SPEAKING OF CANADA.

It makes sense that a people as diverse as Canadians would speak in a range of regional dialects as diverse as any in the world

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How closely does Canada resemble the United States? In some critical ways, our cultures correspond with striking kinship. We watch American movies and American television in Canada; we read American literature, listen to American podcasts, scroll through American tweets. We have long shared the vernacular of its popular culture, and have heard almost as much American English spoken as we have heard from our neighbours, our families and our friends. The regional dialect of, say, The Simpsons will, of course, be a dialect we often speak and almost always understand.

At the same time, as much as we have learned and continue to learn from our contemporaries to the south, we have also been inculcated by our forebears across the ocean — a cultural superforce that still exerts dominance over our language even as its influence increasingly wanes. We are a British colony. As such, we retain a great many hallmarks of English as it is written and spoken in the United Kingdom. One need only compare a Canadian newspaper such as this one to a newspaper from below the border to observe discrepancies in usage and spelling: from Britain, we borrow "axe," "centre," "plough," "skilful," "woollen," "catalogue," and any number of words that feature an additional "u," such as "colour" or "rigour" or "candour." This extends to pronunciations: we say "zed" instead of "zee," to take but the most prominent example.

What's curious is not that Canada derives the particulars of its language from both American and British sources, however. What's strange is how inconsistent we are about it.

"In areas where American and British practices differ, Canadian usage is far from uniform," notes the introduction to the Canadian Senior Dictionary of 1967. "British forms have predominated in most instances in spite of the obvious practical advantages of the American forms. In some cases, however, American spellings have asserted themselves to the virtual exclusion of the corresponding British forms." We use the American "tire" instead of the British "tyre;" we forgo "connexion," "kerb," "gaol," "nett," and "recognise," too.

"It may seem almost incredible to outsiders that a country having English as its major, national, mother-tongue language for many generations cannot agree on some of that language's quite ordinary norms in anything close to the degree that these are agreed on in the British Isles, the older Commonwealth, or the United States," writes the academic T.K. Pratt.

Pratt has written extensively about just how slippery Canadian English seems. In the mid-'80s, he attended an academic conference at Queen's University, held by the Strathy Language Unit, whose purpose was to "stimulate interest in Canadian English usage and to publish successive editions of a guide to written and spoken communication." Some attendees, Pratt explains, "stood on guard against a perceived decline in educated usage." Others, meanwhile, "took the position that what we were searching for was the Canadian norm."

“To no one’s surprise, the conference came to no conclusion on either point,” Pratt writes. Even when the papers delivered at the conference were eventually compiled and published as a manuscript, the editors couldn’t agree on one uniform stylebook to follow — and permitted each of the authors to use British or American spellings as their hearts so desired. That’s just how vague the precise rules of Canadian English tend to be.

There is a famous quote by the writer Stephen Leacock that in Canada “we have enough to do keeping up with two spoken languages,” so we “just go right ahead and use English for literature, Scotch for sermons and American for conversation.” But of course we have quirks of dialect entirely our own.

Spend any time out of the country, for instance, and you will quickly learn that no one outside of this nation can properly direct you to the washroom: most people have never heard of such a facility, and you will need to ask for the restroom (in the U.S.), the loo (in the U.K.) or the toilet (elsewhere in Europe) depending on the place. Likewise, in the U.S., shopping for a chesterfield will get you not a couch but a brand of cigarettes. Ask someone to draw the blinds and they will be confused until you clarify the shades. Our washroom “taps” are American “faucets;” our restaurant “serviettes” are merely “napkins.” On your head is not a “beanie.” It is a “toque.”

These are what linguists and lexicographers call “Canadianisms:” words we use here that are not used, or are not used the same way, in other parts of the world. The historical Canadian dictionary project identifies four distinct types of Canadianism: 1) Words that originate in Canada; 2) Words preserved uniquely in Canada; 3) Words that have undergone semantic change in Canada; and 4) Words that are culturally significant to this country particularly. The first edition of the Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles lists more than 10,000 Canadianisms running up to the middle of the 1960s. A new revised edition has been updated to include such Canadian-specific terminology as “grow-op,” “small packet” and, most simply, “eh.”

