

An Assessment of the Usage of Canadianisms, their American Equivalents and the McGill Experience among Canadian and American McGill Students

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Introduction

A Canadianism is a Canadian word used for something that exists throughout the English-speaking world, with equivalent words in other forms of English used outside of Canada (Boberg, 2010: 116). Between 1999 and 2005, the North American Regional Vocabulary Survey (NARVS) was conducted, where a set of Canadianisms, their nationwide frequencies of use and their non-Canadian equivalents were presented (Boberg, 2010: 116). In 2016, the most popular Canadianisms selected among the majority of Canadians in the NARVS study, along with their American equivalents, was restudied among both Canadian and American McGill students. The effect of the McGill experience was also taken into account, examining if there was any influence on which words were chosen. This seemed crucial considering that Canadians at McGill University make up approximately 75% of the student body, while Americans make up only about 5% (McGill, 2016). The Canadianisms and their American equivalents, respectively, studied were: *grade one* vs. *first grade*, *eavestroughs* vs. *gutters*, *bank machine* vs. *ATM*, *bachelor apartment* vs. *studio apartment*, *runners/running shoes* vs. *sneakers/tennis shoes*, and *washroom* vs. *bathroom/restroom*. Unlike the NARVS study, in the 2016 study, the terms *runners* and *running shoes* are treated as one lexical item, despite varying regionally. This seemed fitting considering that when the usages of both the terms from the NARVS study were combined, they accounted for a majority (54%) of Canadian responses.

Different interpretive issues were focused on when assessing the usage of Canadianisms among both groups. For Canadian students, the focus was on whether their use of Canadianisms has been retained or if there is any sway towards using American terms. For Americans, the focus was on the effect of the McGill experience, specifically if any Canadianisms have started to be used since their time in Montreal. The apparent-time hypothesis, a sociolinguistic construct, assumes that most features of language are acquired during childhood, and remain relatively unchanged throughout an individual's lifetime once that individual is past a certain age (Bailey et al., 1991). This study also seeks to address this.

The hypothesis is: there will be some continuation of the use of Canadianisms among Canadians, but ultimately, there will be a decline in each Canadianism's usage since the NARVS study, with Canadians starting to use the American equivalents more frequently. In the case of

the American students, it is expected that they will continue to use their American terms in great numbers, but there will be some use of Canadianisms after coming to McGill, putting the apparent-time hypothesis to the test. Use of Canadianisms among Americans is expected to occur specifically with the use of *washroom*, since it is a term used so frequently in daily speech at McGill. These results were predicted based on years of prior contact with Canadian and American individuals at McGill University, and elsewhere.

Method

The respondents chosen were 46 McGill Students. 23 of the respondents were Canadian students chosen by the researcher, who were known to have lived in Canada for the majority of their lives. The other 23 respondents were Americans in their 3rd or 4th year at McGill, who were known to have lived in the United States for the majority of their lives, only living in Canada since starting university at McGill. Using SurveyMonkey, a 13 question online survey was created. 6 of the questions presented a definition for a word, where there were two options: the Canadianism and American equivalent. In order to directly assess the effect of the McGill experience, there were 6 follow-up questions immediately after each of those questions, asking when the student started using the word they had chosen, with the options: before coming to McGill or after coming to McGill. The last question of the survey asked the respondent where they were from, with options: Quebec, Canada outside Quebec, and USA (Appendix 1). Data was gathered from respondents by having the link of the online survey sent to all 46 students via email, text message, or online messenger. The results were communicated in an online format provided by SurveyMonkey.

Results

Table 1 - The usage of Canadianisms and their American equivalents among **Canadian** students

Canadianism	Proportion of Canadians (%)	American equivalent	Proportion of Canadians (%)
Grade one	100	First grade	0
Eavestroughs	35	Gutters	65
Bank machine	17	ATM	83
Bachelor apartment	26	Studio apartment	73
Runners/running shoes	61	Sneakers/tennis shoes	39
Washroom	61	Bathroom/restroom	39

Table 2 - The usage of Canadianisms and their American equivalents among **American** students

Canadianism	Proportion of Americans (%)	American equivalent	Proportion of Americans (%)
Grade one	9	First grade	91
Eavestroughs	0	Gutters	100
Bank machine	0	ATM	100
Bachelor apartment	9	Studio apartment	91
Runners/running shoes	22	Sneakers/tennis shoes	78
Washroom	17	Bathroom/restroom	83

Table 3 – The Response of **Canadian** students to the survey question: “When did you start using the word you just chose?”

