

THE LANGUAGE OF KINGS COUNTY, NOVA SCOTIA

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Introduction and Methodology

This paper is based on research done for a doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan, 1965. The dissertation includes a listing of 71 linguistic field records gathered throughout Nova Scotia by Henry Alexander, Rex Wilson, and me between 1939 and 1963. (Wilson's dissertation was The Dialect of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, University of Michigan, 1958.) Also relevant is the master's thesis of Nora Alice Rowe, A Linguistic Study of the Lake Ainslie Area of Inverness County, Nova Scotia, Louisiana State University in New Orleans, 1968.

The survey of Kings County included a representative sampling of the speech of older residents of the county and adjoining areas in western Nova Scotia. It was an attempt to provide more data for a linguistic atlas of the United States and Canada in a district where only two speech records had hitherto existed. Most of the informants were active or retired farmers and their wives or widows whose language had not been greatly affected by training or travel.

Since many of the uninhibited folkways are disappearing, it is essential to record conversation of the oldest residents now if one wishes to chart speech habits without having to allow for additional influences. With the passing away of the aged, local speech habits are vanishing, and a more uniform pattern of speech is already resulting from the establishment of consolidated schools and the effect of mass media of communication. Professor R.J. Gregg has aptly commented on this problem, emphasizing the desire of the young to conform in conversation as in most other social activities.¹

In addition to the analysis of field records that I gathered, consideration was given to existing samples of vernacular speech, both in standardized field work and writing, for Nova Scotia as a whole. Only passing reference was made to informal writing about speech habits in the whole region, an attempt having been made to note what data are available and what remains to be done to complete a provincial survey according to a consistent pattern.

As far as the field worker is concerned, dialect geography consists of pure rather than applied research. Although practical applications of the collected information are tempting, the main purpose of this survey was to answer such questions as the following: What has already been achieved in the analysis of language (speech) in Nova Scotia? What are some of the speech

habits of people in Kings County and environs? What still remains to be done? There are always other researchers eager to explore new avenues opened up by documented reports on areal usage. Such studies are useful to anyone with more than a passing interest in how language actually functions, and are essential for teachers and dictionary-makers.²

A broad linguistic assessment had already been made in Nova Scotia. In 1939-40, Professor Henry Alexander, then at Queen's University, completed a wide-mesh survey of the province, using a short work sheet of some 500 items.³ Professor Rex Wilson, adding to Alexander's data with his own field records, provided a study of language for Lunenburg County in 1958. When I finished my report, Wilson was still actively engaged in compiling new records. Thus, the language of western Nova Scotia, especially for the Annapolis Valley and the South Shore, has been fairly thoroughly investigated. Much still remains to be done elsewhere. Alexander laid a broad foundation which now needs to be reinforced. He completed 30 records for the 18 provincial counties, of which 6 were in Cape Breton and 24 on the mainland. One county provided 4 informants, and 1 county supplied 3; in 7 counties 2 informants respectively were used, and in 9 only 1 person respectively was chosen for interrogation.

In addition to linguistically-trained researchers, various scholars and writers of fiction have been active in the formal or informal writing of Nova Scotian vernacular. Murray Emeneau has studied the speech of Lunenburg.⁴ Helen Creighton has long been outstanding as a folklorist and collector of local songs and stories; W. Roy Mackenzie's Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia is a standard reference. Among novelists and short story writers, two of the best known are Thomas H. Raddall, who has written extensively about early immigrants and historical events, especially along the South Shore; and Will R. Bird, good examples of whose use of folk speech are to be found in Here Stays Good Yorkshire (1945) and The Shy Yorkshireman (1955), novels about settlers who came from England to Cumberland County in northern Nova Scotia.

The foregoing names are merely representative, and no attempt has been made to make a complete list. The use of dialect in literature, although a profitable study, is beyond the scope of this report.⁵

The area investigated is one of approximately 1,500 square miles. The population, some 60,000, is mainly rural, and the largest town (Kentville) contains about 5,000 people.

