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978-0-521-86321-6 - Roots of English: Exploring the History of Dialects

Sali A. Tagliamonte

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Roots of English

What is the explanation for the nature, character and evolution of the many different varieties of English in the world today? Which changes in the English language are the legacy of its origins, and which are the product of novel influences in the places to which it was transported? *Roots of English* is a groundbreaking investigation into four dialects from parts of northern Britain, out of which came the founding populations of many regions in the other parts of the world. Sali Tagliamonte comprehensively describes and analyses the key features of the dialects and their implications for subsequent developments of English. Her examination of dialect features contributes substantive evidence for assessing and understanding bigger issues in sociolinguistic theory. Based on exciting new findings, the book will appeal to those interested in dialects, from the Anglophile to the syntactician.

SALI A. TAGLIAMONTE is a professor of linguistics at the University of Toronto, Canada. She has been a university-level teacher since 1995 and her research focuses on variation and change in the evolution of English. Her previous publications include *Analysing Sociolinguistic Variation* (Cambridge University Press) and *Variationist Sociolinguistics: Change, Observation, Interpretation*.

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For:

Honorah H. Williamson, piano teacher, mentor, friend

David Robinson, blood brother

Una Coghlan, sister in spirit

Bev and Gerry Boyce, parents-in-law

My roots by love

With appreciation, Sali

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Preface

But you see in England and all those places, each place had a sort of their own dialect. They knew by the sound of the voice and the words they used where they came from. (Margaret Aldaine, 80, Swords, Canada, 1982)

My native language is English – Canadian English. It was the mother tongue of my mother and my father, both of whom were born in Canada. But it is my mother's language that was my linguistic model because, like many of my generation, my mother was a homemaker and the one who raised me. My mother's parents were also born in Canada. Yet if I go back just one generation more, to my mother's grandparents, one was born in Ireland and the other was born in England, and both my grandfathers were Scots. Each one of my great-grandparents was a pioneer in a new frontier, the rich farmlands of southern Ontario. They all migrated during the 1800s when thousands of Scots, Irish and English settlers went to North America, the new world of opportunity. To trace my roots back to the ancestors of my great-grandparents in the British Isles is murky. The links are long lost. Or are they?

Have you ever wondered how your ancestry affects the way you speak? For me, it is certain that the dialects of my fore-parents are not directly reproduced in my variety of English. Yet in the bigger picture, Canadian English is a product of development from these founding populations of Scots and Irish and English migrants who first settled in what was then known as Upper Canada. As Canadian English evolved over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it developed into the variety I speak, a variety pretty much indistinguishable from other Canadians like me.

Then I moved to Yorkshire, England in 1995. To my surprise, I shared many linguistic features with my colleagues from Scotland and Ireland, many more than I did with my colleagues from England. I certainly do not *sound* Scots or Irish, and yet features at all levels of grammar from phonetics to discourse-pragmatics are the same. I have the *cot/caught* merger, the form *gotten* for the past participle of 'got'; I am *r*-full, I say *wee* for 'small' and *it's a good job* for 'it's a good thing'. I wouldn't use verbal *-s* outside 3rd person singular but I know what it means and where it is 'normal', i.e. in constructions such as *The*

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cows eats and *I says*. I can recall that my mother said things like this occasionally and my great aunts and uncles certainly did. The same is true of regularized preterits *come*, *give* and *run*, zero adverbs such as *go quick* and *speak slow*, sentence-final *like* and many other linguistic phenomena.

If there are correspondences between my variety of English and those of my northern colleagues, the interesting questions are how and why do similarities and differences like these between dialects long separated by time and distance endure? How do the roots of communities and regions and countries play out in the way their dialects are used by contemporary speakers several hundred years later? These are the questions I asked myself, and they are the questions that spurred me to embark upon the 'Back to the Roots' project and to write this book. May it help you explain some strange turn of a word or an unusual name or a unique expression that you or someone else you know uses. May it offer you a fresh perspective on your own roots.

