

Recent Work in Maritime Linguistics

Lewis J. Poteet

Volume 16, Number 2, Spring 1987

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad16_2rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Poteet, L. J. (1987). Recent Work in Maritime Linguistics. *Acadiensis*, 16(2), 122–129.

Recent Work in Maritime Linguistics

SURELY THE *BOCCAN* (bogeyman, according to a questionnaire for the forthcoming *Dictionary of Prince Edward Island English*) of Canadian linguists and politicians in recent years has been the fear of assimilation, the extinction of language and culture by another more powerful. While the politicians naturally like to express the fears of their electors, serious students of language realize that the processes of word-borrowing and adaptation between languages in contact make a language what it is. Yet most of the authors under review here, all of them students of language use in New Brunswick, warn of the possible extinction of *le parler acadien et québécois*, Micmac, Maliseet, or dialectal English.¹ They echo Cyril Byrne, who while affirming in a 1983 article that local speech patterns have survived here and pointing to their recognition in a range of linguistic and folklore publications, nevertheless wondered if these materials might become "monuments to the past".²

Since 1983, local speech has continued to receive increasing attention from linguists. The appearance in 1985 of Frederick G. Cassidy's *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap Press of Harvard, 1985) was a major event in this work. The product of decades of work, this project gathered data from oral and written sources, made inclusiveness a happy and daring principle, identified regional distribution of folk speech items, and presented it all in an accessible and lively way. The 1982 publication of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, which Cyril Byrne praised as a "cultural...event",³ set a high standard for Canadian lexicographers, with its quotation of examples to illustrate changes in meaning over time. Terry Pratt's *Dictionary of Prince Edward Island English* is being prepared for publication.⁴ My own *South Shore Phrase Book* and *Second South Shore Phrase Book* (Hantsport, N.S., Lancelot Press, 1983 and 1985) offer a sampling of material from the Nova Scotia vernacular lexicon. And the three new publications under review here by Karin Flikeid, Sinclair Robinson and Donald Smith, and the contributors to Reavley Gair, ed., *A Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick* show the remarkably high level of activity among students of the language of this province.

Karin Flikeid's *La Variation phonétique dans le parler acadien du nord-est du*

- 1 For an earlier examination of this question, see T.K. Pratt, "Island English: The Case of the Disappearing Dialect", in Verner Smitheram, David Milne, and Satadal Dasgupta, eds., *The Garden Transformed: Prince Edward Island 1945-1980* (Charlottetown, Ragweed Press, 1982).
- 2 "The Vernacular Tradition in Atlantic Canada", *Acadiensis*, XIII, 1 (Autumn 1983), pp. 142-9.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 143-4.
- 4 For a report on an earlier stage in this project, see T.K. Pratt, "The Use of Dialect Words on Prince Edward Island", *The English Quarterly*, Vol. 13, 4 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 60-9.

Nouveau-Brunswick: Etude sociolinguistique (New York, Peter Lang, 1984) shows the careful rigour, the disciplined faith in definition and statistics, and the serial clarity of the best of that often maligned breed, the doctoral thesis (it was presented at the Université de Sherbrooke). The field work was done during the late 1970s on “la péninsule acadienne”, parishes in Gloucester and Northumberland counties, around the towns of Shippagan and Tracadie. Based on economic, social, educational, and historical data about the strongly francophone population, the study approaches the language through its sounds, and it is a model of the Labovian sociolinguistic use of phonology. (William Labov’s work on sound variation in relation to social, economic, and other variables in such major American cities as New York and Philadelphia taught a generation of linguists how this work should be done.)

Not everyone approaches languages exclusively through phonology, though it has traditionally been the periodic table (or boiler room manual) of linguistics. Terry Pratt, for example, eventually plans to do phonological and grammatical studies of PEI speech, but he has chosen, as I did, to begin his work with the lexicon, and to present the words first. And much recent work in sociolinguistics has criticized the habit of emphasizing “descriptive fieldwork at the expense of comparative analysis”.⁵

