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First Nations English Dialects — Alive and Well

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I have been honoured with the task of shedding light on the topic of First Nations English Dialect (FNED) for the readers of this blog. Let me begin by situating myself and my connection to this subject.

I am Anishinaabe^[1] and my family belongs to the Loon Clan, Chippewas of Rama (Mnjikaning) First Nation, Ontario. I have worked for the past 25 years as a speech and language pathologist primarily in First Nation schools on Manitoulin Island and the North Shore of Lake Huron and with Anishinaabek^[2] and Cree students in off-reserve schools in the vicinities of Lake Nipissing and Sudbury.

My father and his mother were fluent speakers of the Ojibway language and my mother's comprehension of the Algonquin^[3] and Ojibway languages assured her social competence. I grew up in a home that hosted visitors to our community and a myriad of social and political gatherings as my father was Chief and led our community for many years. My parents demonstrated a close connection to our First Nations community^[4] and they were carriers of the heartbeat of the community. My mother was a nurse's aid and my father was a veteran of the Second World War with a grade eight formal education.

Although my parents did not experience the residential schools directly, they nonetheless were affected, as they held the widespread belief that English language proficiency was key for success in school and life and our indigenous language was less important. This meant that the sacred Anishinaabe language was not passed on to myself and my siblings. This phenomenon is widespread among Aboriginal^[5] peoples of Canada and is part of the legacy of residential schools and colonization.

As an Anishinaabe kwe, I have struggled to acquire the Ojibway language. I experienced shame as a young woman who was not a carrier of the language of my people (as did many of the young people of my 60's generation). My husband is a fluent speaker of "high Ojibway" - he has proficiency with cultural and spiritual indigenous knowledge and the meaningful connections that the language exudes. When I lived in Wikwemikong for fifteen years I took every opportunity to be immersed in the Odawa dialect and I regularly attended community meetings with my husband to develop my comprehension skills. I listened and watched each speaker who took the floor to stimulate discussion about community issues at hand. I jotted down each speaker's name and the gist of what they were saying and at home that night, my husband would confirm or correct my understanding. In retrospect, the time was well spent as it honed my Ojibway language skills so that I enjoy a place in the social interactions with Ojibway-speaking family and friends.

Today I consider myself to be a keeper of First Nations English Dialect and there is no shame in that. Let me share about First Nations English Dialect (FNED) and its importance today.

What is First Nations English Dialect?

Aboriginal English dialects developed from contact between an ancestral language and English, in geographically isolated communities with infrequent interactions with Standard English speakers. The first varieties of non-standard English dialects (pidgins) developed as a contact language when Aboriginal people began utilizing English without formal instruction and applied rules and patterns of their ancestral languages (Ball, Bernhardt & Deby, 2006). As new generations spoke the pidgins as their first language, creoles developed where language patterns became more consistent and regular. Over generations and with continued contact with English speakers, these creoles became increasingly similar to Standard English.

Aboriginal [\[6\]](#) people in Canada and the United States have experienced colonization which has included overt governmental policies aimed at assimilation and eradication of Aboriginal people and their languages. The residential school era from 1892 to 1996 in Canada meant forced removal of Aboriginal children from their homes resulting in negative residential school legacy effects for generations of Aboriginal people. In these schools, children from different Aboriginal language and cultural backgrounds were grouped together. Children were penalized for speaking their native languages. In this way, the residential school system may have inadvertently served to consolidate Aboriginal English dialects.

In current times, FNEDs are evident not only among Aboriginal people who speak their ancestral language, but also people who no longer speak their ancestral tongue. Sadly, many of our ancestral languages are being lost at an alarming rate. This highlights FNEDs as important remnants to our sacred languages.

It is through Aboriginal languages and our tradition of orality that the Aboriginal worldview is expressed. FNED is often evident in the home and community talk of Aboriginal people whether they reside on a First Nation territory or in a rural or urban setting. Regional varieties of FNED share common linguistic features (pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary) and discourse and pragmatic rules. When Aboriginal people communicate within their specific cultural community, they use First Nation English dialect. Each community has a unique, nonstandard, variety of English that holds a central place in social discourse and is key to supporting the individual's identity and ties to a distinct Aboriginal community. Aboriginal people themselves can usually tell where an individual comes from when they hear the First Nations English dialect.

An interesting aspect of FNED discourse includes exclamations to express emotional reaction or inquisitive response to the communicative exchange. In my First Nation community in southern Ontario we commonly say, "ii saa" to denote distaste, or "urh" to express disapproval. The common expression for distaste in Wikwemikong, Manitoulin Island, for example is "zaay" and FNED speakers say "wii shih" when hearing something incredulous. In the Nipissing First Nation locale in northeastern Ontario "bwaa chug" is used as a reaction to something incredulous. FNED speakers in M'Chigeeng, Manitoulin Island show interest in their communicative partner's story with the question "miina?" while in southern Ontario's Walpole Island First Nation community "izit?" is used.