Of the 21 informants used, 12 lived in Kings County, 5 in western Hants, and 4 in eastern Annapolis. The area of Kings County was chosen as the center for research because Wilson had already surveyed much of western Annapolis, and eastern Hants is somewhat removed from the region of those New England settlers

("Planters") who came to this part of Nova Scotia in 1760, following the expulsion of the Acadians in 1755. Localities for field work were chosen (in consultation with Wilson) to provide a sampling of the speech of rural and non-rural residents, and a contrast between those on main highways and in more remote areas. Informants were distributed in towns and smaller settlements along Highway 1 (Halifax-Yarmouth) and in the rural hinterland, including farming districts and fishing villages along the Bay of Fundy shore.

The method used in collecting the raw material for this study was that of direct interrogation with a standardized set of questions. This approach for dialect geography has now become highly refined through use in various parts of Europe and North America.⁶ Replies are elicited by oblique questioning, the field worker avoiding the use of the word or phrase which he hopes to gain in the informant's reply. Only as a last resort does he ask such a question as "Do you talk about a skim of ice?" An item obtained in this way is marked "suggested" in the field notes. Unless otherwise stated below, no forms obtained by suggesting the item have been used in preparing this report.

In recent years the tape recorder has been used to assist the ear and hand of the researcher. Advantages and drawbacks of machine recording in the field have been discussed at length by McDavid and Wilson, among others.⁷ Since 1952 Wilson has perpetuated his field studies on tape, and I used a tape recorder for all interviews. Thus, of all records analyzed for this survey, only the two by Alexander were obtained without machine recording.

The interviews with most of the informants were conducted during two sessions, usually within a period of three or four days, although one required three sessions, and one was completed during the same afternoon and evening. The average total length of time was six hours, and conversations were held in the homes of informants under relaxed conditions that were as free from distractions as possible. In several places where other members of the family were present, their participation in the discussion was discouraged.

The work sheets were adopted after consultation with Rex Wilson to provide comparable data for all Nova Scotia field records.

The informants were chosen to provide a representative sampling of older inhabitants of the area. This approach complements the type of survey made by Alexander and by Wilson, who concentrated on older, native, rural residents. Of the 20 records used for this study, 16 were completed by Wanamaker, 2 by Wilson and Wanamaker, and 2 by Alexander.

The ages of those interviewed varied from 57 to 96, with only 2 under 60, and two-thirds of the total number over 70. Education is hard to assess when one receives such replies as, "Completed

the fourth book", or "Went to grade 8, mostly during winters". However, according to individual responses, the education of these informants ranged from grade 4 through postgraduate university training, as follows: grade school--10; high school--9, of whom 4 completed grade 11; two years college--1; postgraduate study--1. Of the 4 who completed high school, 1 attended business college and 1 went to normal school.

An analysis of the background of informants by age and general level of culture, according to the categories developed for use in the Linguistic Atlas of New England, gives the following distribution: I-A (older or old-fashioned type with little formal education)--12; II-A (better education, but either aged or old-fashioned in usage)--1; II-B (better education, younger and/or more modern)--5; III-A (superior education, more old-fashioned)--1; III-B (well educated and more modern)--2. The male-female ratio of informants was 16:5.

General Conclusions

Western Nova Scotia, including West Hants and the counties of Kings, Annapolis, Digby, Yarmouth, Shelburne, Queens, and Lunenburg, has now been intensively investigated by field workers, although much of the data have not yet been published. According to Rex Wilson, Lunenburg County shows more variants and unique linguistic features than do the adjacent counties.

Although there are unusual features of vocabulary and morphology, it would seem that the Kings County area is not greatly different from mainland Nova Scotia in general. The province as a whole is a conservative area, in general culture as well as a language, but conditions are changing. The two records by Alexander used in this survey were obtained more than two decades before my investigation, at which time the informants, who lived on back roads, were aged 90 and 77. Many of the "relic" forms in this report came from these two informants. Fewer old-fashioned words were given by most of my informants, and it would appear that various sociological factors are at work that have resulted in linguistic changes aside from those to be expected with the passage of a quarter of a century.

