

# Aboriginal English Varieties & Standard Language Assessment Practices

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## Issue and Significance

There is growing concern by First Nations communities, educators and researchers that First Nations children are being misdiagnosed with speech-language delays and impairments. This may be attributed in part to misunderstandings about First Nations English language dialects. To date, there are only a few studies related to Aboriginal English varieties in Canada (e.g., Genee & Stigter, 2010; Mulder, 1982; Tarpent, 1982) and very limited research on Indigenous children's language development (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). However, numerous scholars advocate for the examination and documentation of Aboriginal English dialects in Canada and elsewhere, to inform the development of culturally appropriate assessment tools and practices, and to help Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) provide appropriate assessment services for First Nations children (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Peltier, 2010).

To support the language development of First Nations children, and to provide appropriate language assessments and services, Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) and other professionals need to be able to identify the dialectal features of Aboriginal English varieties, and to distinguish between dialectal differences and language impairments. SLPs also require

awareness of contextual variables, which influence children's language-in-use, including: cultural norms of communication; community and family perspectives on children's culture and language learning; and, the broader socio-historical context of language destruction<sup>1</sup> and language revitalization efforts in Canada (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2005). Further research into Aboriginal English varieties can lend support to the healthy language development of First Nations children, help recognize the distinct characteristics of First Nations dialects, and contribute to overall Aboriginal language revitalization initiatives (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008).

## Summary of First Nations English

### *History*

There are multiple forms of spoken English across Canada, yet Standard English is used in most formal institutions. Standard English can be defined as "language that is spoken and written in mainstream media and that is often found spoken in classrooms and other institutions such as legal settings, government, social and medical services and the like" (Fadden & LaFrance, 2010, p. 144). In general, standardized assessment and diagnostic tools are created and assumed for use with monolingual speakers of "standardized" English, and do not take into consideration

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<sup>1</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the issues around the loss of Indigenous languages, it is important to note a dominant tendency in research to discuss the loss of language as a passive, inevitable process of time and contact. The word "destruction" has been used here purposefully to emphasize that the decimation of Indigenous languages was an active and strategic colonial process.

speakers of additional language(s), or speakers of other English language varieties, including Aboriginal English dialects (Ball, 2007; Gould, 2008).

In Canada, there are approximately 50 First Nations languages, many of which are deemed to be “endangered” due to the low number of surviving fluent speakers. The greatest reason for First Nations language decimation was Canada’s colonial policies of coercive assimilation and population segregation, which resulted in the forced separation of families and communities, and the disruption of inter-generational culture and language transmission (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Peltier, 2010; RCAP, 1996). First Nations English varieties now exist within conditions of linguistic endangerment and regeneration: “On the one hand, First Nations English dialects reflect the historical situation in which English has been, and remains, a major colonizing language; yet, on the other hand, the dialects are important linguistic markers of Indigenous identity and solidarity” (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008, p. 573).

Aboriginal English is traced back to the contact period with colonialists (Fadden & LaFrance, 2010), with the development of First Nations dialects attributed to “depidginization and decreolization” processes (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008, p. 573). Through time, contact between Indigenous and English peoples has resulted in the merging of First Nations dialects and Standard English. Existing studies on Native American English forms also suggest that similarities between Native American and First Nations dialects are likely the result of forced cohabitation of different dialect speakers at various historical junctures (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008).

While studies on Native American English in the United States (e.g. Leap, 1993) and Australian Aboriginal English (AAE) in Australia (e.g. Butcher, 2008) have been conducted, there is very limited research on Aboriginal varieties of English in Canada (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Fadden & LaFrance, 2010). Fadden & LaFrance (2010) attribute this lack of research on Aboriginal English to a more urgent and necessary emphasis of research on Indigenous

language preservation and revitalization. They further contend that there is resistance from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal scholars to the notion that there are fundamental differences between “standard” English language varieties and varieties of English spoken by First Nations peoples. They also note some opposition to establish “linguistic equity” for both varieties (p. 146).

### *Characteristics and Distinctions*

Based on their preliminary study of First Nations English dialects, Ball & Bernhardt (2008) note the numerous differences in phonology, morphosyntax, vocabulary, and discourse between Standard English and First Nations languages, which they contend could influence First Nations English dialects. These differences may contribute to the misinterpretation and misdiagnosis of language impairment and delays that occur during language assessments for First Nations children. Furthermore, SLPs report that it is hard to assess vocabulary use when language assessment tools do not appropriately represent, or take into account, children’s community-based vocabulary norms. For instance, SLPs and other professionals note that First Nations children use less spatial vocabulary and more gestural forms of communication, likely reflecting characteristics of First Nations languages. Discursive distinctions have been noted as well, including the function of silence, eye contact, and narrative structure. For example, silence and limited eye contact may be a cultural norm indicating respect, and different verb tenses may be used with non-linear forms of storytelling. In language assessment contexts, these cultural language norms may be misinterpreted as developmental disorders (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Fadden & LaFrance, 2010).

Moreover, Aboriginal English and Standard English varieties have differences in form and function. For instance, existing research studies suggest that there are differences with respect to vocabulary usage, pronunciation, intonation, as well as in discursive practices such as the amount of time between speech acts, turn taking, and tag question and pronoun usage (see Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2005;

Peltier, 2010). During assessments, these differences may also be interpreted as a lack of understanding and/or an impairment.

