

Celebrating the Local, Negotiating the School: Language and Literacy in Aboriginal Communities

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To introduce this special edition of the *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, we share our entrances to this topic and to the subsequent work that unfolded in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with a three-day symposium called “Celebrating the Local, Negotiating the School: Symposium on Language and Literacy in Aboriginal Communities,” which then evolved into papers that make up this collection of articles. As professional colleagues in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan, we were brought together by the availability of funds that drew from the Learning Spirit bundle, one of the six working groups of the Aboriginal Learning Knowledge Centre (AbLKC) under the lead of Marie Battiste, and our common interests in Aboriginal learning and education. Considering that AbLKC had six learning bundles that had focused activity on various areas of learning among Aboriginal peoples including Learning from Place, Nourishing the Learning Spirit, Aboriginal Languages and Learning, Diverse Educational Systems of Learning, Pedagogy of Professions, and Technology and Learning, we considered what would be the most effective use of the limited funds to bring educators together around a topic that the other teams might not be researching. In focused conversations, we each had had diverse knowledge, drawing from our experiences working with Aboriginal people, youth, and children and varied areas of interest.

Marie Battiste is a Mi’kmaw scholar, professor, and Director of the Aboriginal Education Research Centre at the University of Saskatchewan. She is known for her work in writing in cognitive imperialism, linguistic and cultural integrity, Indigenous knowledge and humanities, and decolonization of Aboriginal education. Marie has worked actively with First Nations schools as an administrator, teacher, consultant, and curriculum developer, advancing Aboriginal epistemology, languages, pedagogy, and research. Her research interests are in initiating institutional change in the decolonization of education, language, and social justice policy and power, and postcolonial educational approaches that recognize

and affirm the political and cultural diversity of Canada and the collective healing required for transformation from colonial trauma.

Margaret Kovach is of Plains-Cree and Saulteaux ancestry. She is an assistant professor in the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan and holds a joint appointment with the Departments of Educational Foundations and Educational Administration. She holds an interdisciplinary doctorate in education and social work, and her areas of teaching and scholarship include Indigenous research methodologies, decolonizing and anti-oppressive theory, and practice in preservice professional education of teachers and social workers. She has worked for many years as an adult educator in Indigenous contexts and has an extensive background in Indigenous curriculum development and design in distance education.

Geraldine Balzer is an assistant professor of English language arts in curriculum studies in the University of Saskatchewan. Her interest in Aboriginal and multiple Englishes grew out of her 14 years of teaching in small Inuit communities in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. She holds an interdisciplinary doctorate in curriculum studies and English, and her areas of teaching and scholarship include postcolonial and Aboriginal literary theory, curriculum theory, and service learning.

As we began to concentrate on some of the major challenges facing youth today that affect their educational success, we considered the language challenges that students face in the classroom. Although their ancestral home languages were most in need of enhancement and enrichment in schools at every level as they are widely neglected, we recognized that they often came to school with another language that they continued to use throughout their school years. These other languages are often variants of English learned through the relationships, social functions, and networks of home, community, and school together with the pop culture of television, radio, and other media. These languages were variants created from diglossic situations where new languages form and structures merge from both their first languages and their nonconscious applications of those forms, structures, vocabularies, and idioms to form a variant of English. These structures—regular, fully functional, and adequate—continue to serve their social, familial, and community communication needs and are the language forms that students bring to school. There they are often devalued against imagined standard forms of English, framed as a nonstandard dialect or a diverse English, and this often impedes their progress in school as teachers often expect written and oral communication to be framed as a variation that is normalized in English-speaking communities. These varieties become an oral “nonstandard” standard, meaning that no forms of English are totally normalized to all communities as standard. Each has its own variations in inflection, form, grammar, and idioms, and so forth, so much so as that one family may have its own variants compared with families across the street or

across the river or in the region. Compare, for example, those who speak English in Newfoundland with those in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, or Nunavut. Each has a diverse form of English that is like no other, yet is framed as standard for that area.