This part of Nova Scotia, then, has characteristics of language that are both relic and transitional. Rex Wilson has written that "Nova Scotia is . . . a typical relic area, a region where older forms are preserved."⁸ This statement is true with modification. I was not able to discover as many "relic" terms as was Wilson, nor were any of the items obtained that are listed by Kurath as lexical relics for New England.⁹

Since the questionnaire contains many items relating to rural life, it was highly suitable for use with the non-urban informants chosen for this study. Much lexical information was elicited with regard to fences, barn construction, and farm animals. The tap-

faucet, vest-waistcoat contrasts suggest the dual influence of British and American English. Among unusual or unique items were shiretown, salute (saluting), vault, grade (verb), frolic, and kitty-cornered.

Morphological data show that in the speech of 18 informants, 4 used a majority of non-standard verb forms. The proportion of those using a majority of undeclined plurals was 3/18. The ratio for total non-verbal forms (undeclined plurals, plus anywheres, ways, them for "those", that for "who", and poison for "poisonous") was 5/18. This suggests that speakers in this area have been well drilled in such grammatical forms as appear in the questionnaire, although the figures might differ if one obtained a large corpus of free conversation. In addition, certain unusual forms were obtained, such as swimmed (preterite) and skun (preterite for skin).

The following consonant phonemes and allophones are worthy of comment. The only pronunciation elicited for whinny, whicker, and wharf was /w/. For wheelbarrow, the ratio of /w/ to /hw/ was 15:4; for whip--14:6; for whetstone--11:6. The addition of /r/ in such words as afterfeed, afternoon, pasture, and wash is not uncommon, especially in the speech of older rural residents. Usage is almost evenly divided between /j/ and /hj/ for the initial sound in humor, the respective ratio being 9:7. For words like new, due, Tuesday, and student, the usual pronunciation is the /u/ of boot, although some speakers use /ju/, especially when influenced by British usage.

The pattern of vowel phonemes and diphthongs warrants a summarizing comment on several prominent features of Kings County pronunciation. Although /a/ in such words as half, glass, and pasture, rather than /æ/, is an acquired, prestige pronunciation in some parts of Nova Scotia, it is natural in the language of most of the informants used for this survey. The low back vowel /ɔ/ and its allophones is the standard pronunciation for law, dog, lot, and crop in this area, and indeed for much of Canada. This sound is replaced by /a/, however, in the word father. Further evidence is needed to discover the extent of this usage; in certain other parts of the Maritime Provinces the use of /ɔ/ is common. There is no contrast between Mary and merry, each having the phoneme /ɛ/, but married is pronounced with both /æ/ and /ɛ/ by different speakers in the same region. The use of [ɹv, ɛv] in words like mountain, down, out, and about, as well as the sounds of [ov ~ ov̄] in coat, road, and know, is the standard pattern of speech for natives of Kings County, although they may change these sounds if they are later found to be lacking in prestige.

Language in the Kings County area is in a fluid state. Long an economic and cultural backwater, Nova Scotia is now making progress toward a higher standard of living and improved cultural development. The examination of the language of younger people and those with more education would probably modify the suggestion

given that this is a region of old-fashioned usage. The lack of a large urban center to serve as a focal point means that language in the hinterland changes slowly, but the recent development of Greenwood by the armed forces, expansion of industry, improved roads, and consolidated schools are having a marked effect on mobility of population and the development of a more cosmopolitan outlook. The influence of radio and television on language still has to be assessed, but here, as elsewhere, it is a powerful one.

In a short survey such as this, one cannot cover all the implications of dialect geography. My purpose was to provide certain data which may be used in a variety of ways. Raven I. McDavid and others have commented on by-products of the Linguistic Atlas and related surveys.¹⁰ It is not easy to separate pure and applied research in areal linguistics. One of the problems in collecting unbiased material is the uncertainty of the informant about the correctness of his response, indicated by such questions as "What should I say?" or "Is that the right answer?" There is a real need for the interpretation of raw material by linguistically-trained scholars. Fortunately, that need is now being met to some extent, especially in relation to what could and should be taught in the public schools about language, and how the general public should react to linguistic variants--answering the vexing question, "What is standard usage?"

