



NIK WEST

Pass the crumpets, please

A University of Victoria linguist traces Victoria's fabled British roots

D'Arcy

by Peigi McGillivray

Victorians have a reputation for being “more British than the British,” in part due to our enduring love of flower baskets, tearooms and lawn bowling. But are we really “more British” than other Canadians?

To find out, Dr. Alexandra D'Arcy, a linguistics professor and director of the sociolinguistics research lab at the University of Victoria, is searching for clues in the way we speak.

“There’s an undeniably high British presence in the city—roughly 30 per cent of Victoria’s population in censuses from 1881 to 1951 claimed British origin—but born and bred Canadians have been the majority,” notes D'Arcy.

“Linguistically speaking, this means Canadians are the primary influence. But this doesn’t mean that traces of our partly British roots won’t persist. What I want to know is where—and how—these traces persist.”

Victoria was settled by Europeans relatively late—robust settlement didn’t really begin until about 1860, she notes. “That means I can trace the development of spoken English right back to the city’s earliest days.”

Although there are no sound recordings from the 1800s, it’s still possible to infer how people spoke back then. “Patterns of speech don’t change much after our late teens,” says D'Arcy. “We can analyze later recordings of older people and hear how language was used decades earlier.”

To find those early voices, D'Arcy and her team are poring over the sound archives at the Royal BC Museum and UVic’s libraries. They’re also digging into archived diaries and personal letters and reviewing past issues of Victoria’s local papers as far back as 1858.

To find out whether there are any lingering hints of British English in the speech of current Victoria residents, D'Arcy is also interviewing people born and raised in the city.

Her lab’s state-of-the-art language software enables her team to search and interact with sound files, and transcribe and analyze each sample. They look for key words and phrases that are markers of British and North American usage.

For instance, while British people tend to say: “Have you got any butter?” North Americans say: “Do you have any butter?” Other telltale words include pronunciation of the words schedule (*skedule* or *shedule*) and news (*nooz* or *nyooz*).

“With historical as well as contemporary data, we’re able to put the development of English in Victoria into context with the development of standard urban Canadian English,” says D'Arcy.

The study is offering some tantalizing hints that, linguistically, Victorians may indeed be more “British” than other Canadians.

“Evidence so far suggests that older speakers in Victoria tend to say *tyoon* rather than *toon* (tune), *dyoo* rather than *doo* (due) and *tyoob* rather than *toob* (tube),” she says.

“These linguistic features are harder and harder to find evidence for in urban contexts west of Quebec,” she adds. “That they are here suggests Victorians have held on to these older, more conservative pronunciations with greater tenacity. This does make us unique!”

The study gives linguists a rare opportunity to “watch” a dialect evolve, says D'Arcy—knowledge that will be used to develop better teaching and language assessment tools.

And we all get a better understanding of who we are as Victorians. “We seldom think about the way we speak,” she says, “but it can tell us a lot about ourselves.”

EDGEwise

You can help. D'Arcy is looking for interview candidates who were born and raised in Victoria. She’s also looking for old sound recordings of native Victorians. If you or someone you know can help, contact her at adarcy@uvic.ca.

Do you say “I have an idea” or “I’ve got an idea?” Torontonians tend to say the former, while British English favours the latter, says D'Arcy. “Features like this are a great way to tap into the linguistic map of a city, since they often operate below the level of consciousness. We all have ideas of what we should say, but do we know what we actually say? More often than not, we don’t.”

D'Arcy’s students benefit from direct involvement in her research. Undergraduates learn to conduct interviews and record results using a custom iPod/iPad app. Graduate students help comb through the archives and compile information into a sophisticated language database. “We’re building a resource of language information that all students can use for research in the future,” says D'Arcy.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$100 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2010/11—more than triple the amount achieved 10 years ago.



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