



**University
of Victoria**

Graduate Studies

Notice of the Final Oral Examination
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

of

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MSc (Dalhousie University, 1980)
BA (Mount Allison University, 1978)

“Learning Standard English in addition to a Local English Variety”

Interdisciplinary Studies

Monday, September 16, 2019

8:45 A.M.

Clearihue Building

Room B007

Supervisory Committee:

Dr. Alexandra D’Arcy, Department of Linguistics, University of Victoria (Co-Supervisor)

Dr. Donna McGhie-Richmond, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies,
UVic (Co-Supervisor)

Dr. Carmen Rodriguez de France, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, UVic, (Outside Member)

Dr. Barbara May Bernhardt, School of Audiology & Speech Sciences, University of British Columbia
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Dr. Christine A. Dollaghan, School of Behavioral and Brain Sciences, University of Texas at Dallas
(Outside Member)

External Examiner:

Dr. Walter Wolfram, Department of English, North Carolina State University

Chair of Oral Examination:

Dr. Ke Xu, Department of Economics, UVic

Dr. David Capson, Dean, Faculty of Graduate Studies

Abstract

Students who speak local varieties (i.e., dialects) of English that differ from the codified variety promoted in school are at a disadvantage. Research illustrates that differences in sound systems, grammar, vocabulary, and usage can negatively affect literacy development and achievement in math and science, and lead to misunderstandings and changes in teacher attitudes toward students. Moreover, the use of inappropriate assessment tools may result in unnecessary pathologization and inappropriate pedagogical approaches. Since many Indigenous children may speak local varieties, it is reasonable to assume that the same issues that hinder school success for speakers of other varieties affect many Indigenous students in Canada in similar ways. However, to date, research concerning Indigenous Englishes in Canada is scant. Similarly, virtually no empirical evidence has been gathered on use in Canadian schools. By extension, the trajectory of use of features as children progress through grades remains unknown. The goal of this research was to begin to address the crucial necessity of learning more about Indigenous English varieties, in order that appropriate language assessment and pedagogical practices can be implemented.

The research, conducted in a remote community in Northern British Columbia, Canada, concentrates on differences in grammar used by a group of First Nations school-aged children. I analyzed oral narrative language samples of Kindergarteners, and oral and written narrative language samples of students in Kindergarten to Grade 5, over a three-year period. Results reveal the presence of at least 23 distinct grammatical features, many of which may have arisen from the structure of the ancestral language. At school entry, students used grammatical features at high rates, regardless of whether or not they later required speech-language pathology or special education services. As children progressed through the grades, the rate at which they produced features appeared to follow a curvilinear trajectory, declining until grades 3 and 4 and then gradually rising again in middle school. A preference for using shorter sentences with less use of subordination and embedding of clauses also appears to be a feature of this variety. Most of the features the children used in their speech, they also used in their writing. Children had the most difficulty switching to standard English forms of verb tense, and so verb tense may require more direct instruction.

While my results may not be directly generalizable to other First Nations communities, it is anticipated that educators will use them as a guide in their practice and instruction, so they can cease confusing features of a local variety with errors requiring “correction”, avoid unnecessary pathologization, and adjust expectations regarding the rate at which children can be expected to acquire the codified standard language model. It is also hoped that this study will contribute to the preservation and celebration of the unique ways of speaking English that have evolved in northern communities.