Now it is true that Flikeid’s study proceeds from careful comparative work on what has been done with Acadian speech, as she isolates the sounds she will study. And she is able to conclude with some confidence that in this region, self-sufficiency, so highly valued but elusive in the economic sphere, is remarkably present in the language. Among her sample of more than eighty representative informants, “il n’y a aucune indication d’un abandon progressif des variantes acadiennes”. She is well aware that the area is vulnerable to change, and she admits that in Moncton, for example, the intrusion of English is greater. But her own study is devoted to a place where “une communauté de forte cohésion interne” allows the study of the interplay of varieties of Acadian French, and her research supports strongly the hypothesis that speakers make a deliberate choice among varieties, reaffirming the traditional variant. Together with B. Edward Gesner, she is working on a study of Nova Scotia Acadian speech; a report on this project appears in *Papers from the 8th Annual Meeting of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association* (1984).⁶

- 5 Gerry Philipsen and Donald Carbaugh, “A Bibliography of fieldwork in the ethnography of communication”, *Language in Society* 15, 3 (September 1986), p. 387. Readers interested in the possibilities of this field may want to look up two essays by Dell Hymes, “Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life”, in J. Gumperz and D. Hymes, eds., *Directions in Sociolinguistics* (New York, 1972), and “Linguistic Problems in Defining the Concept of Tribe”, in J. Baugh and J. Sherzer, eds., *Language in Use* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1984).
- 6 Readers interested in following other work in sociolinguistics in the Maritimes may want to consult this volume and its companion issues for 1983 and 1985, where they will find papers by Sandra Clarke (on St. John’s English), Maurice Holder and Robert Ryan (on Acadian intonation and personal pronouns), Pierre Gérin (on *chiac*, the name for the Acadian variety

If Karin Flikeid's study represents the best qualities of the specialized scholarly investigation — the study in depth of a carefully limited area — Sinclair Robinson and Donald Smith's *Practical Handbook of Quebec and Acadian French* (Toronto, Anansi, 1984) shows how scholarly work may be made accessible and attractive to a wide audience. This is a revision of their 1973 *Handbook of Canadian French* with some 1000 new entries, new chapters on Acadian French, and Acadian and Quebec grammar and pronunciation. The new title itself reflects the progressively greater emphasis on distinguishing local strains of language. Though its topical arrangement of the word list may be disconcerting to the student, whether linguist or average user, and is perhaps not the best choice of formats, it is full of interesting material for anglophones interested in expanding their vocabulary of spoken French. The words are classified under subjects like "Birds", "The Weather", "Swear Words", and as a result the "Divers (Miscellaneous)" section is by far the largest. A system of asterisk and italic notation provides advice concerning level of usage, and all but one six-page section of entries (the one devoted to Acadian French) is set up in three columns listing the Quebec word or phrase, the Standard French, and the English-Canadian word or translation. The Acadian section lists only words peculiar to Acadian, but the authors note that most Quebec vocabulary is also used in the Acadian dialects. Antonine Maillet, the celebrated author of *La Sagouine*, assisted in the preparation of material on Acadian French, which also includes distinctive grammatical characteristics.

There is as yet no single standard dictionary of Québécois, far less of Acadian. But what there is, among the half-dozen interesting word-books for Quebec French, suggests that a precise description would show much more complexity than Robinson and Smith can present in any detail. They give a helpful annotated bibliography of these dictionaries, from Léandre Bergeron's big, popular *Dictionnaire de la langue québécoise* (Montreal, VLB éditeur, 1980) to Gérard Dagenais' *Dictionnaire des difficultés de la langue française au Canada* (Quebec-Montreal, Editions Pedagogia, 1967), a classic by a purist which is "a treasure-house of Québécois words and expressions, all of which the author wishes to correct". To this list should be added the "Volume de Présentation" of the *Dictionnaire du Français Québécois*, ed. Claude Poirier (Sainte-Foy, Laval University Press, 1985), a projected comprehensive dictionary which will give regional variants and, like the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, a history of usage. This volume gives a sampling of what will no doubt be more nearly a definitive study.

But until the larger work appears, Robinson and Smith's book can be highly recommended, especially for the layman. Its limited sample represents judicious choices, avoiding both purism and giddy over-inclusiveness: they include words like "drette-là" (right on the spot), "dérincher" (to break, bust; to beat up), along

spoken around Shediac), and Gary Butler and Ruth King (on codé-switching, or the use of both French and English in conversational strategies in L'Anse à Canards, Newfoundland).

with “Standard Québécois” terms like “rondelle” (puck), for which there are several other available if unofficial choices. A larger book would permit listing beside “flo*” (teenager, kid, m), a companion word for the female, “flounne”, whose use is reported in the Gaspé.

