

# First Nations English Dialects in Canada and SLP Practice BCASLPA, 2006

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Who are we?

What is our background?



# Multicultural profile: MB

7 completely multicultural, 1 completely mono-cultural (dominant)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent home; grandparents' home	P:50-60		G				
Community where grew up: Postwar		EV					
Elementary school		EV					
Religious organization: 1950-1970	WASP						
High school and college: Lang., people		x					
Professional association		x					
Clinical settings: Health, School, CD	Staff						
Clinical work settings: Clients		70s	>	80s	>	Now	
My children's home							J,U
Associations/clubs	Dance	Bike					OF
UBC work...TREK document...but SASS		St, Fac		R			3



# Other project investigators

Jeff Deby, Ph.D., Sociolinguist

*FN co-investigator-Phase 1: Laura Fraser*

*FN Advisor: Katherine Fraser*



# Acknowledgments

- ❖ The British Columbia Ministry of Children and Family Development through the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP)
- ❖ Participants in two forums
- ❖ Research assistants: Susan Edwards, Elisha Kamell, Lori Speck, Geeta Modha, Sean Cousineau



# First Nations Children, Canada

- ❖ Are growing up in a variety of contexts (50% urban, 10% rural off-reserve, 40% rural/remote on-reserve) within a variety of cultural ecologies and languages.
- ❖ Some children, though not all, are exposed to a non-standard English dialect as the primary language of their family or community.



# Why this project?

## *Dialect/culture difference or language delay?*

- ❖ A lack of knowledge about language development in FN children, heritage or English
- ❖ Some early childhood practitioners and First Nations leaders suggest that First Nations children may be disproportionately misdiagnosed, i.e., as having or not having language delay...



# Consequences

- ❖ **Mis-diagnosed children may be given unneeded remedial therapy to correct the perceived disability.**
  - ❖ Missing valuable program or classroom time for therapeutic sessions addressed to a problem they do not actually have.
  - ❖ Limited speech-language therapy resources may be wasted.
  - ❖ Children may be stigmatized as learning disabled, which can result in self-fulfilling lower performance expectations by everyone concerned, especially the children.
  - ❖ Interventionists may contribute to a social order in which First Nations people are marginalized and devalued.
- ❖ **Some children who have genuine language disorders may go undiagnosed and un-served.**





# What may drive such consequences?

- ❖ **Lack of information** on the dialects, including the Standard...
- ❖ Language assessment and intervention **tools and procedures based on the “Standard” English dialect**
- ❖ **Lack of training** of speech-language pathologists, child care practitioners, and educators on the nature and validity of non-standard English dialects



# Goals of the project

To explore and consider:

- ❖ **Perceptions of the nature and prevalence of problems** associated with lack of knowledge of First Nations English dialect learning in young children
- ❖ **How communities and investigators could begin research** to develop and share knowledge of dialect learning among First Nations children.



# Today's Talk

- ❖ Key points on First Nations English dialects among young children, focusing on:
  - ❖ The nature of non-standard dialects in general and of First Nations English dialects
  - ❖ The significance of FN English dialects for early learning
  - ❖ Implications for practice, training, and policy for practitioners working with First Nations children.



# Project Activities

## ❖ **Literature review**

- ❖ English dialects of Indigenous peoples: USA, Australia, NZ
- ❖ Education approaches re dialects in USA, Australia

## ❖ **Forum 1: February 2004:** Defining the issues

- ❖ Participants: FN, non-FN linguists, child dev. specialists

## ❖ **Forum 2: December 2004:** Implications of FN dialect for lang. assess/intervention

- ❖ Participants: Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal child dev. specialists, particularly speech-language pathologists



# *Forum 1: February 2004*

## **3 Topics explored in focus groups:**

1. Significance of First Nations English dialects for First Nations children's education.
2. Recommendations for First Nations English Dialect Project's research focus.
3. Recommendations for a pilot project.