Our resolve once framed, then, was to raise the consciousness of our academic partners to the variant Englishes that Aboriginal communities and youth use and the academic challenges they encounter with them, with considerations of how these languages could be better positioned in education as local variants to be used and brought to new positions of strength toward developing new and other variant forms of English that might serve them in new ways in their academic futures. This was our challenge and our quest as we set out to create a symposium in Saskatoon with funds from the Learning Spirit bundle.

We first acknowledge the contributions and funding of the AbLKC, one of the five learning centres across Canada of the Canadian Council of Learning (CCL) funded through an agreement with the Human Resources and Skills Development Canada. The CCL is a nonprofit, independent organization that seeks to enhance learning in Canada by expanding knowledge about learning and learners and to improve learning and report on Canada's progress throughout all stages of life from early childhood through to the senior years. The Web site www.ccl-cca.ca provides a venue for the distribution of the diverse learning publications, products, and research outcomes of 2004-2009, including testimonies from learners, reports, papers, research outcomes, and promising practices arising from each of the five knowledge centres across Canada including the Adult Learning, Early Childhood Learning, Work and Learning, Aboriginal Learning, and Health and Learning Knowledge Centres.

Our approach to planning for the symposium was to develop a national call for abstracts for the symposium from which we selected four that would be developed into presentations at the symposium and papers for publication. Because scholarly papers are often not developed with the practitioner in mind, we sought out practitioner respondents who would read the papers before the symposium and respond to them in both oral and written form. This helped the authors to focus their papers with the practitioner in mind as well as a scholarly reading audience. The symposium papers were not only to address theory and research, but also to translate the knowledge into the field, thereby ensuring that new knowledge would be translated to multiple audiences and practitioners who could then bring theory and practice together. The respondents provided oral testimonies and raised issues at the symposium and were invited to submit their responses to the paper. Some did so, whereas others chose not to prepare a paper or submitted one for which there were no respondents.

We were assisted in the process of developing the symposium by a small committee of planners and interested faculty members and students at the University of Saskatchewan. We thank Linda Wason-Ellan and

Angela Ward, who contributed their expertise and knowledge of literacy and language-learning as we framed the issues surrounding the theme of the symposium and who then participated in the symposium. We thank Jonathan Anuik for helping with taking notes at the symposium and for his assistance in drafting a report to AbLKC. We also thank all the presenters, authors, graduate students, and teachers/educators and academics who shared their time and talents with us during the three days at Wanuskewin Heritage Park, and Danny Musqua, Saulteaux Elder and scholar/teacher.

Recognizing Multiple Englishes

McCarty (2005) claims:

On the cusp of a new millennium, we are also on the crest of a new language and literacy divide. Globally, the world's linguistic and cultural diversity is imperiled by national and transnational forces that work to homogenize and standardize, even as they stratify and marginalize. (p. xv)

This view of language and literacy divides people into two groups, literates and nonliterates, and literates speak, read, and write a standard form. Although educational policies profess to work toward social justice and inclusionary practices, this view of literacy continues to exclude those groups that are not fluent in the national standard English. But the question of standard English and whose English is the standard is as old as the language itself. The notion of a standard English emerged with the invention of the printing press and the possibility of disseminating English writings to the population of the English-speaking world. Initially, standard English was a written norm rather than a spoken standard. Although the notion of a standard was upheld by academics, their control of the language was tenuous at best. The effect of British colonialism and the spread of English as the lingua franca of the modern world caused a re-splintering of this newly minted standard. In 2010, the number of people speaking English as an additional language exceeds the number of people who speak English as a first language. According to McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil (1996), English is the official language of 34 countries around the globe, producing "some exotic hybrids, among them Caribbean English, Indian English, various forms of African English and Singapore English (p. 308). In recent years, terms such as *Spanglish* and *Chinglish* have been coined to acknowledge the hybrids that arise when Spanish and Chinese meet English. In Aboriginal communities across Canada, hybrid Englishes flourish as Inuktitut, Cree, Anishnabe, Mi'kmaq, Salish, and a host of other Aboriginal languages fuse with English to create new languages of community.