For Louisiana Acadian French, there simply has not been very much research done to date.⁷ One interesting if perhaps not traditionally scholarly work is Jules O. Daigle, *A Dictionary of the Cajun Language* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, Edwards Brothers, 1984). In 600 exuberant pages he illustrates his theory that Cajun is a language, the integrity of which he wishes to protect in the form it took just after the First World War. You will not learn from Robinson and Smith, but only from Daigle, that “drapeau” in Louisiana means “diaper”, a specificity he attributes to popular Cajun anger at France and England; on the other hand, you learn only from the *Practical Handbook* that “flacatoune (f)” is Acadian for “home-made beer”, a meaning that is kin to one reported from Gaspé English — “flockatoon”, a “happy drunken party, after hard work”.

A Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick (Fredericton, Fiddlehead Poetry Books, 1985) devotes less than a third of its 286 pages to linguistic history, but the five essays touch all four major languages and open up to a wide readership a treasure of good scholarly work. Each of the authors begins by explaining for the layman certain key concepts of the field — the difference between written or literary and spoken Micmac, with its amazing “great internal variation”, for example, or the wonderfully clear explanation of the meaning of “dialect” by Murray Kinloch, followed by the very funny list of “difficulties of the dialect historian” — immigration, education, and “pioneer conditions [of] life”. Then four of the five provide a concise introduction to the discipline, up-to-date and remarkably comprehensive.

Roy Wright’s “The Micmac Language” sets forth the regional distribution of the Micmac people and gives a sense of the mobility and, during working years, “wholesale adoption of English” which does not alter their tenacious pride in their own culture. (During the summer of 1986 several reports in newspapers and magazines drew attention to the threatened status of Micmac and to the efforts being made to keep it alive.⁸) It is interesting that Micmac has, as Wright says, “a richness of spelling systems unmatched even by other American Indian languages”, a language feature left over from the successive visits of different denominations of missionaries. Its lexicon, too, shows many borrowings from French, “lasiet, nasiet”, (plate) from “l’assiette” and “(u)ne assiette”, for example, and “tap’tan”, “tapatal” from “des patates”. Wright offers a guide to pronunciation but points the reader interested in verb forms to a series of articles and books,

7 See B. Edward Gesner, “Les parlers cajuns de la Louisiane—où en est la recherche?” *Papers from the 9th Annual Meeting, Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association* (1985).

8 See “Bringing the Maritimes’ first language back from the brink”, *Atlantic Insight*, July 1986, and a speech by Peter J. Christmas made at the Winnipeg conference of the Association for Canadian Studies, reported in the *Halifax Chronicle Herald*, 26 July 1986).

a list unfortunately hard to use because the references are incomplete. But the persistent reader should be able to find *Pacifique* (1938-40, 1939, 1941) and others; the *Papers from the 9th Annual Meeting of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association* (1985) includes two on Micmac orthography and verb forms by John Hewson and Stephanie Inglis.

Lazlo Szabo's "Maliseet: The Language of the St. John River Indians" presents that other Algonkian language through an original, concise, multi-purpose technique. He tells a story in the language, providing simultaneous literal translation, and the story shares both language and history at once, in the voice of the people. Like Micmac, Maliseet has a particular distinction between nouns by which they are animate or inanimate, and the verb, noun, and pronoun inflections include the "obviative" ending, to signal that "two animate third persons are somehow involved in the action". Other unusual grammatical and morphological categories in Maliseet signal particular kinds of time and action, one of them "not (that) this person is acting on that person but the other way around". The "obviative" seems to function somewhat as a passive voice does in verbs, but its exact name and use are subject to debate — is it "genitive", "accusative", or "fourth person"? This fascinating expressive device is not easy for a layman to understand, but Szabo and Wright give a sense of its peculiar utility. Students of both these tenacious but threatened native languages may be interested in *Language, Society, and Identity* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986) by John Edwards of St. Francis Xavier University. Edwards examines the role of language in the survival of minority groups, and brings to these questions a realistic, pluralist consciousness well aware of the turbulent ebbs and flows which make language change natural and vital.