**Participants:** FN and non-FN SLPs, development specialists, linguists, and Aboriginal community members.

**Transcription, thematic qualitative analysis:** Jeff Deby, Ph.D.



# *Forum 2: December 2004*

**Topic:** Implications of First Nations English dialects for understanding, assessing and supporting FN children's early language development.

**Participants:** FN and non-FN speech-language pathologists, early childhood care and development specialists, and FN community-based program leaders.

**Thematic analysis** of discussions: to identify challenges and possibilities for effective screening, diagnosis and early intervention;  
L. Speck, G. Modha under supervision of J. Ball, M. Bernhardt, J. Deby



# Notes from Forum I Proceedings: Previous Research

Native American Englishes in the literature (examples):

- ❖ Lakota English (Flanigan 1985)
- ❖ White Mountain Apache English (Liebe-Harkort 1983)
- ❖ Ute and Isletan Englishes (Leap 1977, 1993)
- ❖ Lumbee English (Wolfram 1984, Dannenberg 2002)
- ❖ Kotzebue Inupiaq English in Alaska (Vandergriff 1982)
- ❖ Tsimshian English (Tarpent 1982, Mulder 1982; cited in Leap 1993:56-7)

*BC: Pye (1985): some evidence for a distinct variety of English among the Chilcotin in British Columbia (cited in Leap 1993)*



# Language and Dialects

- ❖ Language: **a system of communication** comprised of elements (e.g. sounds, words, signs) and ways of combining those elements, i.e. the “grammar”.
- ❖ Each language: a group of systems, i.e, dialects.  
**Associated with speakers who share geography, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, education, L1**  
e.g. “Queen’s” English (RP: Received Pronunciation), CBC English, African-American English, Singlish (Singapore), Spanglish, Newfoundland English, Teen English....





# Dialects: Grammar and Perspective

- ❖ Equal in grammar
- ❖ Sometimes perceived as having different status

“My Fair Lady” (Mayfair)....’enry ‘Iggins\*

“It’s her ‘aow’ and ‘go-on’ that keep her in her place, not her ragged clothes and dirty face”

\*G.B. Shaw, *Pygmalion*, based on Henry Sweet, linguist in 19<sup>th</sup> century England: *Dialects of UK*



# The issue of what is ‘*high status*’

- ❖ Goes back centuries....Prescriptive grammar!
- ❖ Example in English from 1687:  
Christopher Cooper, 1687: Spoke of features of the 'barbarous dialect' in his book, the *English Teacher*.
- ❖ The Academie Française: France from 1635
- ❖ South London and Glasgow – Underground...



# Children and Dialects

- ❖ Children who acquire the standard dialect at home are often seen as having more advanced development of language skills in early childhood and at school entry, giving them an easier transition into school.
- ❖ Children who do not acquire the standard dialect as a mother tongue can be perceived as having delayed or poor language skills, language impairments or general developmental delays.





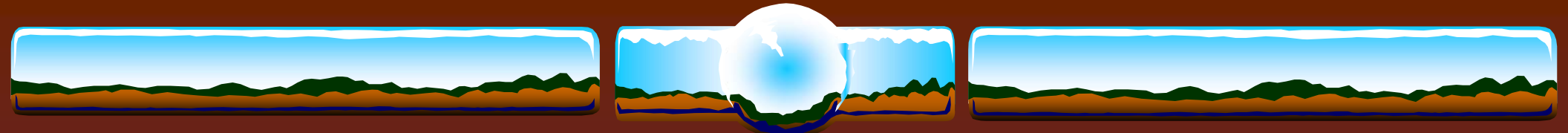
# Variety within varieties

- ❖ Not all speakers in a community necessarily speak the same variety of a language
- ❖ First Nations Englishes differ in language features
  - ❖ Transference from different ancestral languages
  - ❖ Different amounts of contact with other varieties of English, whether because of physical or cultural distance from the other nearby groups



# FN English Dialect Features: Phonology?

- ❖ **Speech sound differences: Initial observations.**
  - ❖ [d ] may be used for /, in words like *that* or *other*.
  - ❖ /s/ and / / may interchange in certain BC FN dialect areas
  - ❖ Stops may be softened to near-fricative quality (softening)
- ❖ **Word endings: Research suggests that when a word ends in more than two consonants, the final one is often deleted in some FN English.**
- ❖ Intonation patterns may differ.