Canadianism	Before coming to McGill (%)	After coming to McGill (%)	American Equivalent	Before coming to McGill (%)	After coming to McGill (%)
Grade one	100	0	First grade	-----	-----
Eavestroughs	100	0	Gutters	100	0
Bank machine	100	0	ATM	100	0
Bachelor apartment	83	17	Studio apartment	76	23
Runners/running shoes	100	0	Sneakers/tennis shoes	78	22
Washroom	93	7	Bathroom/restroom	100	0

Table 4 – The Response of **American** students to the question: “When did you start using the word you just chose?”

Canadianism	Before coming to McGill (%)	After coming to McGill (%)	American Equivalent	Before coming to McGill (%)	After coming to McGill (%)
Grade one	100	0	First grade	100	0
Eavestroughs	-----	-----	Gutters	96	4
Bank machine	-----	-----	ATM	100	0
Bachelor apartment	100	0	Studio apartment	81	19
Runners/running shoes	100	0	Sneakers/tennis shoes	94	6
Washroom	25	75	Bathroom/restroom	100	0

Table 5 – The usage of Canadianisms in the NARVS questionnaire versus the 2016 Study

Canadianism	NARVS freq. (%)	Proportion of Canadians in 2016 (%)
Grade one	85	100
Eavestroughs	55	35
Bank machine	55	17
Bachelor apartment	62	26
Runners/running shoes	54	61
Washroom	50	61

Discussion

Limitations

In the 2016 study, some limitations on the sample must be taken into account. While American students given the survey were either in their 3rd or 4th year at McGill, it must be acknowledged that 2 or 3 years of education in Canada may not be sufficient for examining change in word choice. Furthermore, the international nature of McGill University could lessen the salience of Canadian linguistic influence on Americans depending on their social contact with other nationalities and languages at McGill. Additionally, in accessing for student background, the survey did not ask respondents to specify exactly where they were from but presented the options Quebec, Canada outside of Quebec and USA. Thus, it must be acknowledged that the 2016 data is not representative of a nationwide sample, and is also limited to one general age range and education level, young adults attending university.

Identification of Results

In assessing Canadian usage of Canadianisms and their American equivalents in 2016, the Canadianism, *grade one* was selected by 100% of the Canadian respondents. The Canadianism *eavestroughs* was selected among 35% of Canadians, making *gutters* the more popular term with 65%. Furthermore, 17% of Canadians chose the term *bank machine*, while 83% chose the term *ATM*. In 2016, a majority (73%) of Canadians selected *studio apartment*, with a minority

(26%) selecting *bachelor apartment*. The Canadianism *runners/running shoes* was selected by the majority (61%) of Canadians, while 39% selected *sneakers/tennis shoes*. Likewise, 61% of Canadians selected the Canadianism *washroom*, and 39% selected the American term, *bathroom/restroom*. All of the Canadian respondents who had selected the terms *grade one*, *eavestroughs*, *gutters*, *bank machine*, *ATM*, *runners/running shoes* and *bathroom/restroom*, selected that they were using these terms before coming to McGill. Variation was seen among those Canadians who had selected *bachelor apartment*, where 83% selected using the term before coming to McGill, and 17% selected using it after. Moreover, of the Canadians who selected *studio apartment*, 76% used the term before coming to McGill, while 23% started using it after McGill. Variation was also present among Canadians who chose *sneakers/tennis shoes*, with 78% claiming to use the term before coming to McGill, and 22% starting to use it after. A majority (93%) of the Canadians who had selected *washroom* were using the term before coming to McGill, while 7% started using the term after coming to McGill.