North American Aboriginal groups have, in the words of Bird and Harjo (1997), "re-invented the enemy's language" in order to express

themselves in an unfamiliar language and in the absence of a mother tongue.

But to speak, at whatever the cost, is to become empowered rather than victimize by destruction. In our tribal cultures the power of language to heal, to regenerate, and to create is understood. These colonizers' languages which often usurped our own tribal languages or diminished them, now hand back emblems of our cultures, our own designs: beadwork, quills if you will. We've transformed these enemy languages. (pp. 21-22)

Bird and Harjo see this hybridization of languages as a "process of decolonization ... that will politicize as well as transform literary expression" (p. 22). These new Englishes are inflected by Aboriginal languages and meet the needs of community. Not recognizing that standard English is simply another variant, schools have attempted to eradicate these local Englishes. Current research indicates that building on the language knowledge of learners enables them to use their linguistic understandings to access standard English as a language of power in the educational and political realms without relinquishing their local language, a language of power in community. As Trudgill (2002) notes, using the English of the Indian subcontinent as an example, the hybrid "is also more suitable for use in India than English because speakers of the model variety are close at hand, its phonology is closer to Indian languages, and its vocabulary is adapted to Indian society and culture (p. 151). Similarly, the Englishes of Canadian Aboriginal communities use the phonology of the Indigenous language and develop a vocabulary that meets the social and cultural needs and norms of the community.

The goal of this symposium was to explore how local literacies develop and function in local communities. Through the acknowledgment of local English variants, educational practitioners can build on the language knowledge of students and provide access to other English forms. Although linguists recognize national variants such as British, American, Canadian, and Australian English as legitimate, the Englishes used by colonized peoples are often suspect. Brathwaite (1984) contended that Caribbean Creoles were the national languages of the islands and should no longer be considered inferior to the English of the colonial centre. In recent years, the Afro-American community has struggled to have Black Englishes recognized and legitimized. As Gilyard (2005) notes in his foreword to *African American Literacies Unleashed*, African American vernacular English "has been the most studied and written about language variety in the world.... Yet in most corners of academe, linguistic findings seem to run far ahead of changes in pedagogy [and] African American students remain underserved" (p. xii). Parallel struggles are occurring in many groups worldwide including Canadian Aboriginal communities. It is our hope that the articles in this collection will help unite the academy

and field as they seek practical ways to serve Canadian Aboriginal students. All language is rich, and users of language bring understandings of community and communication to their speaking and writing. Insistence on the "Queen's English," a standard that exists only in the imaginations of 19th-century grammarians and their followers, diminishes the communicative potential of English. We encourage educators to discover and celebrate the language riches of community by giving students access to additional variants rather than impoverishing them by demeaning their English.

Overview of Presentations and Papers

How has standardized English maintained itself, and what avenues are available to deconstruct this linguistic monopoly? This is a central theme of Marlene R. Atleo and Laara Fitznor's article "Aboriginal Educators Discuss Recognizing, Reclaiming, and Revitalizing Their Multi-Competences in Heritage/English Language Use." These authors draw on a research study with teachers that integrates story with critical analysis to illustrate the personal ramifications of speaking Aboriginal Englishes in formal Western educational settings. Through sharing their own narrative in relation to Aboriginal languages in their varied forms, the authors holistically document how the suppression of Indigenous heritage languages has worked to marginalize its speakers. In its analytical discussion, the article offers a conceptual framework, and arguably a literal space, which they identify as the "zone of Aboriginal education" that serves as a "model to understand an interface between an Aboriginal/First Nations/Métis/Inuit/Indigenous heritages and a settler Euroheritage." This framework provides an opportunity to examine the extent to which standardized English, born of Euro-heritage language, has become the norm and in doing so provides the potential for dismantling language monopoly and challenging linguistic homogeny. As Atleo and Fitznor state, the "zone of Aboriginal education" is an "interface" place where dialogic story work can occur. They argue that intraethnic and interethnic communication in formal education are a means to bring Indigenous knowledges (and languages) into mainstream spaces, thereby making mainstream spaces more identifiable to Indigenous learners.