# FN Eng. Dialect Features: Morphology

Some FN English dialects may use the same form for all present tense verb forms:

- ❖ *I go, you go, he go*
- ❖ *I goes, you goes, he goes*

This is a feature of other major world languages: Mandarin, Indonesian etc.



# FN Eng. Dialect: Pronouns

- ❖ In some First Nations and Native American dialects of English, pronouns are optional when they can be inferred from the context.
  - ❖ *You hear about Mike? Drives into town yesterday....*
- ❖ Optional omission of pronouns is also found in other languages, such as Japanese.



# FN English Dialect Features: Vocabulary

## Language assessments for vocabulary:

- ❖ Normed on words familiar to middle-class children, but not First Nations children living in rural or remote communities.
- ❖ *Cultural mismatch between assessment tools and children can result in mis-attribution of word learning impairment*
- ❖ Issue of knowledge versus ability!
  - ❖ Moose-skinning words versus video game words....





# FN English Dialect Features: Narrative

## Standard English narrative structure

- Chronological sequencing
- Explicit connections between ideas
- Elaboration is valued

## Alternative narrative structures

- Thematic sequencing
- Implicit connections between ideas
- Brevity is valued



# More on Narrative

- ❖ **First Nations children may tell a story**
  - ❖ without an introduction
  - ❖ without building a context
  - ❖ or in a non-linear sequence.
- ❖ **Their story re-tellings may elicit less language** than play-based language samples.
- ❖ Assessing a narrative according to the structural features of a different set of norms can result in misattribution of cognitive delay or deficit.



# Fn Eng. Dialects: Communicative interaction?

- ❖ People from different cultures may have been socialized into different sets of norms for appropriate ways to use language interactively.
- ❖ First Nations children's interactional norms may not match situations or expectations in preschool or school.
- ❖ Responses in the form of hesitation or silence may be misinterpreted as lack of comprehension, inability to respond correctly, lack of attention or even rudeness.



# FN Eng. Dialects: Participation

## **Uncomfortable situations**

- Being called on to speak in large group
- Speaking when adults are present
- Being called on to demonstrate knowledge

## **Comfortable situations**

- Speaking with single person or small group
- Speaking with peers in the absence of adults
- Child deciding when ready to demonstrate knowledge



# *FN Eng: Attention and listening?*

- ❖ Norms for “good listening” vary across cultures.
- ❖ In **mainstream** Canadian conversations, listeners are expected to **look the speaker in the eye**, and provide active listening responses (mm-hm... really!).
- ❖ These behaviours may be seen as rude and interrupting in some First Nations cultures, especially when the speaker is an adult and the listener is a child.



# FN Eng: Questions/Answers?

- ❖ Questioning and answering are behaviours expected of children in mainstream Canadian programs and classrooms.
- ❖ First Nations children may belong to communities in which it is not appropriate to ask direct questions of adults.
- ❖ They may also hesitate to answering questions from adults, for several reasons.



# Question/Answer cont/

- ❖ *Higher cultural tolerance for silence.*
  - ❖ longer gap between speaker turns and longer silences than in white middle-class speech communities.
  - ❖ expectation that one takes time to consider a question carefully before answering.
- ❖ *Unfamiliarity with display questions. “What colour is the sky?”*

May confuse First Nations students who expect people to ask questions in order to gain new information, not to test their skills.



# *Other possible dialect features?*

- ❖ *Prosody*. Some First Nations children may be accustomed to speech that is quieter and slower than mainstream Canadian speech.
- ❖ *Humour*. Expectations of how humour is used may differ between First Nations communities and in the mainstream school classrooms.
- ❖ *Paralinguistic factors*. First Nations children may be used to different norms of gesture and facial expression when talking and listening.