When examining American usage, 9% of American respondents chose the Canadianism *grade one*, and 91% chose the term *first grade*. All of the American respondents in the study selected the terms *gutters* and *ATM*, over *eavestroughs* and *bank machine*. A majority of 91% Americans selected the term *studio apartment*, while only 9% selected Canadianism *bachelor apartment*. The Canadianism *runners/running shoes* was selected by 22% of Americans, while 78% selected *sneakers/tennis shoes*. Moreover, 17% of Americans chose the term *washroom*, while 83% chose the term *bathroom/restroom*. All of the American respondents who had selected the terms, *grade one*, *first grade*, *ATM*, *bachelor apartment*, *runners/running shoes* and *bathroom/restroom*, claimed that they were using these terms before coming to McGill. Variation in use occurred among Americans where 96% of those who had selected *gutters*, were using the term before coming to McGill, and 4% were using it after. Furthermore, 81% of those who had selected *studio apartment* were using the term before coming to McGill, while 19% started using it after. Of the Americans who selected *sneakers/tennis shoes*, 94% had been using the term before McGill, and 6% started using it after. Finally, 25% of those who had selected *washroom*, started using the term before coming to McGill, while 75% started using the term after coming to McGill.

i) Comparison of 2016 study to the NARVS study

In the NARVS study, *grade one* was the term most popular among Canadians with 85% selecting it. Since then, the term has gained even more popularity with 100% of Canadians selecting it in 2016. Today, *bachelor apartment* accounts for 26% of the responses among Canadians, a substantial decline from 62% a decade earlier. The Canadianisms *bank machine* and *eavestroughs* were both selected by 55% of Canadians (NARVS), and since then, have declined to 17% and 35%, respectively. *Runners/running shoes* accounted for the choice of 54%

Canadians in the NARVS study, and the term continues to be prevalent with 61%. Lastly, 61% of Canadians selected the Canadianism *washroom* in 2016, an increase from NARVS data.

ii) Comparison to studies by Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) and Chambers (2002)

In 1972, "The Survey of Canadian English" was conducted, involving over 14,000 school children and their parents in every province of Canada (Scargill et al., 1972). The use of Canadianism *eavestroughs* and the American term *gutters* was also examined in the 1972 study. The percentages for male parents, female parents, male students and female students in the 1972 study were averaged in order to be comparable with 2016 data. When averaged, 58% of Canadian respondents chose the term *eavestroughs*, 25% chose the term *gutters* and 14% chose another name. The figure for *eavestroughs* is very close to the 55% from the NARVS study in 1999-2005. However today, the use of *eavestroughs* has declined to 35%, while Canadians using *gutters* has greatly increased, from 25% (1972) to 65% (2016).

In a 2002 study conducted by Chambers, a survey was carried out in the Golden Horseshoe region in Southern Ontario, which crosses the Canada-United States border. The use of the Canadianism *runners/running shoes* and American equivalent *sneakers* was assessed in this study. 87% of Canadian respondents preferred *runners/running shoes*, while 99% of American respondents preferred *sneakers*. The Canadian response for *sneakers* was 13%. Though this is a regional study, its importance lies in its unique location, showing that across the border, direct influence of the American term *sneakers* appears stronger than the influence of Canadian term *runners/running shoes*.

Analysis of Results

Grade one being the most popular Canadianism in the NARVS study (with 85% of Canadians selecting the term), and then gaining even more popularity among Canadians in the 2016 study, with 100%, suggests that the Canadianism will continue to be used among a majority of Canadians in the future. Likewise, the increase in the Canadianisms *runners/running shoes* and *washroom* since the NARVS study indicates that these terms will continue to be the popular choice over the American equivalents, for Canadians. However, in 2016, the majority of Canadians have begun leaning towards using American terms, *ATM*, *gutters* and *studio apartment*, rather than the Canadianisms. Such a shift since the NARVS study indicates that these American terms have become prevalent among young Canadians.

When assessing American usage, all of the American terms were chosen by majority of the American students in the study, with even 100% of American respondents selecting the terms

gutters and *ATM*. As a result, one could assume that American terms will continue to be the popular choice among Americans. However, there was considerable usage of Canadianisms among Americans, with 22% selecting *runners/running shoes*, 17% selecting *washroom*, 9% choosing *grade one* and 9% choosing *bachelor apartment*, perhaps suggesting that these terms are considered acceptable or understandable among Americans.