A number of scholars in the fields of linguistics and education have documented Canadian Indigenous [7] English and American Indian English which are as diverse as the Aboriginal peoples of North America (Mulder 1982, Heit & Blair 1993, Darnell 1993, Leap 1993). In Canada, linguistic ethnographic studies (Speilman 1986, 1998, Valentine, 1995) have examined the culture-specific ways of thinking and interacting among Ojibway language users. Information about different speaking styles, functions of language, dialects, components of phonetics, phonology, morphology and syntax, and discourse are brought forward.

Educational Implications

There is a paucity of relevant research in Canada and currently, researchers in the fields of linguistics, education, psychology, and speech language pathology are working to contribute knowledge about what is referred to as FNED. (Bernhardt, Ball & Deby, 2007, Ball & Bernhardt, 2008, Peltier 2009, 2010). This phenomenon has relatively recently come to light and educational implications for First Nation language and literacy learning are currently being explored.

The use of standard English pronunciation, grammar, and discourse rules is critical for school and professional success. Historically, students who use FNED have been stigmatized and misunderstood as learners within the educational system. Young Aboriginal children are socialized to use First Nation English speech and language and discourse patterns within the context of home and community before they enter school. In school, their communication has been judged to be delayed or deficient by teachers and specialists such as speech and language pathologists, resulting in over-identification of Aboriginal students in special education programs. Increased understanding and acknowledgement of FNED in the schools now supports bi-dialectal curricula with teaching about cultural and linguistic diversity, encouragement of “code switching” and the acquisition of standard English as a second dialect, and the important maintenance of the students’ FNED and ancestral language (Cummins, et. al 2006, Ontario Ministry of Education 2007, Fadden & LaFrance 2010, Sterzukk 2010, Wawrykow 2011, Peltier 2010, 2011).

Bi-dialectal English Skills Creates Semantic and Pragmatic Bridges

My personal and professional life experiences with FNED have shown me that FNEDs are alive and well in the Aboriginal community and are an important part of our language retention, especially in light of the language-loss situation that affects every First Nation community today. FNED is an important link to my community of origin which is foundational to my integrity as an Anishinaabe kwe. I do believe that many Aboriginal people, myself included, live in two worlds, and it is important to be able to code-switch in order to function at our best whether at work in the mainstream society or within the First Nation community where we have been socialized and where we feel belonging. As a bi-dialectal English language user, I have a wonderful ability to code-switch according to the communicative context in which I find myself, utilizing semantic and pragmatic bridges.

Many First Nations people like me have left their community to gain a formal education. Professional opportunities and assimilative processes of society erode our

fundamentally important link to the land and our people as we settle and work off-reserve. I cherish and honour my FNED as a crucial communicative mode for instant recognition and reconnection to my relatives and place of origin.

Sharla Peltier is an Aboriginal speech and language pathologist. She is from the Chippewas of Rama First Nation, Ontario and is a member of the Loon Clan. Sharla has worked exclusively with First Nations for many years and is currently employed by the Rainbow District School Board in the First Nation Metis and Inuit Program. She is cognizant of First Nations cultural and linguistic differences and advocates for consideration and understanding of home and community factors in evaluation and intervention aspects of professional practice. Sharla is a graduate of the Master of Education program at Nipissing University. One of her recent program of research illustrated the pragmatics of First Nations storytelling through an investigation of the oral tradition with Anishinabek children and Elders. She has presented at national and international conferences and delivered numerous workshops for professionals and community practitioners working with Aboriginal children, families and communities.

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Footnotes

[1]

Anishinaabe: the term used by an Ojibway or Algonquin person to refer to themselves. Elder and spiritual leader Eddie Benton-Banai explains that the term refers to Original Man in the Creation Story.

[2]

Anishinaabek: referring to the group of Anishinaabe people from 43 First Nation communities around the Lake Superior and Lake Huron regions of Ontario.

[3]

Algonquin: a language considered by its speakers to be distinct from Ojibway but classified by linguists as a northern dialect of the Ojibway language.

[4]

"First Nations Community" refers to North American Indian reserves, of which there are more than 600 in Canada.

[5]

Aboriginal: belonging to North American Indian, Métis, or Inuit groups of peoples.

[6]

Aboriginal: belonging to North American Indian, Métis, or Inuit groups of peoples

[7]

"Indigenous" is used to refer collectively to individuals across Canada who are descendants of the country's original inhabitants.