Ball and Bernhardt (2008) state the need for more research into the vocabulary development and situated use of language for First Nations children. They recommend the study of language use in a variety of naturally occurring discursive conditions with consideration given to variables such as speaker demographics, speaker relationships, and the discursive environment. Research must also be informed by a decolonizing framework (Mutua & Swadener, 2008; Smith, 1999), which is community driven, collaborative, and reflects distinct community and family perspectives and needs regarding children's culture and language development (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008).

### *Language and Education*

First Nations English dialects play an important role in language revitalization efforts, cultural learning and identity-making processes (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). Aboriginal English dialects "have a central place in social discourse and are key to supporting the individual's identity and ties to a distinct Aboriginal community" (Peltier, 2010, p. 139). As Fadden & LaFrance (2010) note, Aboriginal English "is the linguistic element that reflects and helps bind a community, synchronous with the other elements of cultural identity such as history, spirituality, locale, and so forth" (p. 146). They further contend that if education systems are committed to inclusion, then there should be formal recognition that English language varieties also serve to build community and cultural identity.

Traditional education has sometimes been premised on the belief that mother tongue can hinder Standard English acquisition. Even when Aboriginal children are socialized in Aboriginal English speech communities, they frequently enter a school system where their home language dialect is not present and where it may not necessarily receive "linguistic legitimacy." Teachers may disapprove of Aboriginal students speaking their dialects at school and Aboriginal

children may face stigma and be hindered from full participation in school (Butcher, 2008; Fadden & LaFrance, 2010; Peltier, 2010).

Some researchers claim that the over-representation of Aboriginal learners as having special needs or as requiring interventions can be attributed to a lack of understanding and recognition of Aboriginal English (Fadden & LaFrance, 2010; Peltier, 2010). Treating different community styles as a deficiency requiring remediation, can be harmful to students, and "in fact, treating what does not require treatment amounts to an institutional assault on important cultural property: a community's language" (Fadden & LaFrance, 2010, p. 148).

Children who speak Aboriginal English are often labelled as English as a Second Language (ESL) learners when they enter the school system, but ESL programs are often not suited to the children's language needs (Peltier, 2010). As a solution, Fadden & LaFrance (2010) recommend an Aboriginal English [AE] immersion program in which AE is used primarily in K-4 classrooms, and then Standard English [SE] grammar and structure are introduced in grade 4 or 5, while AE continues to be used across other subject areas. The objective would be to have "bi-dialectal" Aboriginal youth. Both AE and SE could be used in the classrooms and teachers can adapt their approaches to meet specific community and learners' needs. This practice has been employed in Australia for decades, and is similar to a current English as a Second Dialect initiative in several school districts in British Columbia. Results from these programs indicate higher scores on Foundational Skills Assessment (FSA) tests, and comparatively higher scores on reading tests (Fadden & LaFrance, 2010).

Peltier (2010) contends that it is necessary to change cultural attitudes and norms regarding the notion of 'standard' and 'proper' speech and language, to counter assumptions that Aboriginal learners are impaired. There has been an increasing awareness and recognition of Aboriginal English dialects, which is the first step to such change. There are now provincial educational policies that formally acknowledge Aboriginal English dialects, including the

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education Language Arts Guide for Aboriginal and Métis students. These guides still require appropriate assessments and evaluation tools (Peltier, 2010).

### ***The Role of Professionals***

Speech-language specialists and teachers play a particularly significant role as they connect with and support children (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Peltier, 2010). To provide First Nations children with the speech and language support they require, SLPs and other practitioners must have the ability to assess the distinctions between dialect usage and language impairment. Specialists can also learn more about First Nations communities by engaging in community activities, and learning from caregivers about cultural and linguistic practices (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008). Teachers can benefit from further (or initial) training on cross-cultural education, First Nations history and culture, and Aboriginal English dialect and language usage. Peltier (2010) recommends that educators record dialect characteristics to generate a “language profile” for their students (p. 130). This may help teachers understand the specific cultural and contextual nature of their students’ language usages, and the connection between language use and understanding of the world (Peltier, 2010; Sharifian, 2005). Educators who are conscious of this relationship can better facilitate students’ Standard English language learning while supporting Aboriginal languages and Aboriginal English (Peltier, 2010).

### **Conclusion**

Key characteristics of First Nations English dialects, and differences between Standard English and First Nations English dialects, have been preliminarily identified, and “it seems likely that future research will confirm that First Nations English dialects are distinct from Standard Canadian English in terms of their phonology, morphosyntax, and lexicon” (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008, p. 580). These dialectical differences are not reflected in current standard assessment processes, which can lead to the misdiagnosis of First Nations children’s language as delayed or

impaired (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Ball, Bernhardt, & Deby, 2006; Kramer et al., 2009; Pearce & Williams, 2013; Sterzuk, 2008). There is a pressing need to further examine First Nations English dialects and First Nations children’s vocabulary development to determine which language assessment practices and intervention strategies are most appropriate. Moreover, it is crucial to recognize the vital role that First Nations English dialects can play in the intergenerational transmission of culture and language, language revitalization efforts, and cultural identity-making (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008).

### **Author Biography**

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