In assessing when the students started using the words they chose, 100% of Canadians selected that they were using the terms *grade one*, *eavestroughs*, *bank machine* and *runners/running shoes* before coming to McGill, suggesting that these Canadianisms may be engrained in Canadians since childhood. 100% of the Canadians who had selected American terms *gutters*, *ATM* and *bathroom/restroom* were also using these terms before coming to McGill, highlighting that Canadians' use of American terms is by no means recent. Furthermore, 100% of the Americans who had selected the Canadianisms *grade one*, *bachelor apartment* and *runners/running shoes*, were using the terms before coming to McGill, suggesting that the use of Canadianisms may be considered acceptable or understandable among Americans in the States. The Americans who selected the American terms, *first grade*, *ATM*, and *bathroom/restroom*, selected that they were using these words before coming to McGill and continued to do so, signifying that the McGill experience did not cause them to shift towards using Canadianisms. The McGill experience had no influence on the word choice chosen by these Canadian and American students, who had selected that they have been using the same terms now that they were prior to McGill.

On the other hand, 17% of the Canadians who had selected *bachelor apartment*, and 7% of those who had selected *washroom*, started using these Canadianisms after coming to McGill. When assessing Canadian use of American terms, 23% of the Canadians who had selected *studio apartment* and 22% of those who had selected *sneakers/tennis shoes*, also started using these terms after coming to McGill, indicating that the shift to American word usage was brought about by the McGill experience. Conversely, 75% of the Americans who had selected *washroom* started using the Canadianism after coming to McGill. Furthermore, 4% of the American students who had selected American terms *gutters*, 19% who had selected *studio apartment*, and 6% of those who had selected *sneakers/tennis shoes*, started using the terms after coming to McGill, showing that something about the McGill experience is influential in increasing American usage, even among Americans.

Explanation of Results

Since the NARVS study, an increase in the usage of the Canadianisms, *grade one*, *washroom*, and *runners/runnings shoes*, among Canadians, has been observed. The gaining popularity of the Canadianism *grade one*, in particular, can be explained by the institutional support it receives from the school system (Boberg, 2010: 116). Likewise, the increase in the term *washroom* may also be explained by institutional influence, as all schools, businesses, restaurants, etc. require toilet facilities, making the word one that is capable of being perpetuated easily. At the same time, there was also a decrease in the usage of the Canadianisms, *eavestroughs*, *bank machine* and *bachelor apartment*, among Canadians, accompanied by an increasing inclination to use their American equivalents instead. Additionally, all the Canadians in the study who had selected the American terms, *gutters* and *bathroom/restroom*, instead of Canadianisms, *eavestroughs* and *washroom*, claimed to have been using the American terms before coming to McGill, signifying that the use of these American terms among Canadians is not a recent phenomenon.

Such increase in American word usage may be explained by America's dominance in becoming a more accepted standard of English in Canada. American media dominates Canadian popular culture. Popular film produced almost exclusively in Hollywood, and Canadians' access to all major American television networks, provide the means for American vocabulary and slang terms to spread without difficulty (Boberg, 2010: 31). Furthermore, the close proximity of Canada to the US, is vital to the amount of contact Canadians have with American English, which is only exacerbated when considering that cross-border influence has always flowed predominantly northward (Boberg, 2010: 30). This is observed in Chambers' study where despite Canadians and Americans being located so near to the border, American linguistic influence was much stronger, with more Canadians selecting the American term *sneakers*, than Americans selecting the Canadian term *runners/running shoes* (2002). Moreover, many Canadian industries have significant levels of American ownership, and many Canadian companies prosper by extending their operations to the US (Boberg, 2010: 33). Thus, these industries/companies, owned by or located in the US would most likely be using American terms over Canadian ones. These results from the 2016 study may also be explained by the changing attitudes of Canadians towards American English/culture over time. If Canadians hold a critical, hostile or resentful attitude towards American culture, then they presumably are less likely to want to use American terms, and may instead choose to hold onto using Canadianisms (Boberg, 2010: 30). Thus, the fact that the usage of *eavestroughs*, *bank machine* and *bachelor apartment* has declined, may mean that more Canadians are letting go of Canadianisms and are instead being more accepting of American culture. This acceptance is reiterated by the increasing use of the words *gutters*, *ATM* and *studio apartment*. What were once minority terms used among Canadians have become more accepted in daily speech.