# What Next?

- ❖ **Discussions** with First Nations leaders and educators
- ❖ **Careful linguistic studies**, as partnerships with FN communities, educators, other practitioners working with FN communities
- ❖ **Awareness**: Describe rather than prescribe >>



# Building Self and Cultural Awareness: Clinical changes....

- ❖ Explore the sources of one's own assumptions, values and biases.
- ❖ Seek out and work to change one's own attitudes, beliefs, and feelings that may be prejudicial
- ❖ Name and question stereotypes and preconceived notions toward marginalized racial and ethnic minority groups.
- ❖ Facilitate bridges between cultures.



# Some activities

- ❖ Identify and describe cultural issues that may impact the clinical environment: e.g., personal space, eye contact, communication styles, tonal meanings, use of voice.
- ❖ Learn about the history and struggles of First Nations people
- ❖ Learn about the family structures, hierarchies, values, and beliefs of members of First Nations peoples in your area
- ❖ Identify and work around practices in the community that potentially affect help-seeking behaviors and responsiveness to interventions of First Nations people



# Research?

- ❖ Is this an important research topic?
- ❖ If so, what are First Nations Englishes in Canada?
- ❖ How do First Nations Englishes develop in children?
- ❖ What kinds of practices/ tools can effectively serve First Nations children?
- ❖ What can be done now to enhance self-esteem and educational success of children who use First Nations Englishes?
- ❖ What are First Nations goals for children's dialect learning?



# Principles for research

- ❖ **Respect and cultural sensitivity** shown by researchers.
- ❖ **The community = centrally involved** in defining the research.
- ❖ **Community = part of the research team**



# Research and practice: An atmosphere of trust and communication

- ❖ **Face-to-face contacts**: to enable relationships and reciprocal learning about language, culture, knowledge systems, and practices.
- ❖ **A practical intent**: to improve supports for children's optimal development.
- ❖ **Partnerships and clear written agreements** or contracts at the beginning of projects: re research ethics, methods, data ownership, researchers' accountability, project control, outputs, and dissemination of findings.
- ❖ **Plain language**, accessible to the community.



# Possible topics, methods

- ❖ **Identify community perspectives** on their English dialect
- ❖ **Observe and record naturally occurring language situations** to identify distinctive features of grammar and use.
- ❖ **Employ explicit questions** about apparent distinctive features, or experimental data, to refine understandings.



# Language Sampling....

**Purposeful:** non-representative samples of narrow scope to develop hypotheses

Obtain oral language samples from a variety of contexts, including variation in:

- ❖ speaker demographic characteristics
- ❖ number, demographics, and relationship of listeners
- ❖ physical context
- ❖ event type
- ❖ discourse genres





# School-aged: Written samples

- ❖ Phonetic spelling – Grade 1-2....clues to dialect in the written word....
  - ❖ British vs N. American kids; *bird*
    - ❖ *first they differ, in that the Brits have only a vowel and the norteamericanos only an “r”*
    - ❖ *Then they’re told in Britain...there’s an “r” and in North America, there’s a vowel! So they converge on random vowel/r sequences....bred berd....brid bird*
- ❖ Conversation, narrative, expository samples with content matching the context



# All domains are relevant but what might matter most?

- ❖ Discourse (conversation, narrative, expository), pragmatics: People together, telling their stories
  - ❖ Schools: narrative, expository, pragmatics
- ❖ Semantics: Contexts.....
  - ❖ Schools: The Bernstein Hypothesis (restricted/elaborated code misconstrual)
- > (Morphology, syntax, phonology), although the latter are what people think of when they think of dialect....and they do link to spelling



# Your turn: Questions to reflect on

- ❖ What aspects of my own experience – my cultural experience – have helped me engage clients in culturally sensitive and relevant ways?
- ❖ What aspects of my own experience – my cultural experience have helped me build bridges to clients who seem different from me culturally or socially?
- ❖ Any techniques/tools/methods to recommend?