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Acknowledgements

The formative part of my academic career was spent in Yorkshire at the University of York in the Department of Language and Linguistic Science. I interviewed for the post in March of 1995 and was overjoyed to accept a position as Lecturer A in the department, which was to start five months later. A portent of things to come came in a light blue airmail envelope from Lowfield House in Heslington (near York) in June of 1995. It was a letter welcoming me to the department, ‘You will enhance it’ the letter said, and it was signed ‘Bob Le Page’. To me, it was as if the queen herself had greeted me with open arms.

I arrived in York in early August 1995 with three children in nappies and a huge amount of enthusiasm. I left in early August 2001 to take up a position at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Toronto in Canada. The children were not in nappies anymore, my intellectual life had totally changed and Bob had become a confidante and a friend. My sojourn in the UK left a defining imprint on me both personally and professionally. I count among my dear friends many of the people I met between 1995 and 2001 especially Joan Beal, Jenny Cheshire, Karen Corrigan, Paul Foulkes, Paul Kerswill, Jane Stuart-Smith, Jen Smith, Ros Temple, Peter Trudgill and Anthony Warner. Living and working among the British sociolinguistic scene was a mind-blowing experience. My myopic North American-centric perspective changed gear. Many of the non-standard features reported as innovations in Canadian and US circles were alive and well among the people I met on the street and encountered in the pubs and hiked with in the peaks and dales. My own perfectly respectable middle-class Canadian accent had – to my mortification – transmuted into an ill-regarded American drawl. My children started sounding incrementally more and more foreign. The idea that shepherds in Yorkshire counted their sheep in an ancient Celtic tongue was a source of amazement. In sum, I had embarked on the experience of a lifetime. There I was, a neophyte sociolinguist specializing in language variation and change in English, living on the very ley lines where it all began.

As it happens, I am an early riser, so I would go to work early in the morning. It was dark and damp, but the cheery cleaning ladies were my cherished

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companions. They taught me how to pronounce British words properly, such as ‘Scarborough’ and ‘Barbican’ and railed me with stories about their lives and children. Listening to these raconteurs, I first conceived of the idea to create a data repository from the York speech community, which became the York English Corpus collected in 1997. By 1998 I had met Jennifer Smith who collected the Buckie English Corpus. Other students followed, each one did fieldwork in her home town: Elizabeth Godfrey collected the Tiverton data, Megan Jones the Wincanton data, Elyse Ashcroft the Henfield data, and Danielle Martin the Wheatley Hill data. By 1999 I had secured funding to create a corpus of the dialect data from my students’ projects. By 2000, I dreamed of finding the roots of English in the counties that had contributed settlers to North America. I was awarded a large research grant for ‘Back to the roots: The legacy of British dialects’, which enabled me to collect the Roots Archive, the data this book is largely based upon. My academic daughters Jennifer Smith and Helen Lawrence were research assistants and collaborators on this research project. Both of them were in the field (Jennifer in Maryport and Cumnock, and Helen in Portavogie), as well as in the lab and in the office and now appear as co-authors on many of the papers arising from the fieldwork. Before the last draft of the book went to press, I benefited greatly from the input of an anonymous Cambridge University Press reviewer as well as the suggestions of my supervisee Shannon Mooney, who read through the entire manuscript from a student’s point of view.

I am indebted to The Economic and Social Research Council of the United Kingdom (ESRC) for funding these projects in research grants spanning 1997–2001. I am also indebted to the Arts Humanities Research Board of the United Kingdom (AHRB) for providing a research grant to fund ‘Vernacular roots: A database of British dialects’. The latter grant enabled me to compile and transcribe the piles of cassette tapes from the student projects and turn them into a functioning archive of English dialects.

Of course the true heroes and heroines of this book are the women and men from the far north shore of Scotland to the rural countryside of south-west England, who shared their life histories, stories and experiences. Their words infuse this book with colour, nuance and wise humanity. May their stories live long and prosper wherever the offshoots of their roots now bloom.

Counting

She used to get me to count in you know, yan, tan, thethera. You know, t’old yan, tan three. (Andrew Meyers, 63, MPT)¹

Abbreviations

BCK	Buckie
CLB	Cullybackey
CMK	Cumnock
DVN	Devon
MPT	Maryport
NI	Northern Ireland
PVG	Portavogie
SAM	Samaná
TIV	Tiverton
TOR	Toronto
WIN	Wincanton
WHL	Wheatley Hill
YRK	York

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