In addition, the McGill experience proved not only to have an effect on the word choice of American students coming to McGill, but also on Canadians. Significant amounts of change in word choice occurred among Canadians, where 17% of Canadians who had selected *bachelor apartment*, 23% of those who selected *studio apartment* and 22% of those who selected *sneakers*, all started doing so after coming to McGill. Likewise, significant change occurred among Americans, where 19% who had selected *studio apartment*, and 75% who had selected *washroom*, started using these terms after coming to McGill. The variation among the Canadian and American students who made changes to their word choice for the terms *bachelor apartment* or *studio apartment*, may be explained by what is typical of the McGill experience, where after first year, students typically move out of residence and move into their own apartment. For many students, this may have been their first time searching for or moving into their own apartment, thus accounting for the increase in using such terms at McGill. The 75% of American students who had selected *washroom* since coming to McGill may be explained by their attendance of a public institution in Canada, McGill University, where the use of *washroom* may be perpetuated by peers or members of staff on a daily basis. The 22% of Canadian students who started using *sneakers/tennis shoes* after coming to McGill may be explained by the increasing American influence mentioned above. This American influence may perhaps grow even stronger at McGill due to the university's international nature, where international students may also be using American terms, and where even 5% of Americans may hold a strong linguistic influence on their peers.

The fact that many respondents, despite being Canadian or American, continued using terms they were using before attending McGill, perhaps suggests that there was no need at McGill to make a change in their word choice. For example, terms *grade one* and *first grade* have no application to McGill daily life, as they are not University-related terms like “first year” or “freshman”. As a result, it makes sense that the use of *grade one* and *first grade* didn't experience any change once coming to McGill.

Evaluation of Hypothesis

The hypothesis did not that predict that Canadians' word choice would change after coming to McGill, but instead expected that change in word choice would only occur among American students. The hypothesis predicted that the use of all of Canadianisms among Canadians would decrease, but did not predict that the use of some Canadianisms in fact increased among Canadians. The hypothesis also did not expect that many Americans would have been using Canadianisms before coming to McGill University. The hypothesis was correct in that the use of

some Canadianisms decreased among Canadianisms, and that Americans began using Canadianisms after coming to McGill, which can be seen with the use of *washroom*, as predicted. The hypothesis can also be considered correct in disproving the apparent-time hypothesis, as 2 to 3 years of influence at McGill seemed to change the speech among some young Canadian and American adults, in terms of their word choice.

References

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Appendix

Appendix 1- The 2016 Survey created by SurveyMonkey on surveymonkey.com that was sent out to the 46 student respondents

Survey on Word Choice

Please select the word you would use most often in your everyday speech

1. The first year of elementary education is:

grade one

first grade

2. When did you start using the word that you just chose?

Before coming to McGill After coming to McGill

3. The machine that dispenses cash, accepts deposits, and performs other banking services when a customer inserts a plastic card is a/an:

bank machine

ATM

4. When did you start using the word that you just chose?

Before coming to McGill After coming to McGill

5. Devices attached to the roof of a house to catch rain are called:

eavestroughs

gutters

6. When did you start using the word that you just chose?

Before coming to McGill After coming to McGill

7. The machine that dispenses cash, accepts deposits, and performs other banking services when a customer inserts a plastic card is a/an:

- bank machine
- ATM

8. When did you start using the word that you just chose?

- Before coming to McGill
- After coming to McGill

9. Athletic shoes worn as casual attire are:

- runners/running shoes
- sneakers

10. When did you start using the word that you just chose?

- Before coming to McGill
- After coming to McGill

11. A room containing a toilet and sink is a:

- washroom
- bathroom/restroom

12. When did you start using the word that you just chose?

- Before coming to McGill
- After coming to McGill

13. . Where are you from?

- Quebec
- Canada outside of Quebec
- USA