From another vantage point, but complementary to the Atleo and Fitznor analysis, Susan Gingell argues that much is to be learned from "decolonizing literatures" that uphold the varied forms of Aboriginal languages inclusive of Aboriginal Englishes. Her article "Lips' Ink: Cree Writings of the Oral in Canada" advocates recognition of and engagement with Aboriginal Englishes. She asserts that the recognition of "Creenglish" and "Michiflish" are integral to "decolonizing literatures" and work toward a "linguistic self-government." The article is effective in illustrating the power that Creenglish and Michiflish vernaculars hold in contemporary Cree and Cree-Métis communities, thus positioning them in a

particularly significant place in the cultural matrix of Cree and Cree-Métis society. Through the visceral experience of engaging with literature written from a Creenglish vernacular, it becomes evident on a felt level how this language medium is Indigenous resistance in itself. Congruent with the overarching belief of the deep interconnection between “decolonizing literatures” and a self-determining aim is Gingell’s focus on the pedagogical implications of Cree language and cultural revitalization in either supporting (or not) Aboriginal Englishes in educational systems. She argues that curriculum integration and study of works by Cree and Cree-Métis poets such as Louise Bernice Halfe/Sky Dancer, Maria Campbell, Gregory Scofield, and Neal McLeod offer an avenue to reveal the significant contributions of Creenglish literary work. Through Gingell’s decolonizing and respectful analysis of these poets’ work via literary critique, a method familiar in Western literary scholarship, the article models a pedagogical approach for which secondary and postsecondary literary educators can engage with Creenglish and Michiflish literature.

In his article “‘In from the Margins’: Government of Saskatchewan Policies to Support Métis Learning, 1969-1979,” Jonathan Anuik offers a historical account of the Government of Saskatchewan’s attempt to improve Métis students’ educational achievement in the period from 1969 to 1979. From a governmental perspective, Anuik documents the transition to an integrationist curriculum policy framework aimed at the Métis community during this period. He then provides a critique of that perspective and the ensuing policy and programmatic shifts of the period. Anuik suggests that although the government’s advocacy for a philosophical (and semantic) shift from Métis students being perceived as “culturally deficient” as opposed to “culturally different” was hopeful, the practice was largely ineffective given the lack of structural mandate and resources to implement a more culturally cognizant curriculum. He notes that the government’s integrationist rhetoric was not congruent with its actions in a number of ways. The Department of Education was not prepared to “naturalize” Indigenous languages (including Aboriginal Englishes) and world view in the curriculum; there were structural impediments to community involvement in curriculum planning; and curriculum revision was teacher-dependent. The result was limited effectiveness. This piece acts as a historical policy review that cautions the reader about the pitfalls of a policy mandate with “no teeth.” In advocating for the advancement of Aboriginal Englishes, much is to be learned from historical educational reform with respect to both its aspirations and limitations.

Andrea Sterzuk’s article “Indigenous English and Standard Language Ideology: Toward a Postcolonial View of English in Teacher Education” is a discussion of findings from a content analysis of 76 assignments completed by Bachelor of Education students enrolled in a language and literacy course in the second year of their program. The study sought insight into each student’s understanding of language variation in Sas-

katchewan schools and whether their perceptions shifted as a result of the course. The article integrates insights from teacher candidates as they reflect on nonstandard varieties of colonial English. In discussing her findings, Sterzuk focuses on how perceptions of “standard English” are reproduced, the effect of childhood experiences and understandings in shaping this perception, and teacher candidates’ thoughts on negotiating language variations in their classrooms. Sterzuk frames the discussion in a postcolonial theoretical model, and so the findings are interpreted from a theoretical perspective that reveals the power relationships found in educational sites that work to disadvantage Aboriginal students. Through broadening the language discourse for teacher candidates, this analysis challenges linguistic homogeneity by generating awareness among prospective teachers of Aboriginal Englishes. Such discussions prompt praxis in alleviating the stigma that Aboriginal students may encounter in the classroom that result from teachers’ assumptions about language variations.