In Louise Péronnet's "Acadian Forms of Speech", a useful survey of the history of Acadian linguistic study is accompanied by graphs showing the regional origins, in France, of Acadian family names. She then offers a sampling of some lexical differences between Quebec and Acadian French, a list which might lead a curious reader back to Robinson and Smith's *Practical Handbook*. Pointing to the considerable evidence of the antiquity of Acadian French, she shows several ways in which its grammar is more functional than that of Standard French. For example, the "- ont" and "- iont" 3rd person verb endings and the passé simple and imperfect subjunctive endings may be traced to 13th and 14th century Anglo-Norman. Although she cites Flikeid's work, Péronnet seems to ignore it in her emphasis on the threat of English. According to her, the battle for survival has already been lost in the lexicon: "from now on, the battle will be waged at the grammatical level".

A. Murray Kinloch's "The English Language in New Brunswick 1784-1984" is clear, balanced, comprehensive, and entertaining. The past president of the American Dialect Society, the dean of Maritime linguists, and a keen phonologist who runs annual workshops on sound at the APLA conventions, Murray Kinloch has encouraged most of the new work now appearing, and his

own essay is a word-hoard from a perspective long awaited. The question of the origin of New Brunswick English gets here a considered answer: "it seems best to choose the South East Midland dialect of Early Modern English...[as] the form of English that has contributed most to New Brunswick speech".⁹ Kinloch's account of the sounds of New Brunswick speech uncovers a number of interesting ways in which the sounds made in language in the past may be evidenced through close examination of variation in the present and variant spellings in Charles G.D. Roberts' work. In the forms of verbs, too, as on the South Shore of Nova Scotia, old patterns are here preserved. In presenting the particularities of the lexicon of the province, Kinloch tells the story of the typical pattern of immigrant settler life, working into it the words adapted or invented (or preserved) to deal with this life. Here you'll find "snake fence", "zigzag fence", and "worm fence", words for what came after the "root" or "stump fence"; "cant dogs" (useful animals, but not the livestock used to move such a fence into place); and "Scripture timber", a phrase for a good measure of good principle, all of which are too little known today.¹⁰

Finally, Anthony B. House's "The English Language in Francophone New Brunswick" gives a concise and witty idea of the usefulness of some phonological study. He dares — and I admire this — to predict what will happen to certain sounds, intonation and syntactic patterns, and vocabulary, by observing the curious influence on the vowels spoken by anglophones in Edmundston and Shediac of the French sounds around them. He makes it look easy: "When dealing with spoken English, as well as written English, any informed and curious person can become a linguist. It is as natural as speech itself. One asks a few questions and seeks some reasonable answers". Not all linguists would agree, but I do. And his attitude toward change is exemplary: describing the intrusion of gallicisms into English, he writes, "This will not destroy the English of francophone New Brunswick, but will strengthen it". A dialectologist, he offers, "may be summed up as a linguist who has his feet on the ground and his ears open to the languages around him". As these three recent publications show, there are a few of those around.

Implicit in much of the foregoing is the continuing debate among students of language over method and emphasis. J.K. Chambers and Peter Trudgill refer to the "mindless friction" of the past, between linguists and dialectologist, which has recently resolved into a "rapprochement, with the recognition that the study of variation in language is manageable and, concomitantly, that studying dialect

9 For an analogous if perhaps less specific inquiry, see Lewis Poteet, "'Elizabethan English' on Nova Scotia's South Shore", *Nova Scotia Historical Review* (1984), reprinted, revised in *The Second South Shore Phrase Book* (Hantsport, N.S., Lancelot Press, 1985).

