersion model for AE, particularly in those communities where the numbers of Aboriginal students is especially high.

In typical immersion programs in BC, which are mostly conducted in French, teaching in the primary years is almost exclusively in the target language, with SE grammar, reading comprehension, and composition ordinarily being introduced in grade 4. We recommend a modification of this model, where AE is the language of the classroom, and it is used exclusively from kindergarten to grade 4. In grade 4 or 5, SE grammar, reading comprehension, and composition would be introduced, with continued use of AE in other areas such as math, social studies, sciences, and arts.

The intended outcomes of this model are Aboriginal youth populations that are bi-dialectal. Students would not have to forgo the language of their homes and their communities to be successful in later academic years and face linguistic discrimination because of their nonstandard dialect. A further benefit of this model would be avoidance of the linguistic shock alluded to in the introduction, where young children must become attuned to a new language variety in their primary years, which for some sets up the idea that what they speak must be corrected.

A bi-dialectal approach has been taken in Australia for at least 25 years, with an increase in the 1990s, where the community language and stan-

dard Australian English are used in tandem in varying proportions (summarized in Ball et al., 2006). Although performance measures are not reported, the widespread nature of programs involving dual dialects and the significant resources that have gone into teacher training to ensure awareness of Aboriginal dialects are telling of the appreciation of such an approach. Students are given the opportunity to maintain the varieties that bind their communities, and conducting classes in these varieties gives them legitimacy and status as linguistic codes, something that minority languages and dialects everywhere struggle to obtain.

Conclusion

Aboriginal cultures' communication systems reflect the values and experiences of their peoples through a spiritual, intellectually and physically healthful sustaining relationship with complex, dynamic social structures to transmit knowledge and administer political affairs that strengthen the communities. First Nations, Métis, and Inuit families, communities, and nations require that the SE teaching include an acknowledgment that their students' traditional languages and contemporary Aboriginal Englishes are valid linguistic codes with all the robustness and descriptive capacity of any standard variety. This acknowledgment is the basis for the development of curriculum adaptations, support services, and ESD programming, including careful consideration of a modified immersion program based on Aboriginal English.

Notes

¹We fully recognize the problem with the use of the term *standard English* in that its inherent implication is that any other variety is nonstandard with all the connotations that ensue. The term is inconvenient at best, and offensive at worst, from the point of view of mainstreaming some and marginalizing others. This problem is ongoing in the sociolinguistic literature.

²Pidgin languages are linguistic codes that spring from the need for two cultures to communicate where no common language exists. They are grammatically rudimentary and have limited vocabularies.

³Creoles are languages that stem from pidgins once grammatical features stabilize, and children speak them as first or second languages.

⁴For a summary of localized observations gleaned from a number of teachers and speech-language pathologists working in Aboriginal communities, see Ball et al. (2006).

⁵Fadden (2007) addresses the potential for mismatches in communication style in police interviews with First Nations suspects in the Canadian context.

⁶Cross-cultural miscommunication such as this has been well addressed by scholars such as Eades (1992), and appropriate steps have been taken at the legislative level to ensure that linguistic differences due to cultural affiliation are given full consideration.

⁷Although the information is not available at this time about what type of ESL specialist is employed for this function, it is hoped that the specialist is familiar with AE and Aboriginal learners and classrooms given that ESL specialists ordinarily work with those whose first language is other than English, standard or otherwise, and the challenges that foreign language-speakers and AE-speakers face are entirely different.

⁸We acknowledge the controversy surrounding BC's use of the Foundation Skills Assessment exams and the movement by some parents to disallow their children's participation.

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