Inge Genee and Shelley Stigter illustrate in their article “Not just ‘Broken English’: Some Grammatical Characteristics of Blackfoot English” through the analysis of three versions of Blackfoot English samples, how regular BE is in its structures and grammar compared with Blackfoot structures and grammar. They posit that these regularities demonstrate how Blackfoot-speakers create Blackfoot English as an ethnodialect that can be further analyzed by language pathologists and other language specialists to see the regularities and how Blackfoot encounters with English and such grammatical descriptions can then have beneficial effects in academic contexts. Such work needs to be further explored in other Aboriginal contexts as well as its benefits to academic schools and communities.

Through an Aboriginal learner-focused analysis, Sharla Peltier’s article “Facilitating Language and Literacy Learning for Students with Aboriginal English Dialects” identifies the myriad difficulties encountered by Aboriginal students whose first language is Aboriginal English. Peltier articulates the problematic emergence of a “linguistic interference phenomenon” that works to assess Aboriginal Englishes as a deficit requiring correction. As Peltier tells us, such students often face a school system ill equipped to assist them in a manner that respects their identity. This experience is confounded by language arts educators who do not recognize Aboriginal Englishes as a distinctive, culturally driven vernacular, thereby missing the symbiotic relationship between language and culture. The result leads to an assimilative intervention response. Peltier argues that this scenario is supported by biased assessment tools that work first to label and then marginalize Aboriginal students through standardized testing unfairly biased against speakers of Aboriginal English dialects. As Peltier suggests, such assessments “may mistakenly identify an Aboriginal student as having speech, language and learning difficulties and lead to

unneeded remedial therapy." In assessing language intervention programs aimed at Aboriginal students, Peltier criticizes the additive approach found in English-as-a-second-language programs that have the potential to be assimilative in nature. Rather, she advocates for a bi-dialectal language curriculum that accepts both Aboriginal English dialects and standard English code-shifting. She says that language educators are becoming increasingly aware of Aboriginal English dialects as language variants as opposed to the old-school label of "bad English." From this perspective, the emergence of bi-dialectal language programs that acknowledge cultural diversity and that complement Aboriginal students' original first language—whether an Aboriginal English dialect or a First Nation language—will pave the way to serving Aboriginal learners and Aboriginal communities better.

In their article "Advancing Aboriginal English," Lorna Fadden and Jenna LaFrance provide a critique of the language deficiency theory that many Aboriginal students encounter when expressing themselves in Aboriginal Englishes in the formal educational system. To counteract this deficiency perspective, the authors examine the initiative of the Government of British Columbia to offer funding to school districts to offer instruction in English-as-a-second-dialect (ESD) aimed at Aboriginal students. The program is flexible and accommodates the range of distinctive Aboriginal cultural groups in British Columbia and has a dual goal of maintaining the Aboriginal English home dialect while offering programming to improve efficiency in standard English. The authors see this move as positive and state that the enrollment in ESD courses in the Nisga'a and Stikine communities jumped from "less than 5% to 60% between 2001 and 2002." To improve on ESD instruction and to further advance Aboriginal Englishes, Fadden and LaFrance propose a "modified immersion model," whereby community-based ESD programming would involve full course instruction in Aboriginal Englishes from kindergarten to grade 4 with standard English phased in thereafter. The argument is for the creation of a bi-dialectal approach that upholds both Aboriginal and Standard English.

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