10 Readers interested in measure, in term and concept, may enjoy Jacqueline Baum and Lewis Poteet's "Rough Measure in Maritime Dialect Research", forthcoming in *New York Folklore*, no. 3-4 (1987).

is a central source of variation data".¹¹ Briefly, this friction has arisen because much new work in linguistics has been theoretical and hypothetical, more like MIT computer models of the brain or Bell Labs physics studies of sound to improve radar, than the folkloristic local-history collections of dialectology. Some key points of difference are the scientific basis of the work on the one hand, and its accessibility and utility on the other. The dialectologists and linguists who work in this region are far from unaware of the problems that led to the friction and of the possibilities that promise to appear in the rapprochement. In fact, some sense of the self-criticism and innovation that informs their work may be seen in a recent essay by Terry Pratt, "A Case for Direct Questioning in Traditional Fieldwork",¹² an inquiry so cogent that it called forth a response from the great American linguist Raven I. McDavid, Jr., just before his untimely death two years ago: "Eliciting: Direct, Indirect, and Oblique".¹³ One of the key issues in linguistic methodology is whether the primacy of phonology will endure. The traditional faith in phonology seems based on an unstated assumption: in analyzing sounds, we feel we are catching the informant at a level he will find hard to manipulate consciously. Good mimics of accent exist, but they are few. Therefore, phonology seems more scientific than lexicography, which must deal with slippery meanings or estimates of usage, which must be verified by sampling. In fact, as A.B. House's excellent essay shows, sound is infectious, and variation shows the influence of the sounds of one language on another.

What is language, anyway? It is so complex that new ways are needed to explain it adequately. I am particularly fond of the analogy of the ocean and wave shape for language. Thus I am delighted by Harold Paddock's "A Post-Bailey Paradox in Newfoundland English Phonology",¹⁴ which seeks to test this analogy concretely. But what he discovers in Newfoundland speech sound patterns leads him to guess that an apparent contradiction of the theory may be explained by "abnormally conscious efforts to assimilate linguistically". It is precisely this factor, of conscious choice from among possible variants, which must be put beside any analogy which envisions language as a great uncontrollable transpersonal force. For this choice is the key to, among many other good, essential truths about language, the phenomenon of *play* in words which is so large a part of the power, beauty, and utility of language. This play is particularly evident in areas, such as New Brunswick, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Quebec, and Louisiana, where languages and dialects are in frequent contact. As recognition of the element of conscious choice from among known varieties and variant forms moves more and more into method, we may expect the language study of this area to find more and more fruitful the study of

11 In *Dialectology* (New York, 1980), pp. 17-18.

12 *American Speech*, 58 (Summer, 1983), pp. 150-5.

13 *American Speech*, 60 (Winter, 1985), pp. 309-17.

14 *Papers from the 3rd Annual Meeting of the APLA* (1979).

linguistic interchange and play. Modifying a view of assimilation which makes competing languages seem like Sohrab and Rostum or Othello and Desdemona, murderer and victim, such a change in emphasis should give the whole view of linguistics a different tone.

LEWIS J. POTEET

Of Data Sets and Mind Sets — A Critical Review of Recent Writing on Canadian Architectural History

AMID THE SPATE OF "NEW" HISTORIES that have emerged in recent years has come a heightened interest in our material past and most especially our 'built landscape' or architectural history. The fascination with the past which is part of a new Canadian self-consciousness, disillusionment with contemporary patterns of mass residential design, and a period of unparalleled prosperity expressed in no small part through one's housing, have combined to give older buildings a special value and mystique particularly among large numbers of middle class Canadians.

Accordingly, older houses and historic buildings and even whole neighbourhoods have come to be renovated, restored and reproduced in abundance. Individuals, organizations, institutions and various levels of government have been galvanized into action as advocates of preservation, and a great deal has been done to arrest the deterioration and destruction of older buildings, thereby ensuring that there will be a material legacy to pass on to future generations. These efforts have made our extant architectural past a saleable commodity and have captured the imagination of a broad segment of the public in a way unmatched by most other forms of history. In the process a wide range of writing on historical architecture has been generated to serve this movement and this market.

An examination of the comparative flood of recent works reveals a varied and confusing set of investigative responses to the problem of understanding both the artifact itself and the processes that have produced it. It is evident that practitioners of architectural history have been drawn from several quarters and not surprisingly a great range of research approaches and objectives have been implemented. As yet there is no coherent research methodology, let alone an accepted vocabulary or framework for arriving at a full appreciation of these structures. Nevertheless, it is possible in Canada to identify two separate scholarly traditions now engaged in the study of our building history. Each gives evidence of a distinctive mind set in terms of both the building types judged worthy of study and the intellectual orientation necessary for interpretation.

The first of these traditions arises from academic Art History though, as will