But the familiarity of the most notable Canadianisms suggests a uniformity of speech and writing across Canada that doesn’t accurately account for how our language has developed and is actually used. We all know what a toque or a chesterfield is, whether we’re from Moose Jaw or Inuvik or Montreal. But this country is as varied as it is vast, and the differences in spelling, pronunciation, and terminology are as noteworthy from city to city and province to province.

When we talk about regional dialect, we tend to home in on certain key terms or phrases whose distinctions are not only noticeable and consistent by area, but are commonly discussed enough that most of us know different people say different things in different cases. The famous 1965 DARE questionnaire — an indispensable survey of regional dialect that formed the basis of the historical Dictionary of American Regional English — is full of questions that ponder just these kinds of quirks, such as whether one says “dinner” instead of “supper” or whether one wakes up at “sunrise” or “dawn.”

Many of these unagreeable little variations in how we refer to the objects around us are as unique to regions of Canada as they are anywhere else. In some parts of this country, we change channels with the clicker; in others we use the remote control. Some of us play kickball; others play soccer-baseball. Cabin or cottage? Pop or soda? They can be mapped out and scrutinized all day.

It is, of course, hardly surprising that Canada should encompass such a vast array of different dialects. Consider where we are exactly. Canada is the secondlargest country in the world. It spans 10 mil-

lion square kilometres. It includes six different time zones and touches three different oceanic coasts. Our climate, our topography and our terrain differs so wildly between one part of the country and another that two people living in two different areas are as unlikely to share life experiences as two people living on different continents. We have an entire province of French-speaking Canadians, stuck between two sides of an otherwise English-speaking nation; we have a province with deep ties to Britain that only joined the Confederation half a century ago. What's more, our population is uniquely, almost unprecedentedly spread out: It's not enough to say that fewer people live in Canada than in the U.S. Fewer people live in Canada than live in the state of California.

Why wouldn't so many people living so far apart across so large a land speak in different ways? We have, in fact, eight distinct "language regions" in the English-speaking parts of Canada — areas of the country where the dialect is so different from the rest of the country that it constitutes a fully formed own. They are Aboriginal English, Cape Breton English, Lunenburg English (part of Nova Scotia), Newfoundland English, Ottawa Valley English, Pacific West Coast English, Quebec English, and Inland Canadian English. Each has its own peculiarities of accent, of vernacular, of idiom, even of grammar. These are not merely amalgamations of English and American English, either: they are dialects with complicated histories all their own.

Americans as a rule blend and mix and elaborately cross-pollinate. Canadians have a history of retaining differences. Take the Ottawa Valley — "a dialect pocket of exceptional interest," according to an essay by Ian Pringle and Enoch Padolsky. The Ottawa Valley bears "a kind of English which is held to be predominantly Irish, or perhaps Irish with some admixture of Scots traits," they write. "This belief clearly derives above all from the settlement history of the area. Popular histories of Valley communities refer to the 'Ottawa Valley irish' and to their English as the 'Ottawa Valley brogue.'"

This kind of variation based on settlement history — of a dialect emerging from the first peoples to immigrate to the area and remain there over time — is consistent across the country, and accounts for huge pockets of discrete, historically significant variations in the national language.

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German settlers in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia have left their mark on the dialect of the region: residents continue to pronounce w's as v's and th's as d's, and use lost-in-translation Germanic phrases like "get awake" for "wake up." The Pacific West Coast bears traces of the Californian tongue; in Quebec, not surprisingly, many French phrases have mutated into English ones, with innumerable mixed expressions reigning supreme. Every well-known eccentricity of the Newfoundlander's dialect can be attributed to the long-lasting colonial influence, meanwhile. It's there we find the most concentrated effect Canada's rich history can have on the way language exists today.

T.K. Pratt called Canadians, on the grounds of their regional dialect quirks, "among the most broad-minded people writing English today." There may be something to the assessment. We are excellent at putting up with differences and peculiarities in spelling, usage and pronunciation — in part because of our proximity to the U.S., our historical relationship with Great Britain and our confusion around the exact rules of our own official English. We are very much accustomed to differences in dialect and to changing what we say and write on the fly. "It is tempting to suggest," Pratt says, "that such tolerance for diversity is the kind of thing Canadians do best."

Perhaps the peculiarity of Canadian English is not a fault, but a feature — a virtue we ought to cherish. In Canada, the range of regional dialects is as diverse and unusual as any in the world; a description that also applies to its people.

Our whole is made up of differences, and that will remain one of the best things about us.