Facile generalizations about Canadian pronunciation and vocabulary can be avoided only if one has accurate data to assess; hence the importance of making further progress towards the development of a Canadian linguistic atlas, work on which has been lamentably slow.

What remains to be done in Nova Scotia to complete this section of the Canadian atlas? As already indicated above, western Nova Scotia has been investigated by means of a narrow-mesh survey; for the rest of the province there are only scattered records of Alexander's wide-mesh sweep. Following his summer of field work in 1939, Alexander assessed his progress and outlined the settlement history of Nova Scotia.¹¹ His notes provide a basis for considering gaps that still exist in an adequate study of the whole province.

English settlers came directly from England and via the United States (both pre-Loyalist and later immigrants). Cumberland and Colchester counties contain descendants of those who came from England; Guysborough County received disbanded soldiers from the United States. There is, of course, overlapping in this highly simplified outline of national and racial backgrounds; nor should any of the areas mentioned in this section be considered mutually exclusive.

The language of the Germans of Lunenburg County has been examined by Rex Wilson; the Irish, scattered here and there, do not constitute a large, single area; the Acadian French (Digby,

Yarmouth, Cape Breton) are outside the investigation of English in Nova Scotia, but require study as part of the bilingual aspect of Canadian speech. Blacks are comparatively numerous in Nova Scotia, but not in any one locality to the extent of having an appreciable effect on language. They are descended from slaves who came to Nova Scotia with American masters, or from those who emigrated directly from the West Indies. Their children attend racially integrated schools.

As the name of the province suggests, Nova Scotia's history has been closely connected with that of Scotland, and a useful survey could be made of Scottish language, both Highland and Lowland. The influence of the Scots has been pervasive in the central and eastern parts of the province, and the sections to be investigated range from Pictou County, east through Antigonish and beyond, to cover most of Cape Breton Island (where Gaelic is still kept alive by a faithful few).

The areas mentioned above would probably be the most fruitful ones for further research. There is, of course, ample opportunity for specialized studies using different questionnaires; for example regional and/or occupational expressions for farmers or fishermen or those of Scottish descent. The field worker in Nova Scotia can usually be assured of a cordial reception and the hospitality and cooperation of his informants. Most of the people are sober and industrious, having a high regard for education and a keen interest in the way that others act and speak.

Finally, this was a fascinating and rewarding study for me, and, I think, for many of the informants as well--those who must remain anonymous, but who deserve the real credit for any success which a field worker achieves. Often one wishes that the public image of a college professor were different: one might elicit more spontaneous responses if he could approach farmers in the guise of a fertilizer salesman. Certainly field work has a salutary effect on the academician. It is a humbling experience, and teaches one not to be hasty in arriving at conclusions about levels of language, or in rejecting phonological and lexical usage that differs from the idiolect of the researcher.

FOOTNOTES

1. Notes on the Pronunciation of Canadian English as Spoken in Vancouver, B.C., Journal of the Canadian Linguistic Association, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March, 1957), 20.

2. A good example of applied linguistic geography is to be found in Jean Malmstrom, A Study of the Validity of Textbook Statements about Certain Controversial Grammatical Items in the Light of Evidence from the Linguistic Atlas (University of Minnesota Doctoral Dissertation, 1958).

3. For details of Alexander's procedure see Wilson, The Dialect of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, pp. 3, 8-9.

4. The Dialect of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, Language, Vol. 11 (1935), 140-147.

5. For a useful discussion of this topic see Jean Malmstrom and Annabel Ashley, Dialects--U.S.A. (National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), Dialect in Literature, pp. 53-59.

6. See Hans Kurath, Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England (Washington: American Council of Learned Societies, 1939), pp 39-50.

7. Wilson, The Dialect of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, p. 5, n. 1.

8. Ibid., p. 50.

9. Handbook of the Linguistic Geography of New England, pp. 5-6.

10. See Two Decades of the Linguistic Atlas, Journal of English and Germanic Philology, vol. 50 (1951), 106.

11. Linguistic Geography, Queen's Quarterly, vol. 47 (Spring, 1940), 43.