

ENGLISH IN LABRADOR: DEMONSTRATING DIFFERENCE

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THE IDEA OF "OTHERNESS" REGARDING the sense of difference and distance Labrador people feel from their Newfoundland neighbours, and the emic expression of this view in language, is the subject of this paper. Folklorist Gerald Pocius has written:

In a sense, all identity deals with the issue of contrast. We can argue that there can be no identity (individual, regional or national) without contrast of other persons or groups. Identity first centers on the individual and how we experience differences among those in our immediate context. The construction of individual and community identities has as much to do with actual confrontations with "the other" as anything. (Pocius 2001: 1)

Labrador is a place of contradictions: part of a province which glories in its insularity, yet located on the mainland, and situated at a point where the north meets the east, displaying the powerful cultural traits of both places. Sandra Clarke is one of only a few scholars to discuss the English language in Labrador specifically:

Thus Labrador shares with Newfoundland a common historic, geographic, economic and ethnic background, while at the same time maintaining a unique culture and character due to its diverse aboriginal population and its relative geographic isolation from the island. (Clarke 2010: 4)

English is the primary language spoken by people in Labrador, with the important exceptions of Innu community members and the older generation of Inuttituk speakers in Nunatsiavut. Labrador, which contains only 5% of the province's population, has amongst its linguistic forebears the Orkney Hudson Bay Company servants, the Innu and Inuit, and the English fishermen and merchants of the South Coast. In addition, large-scale development projects and military installations have recruited numbers of outsiders who have brought their own influence to bear on the English language and have to some extent brought about "dialect levelling." (Clarke 2010: 155)

The terms "British accent" or "Newfoundland accent", to cite a couple of examples, are used widely to denote a recognizable pattern of speech, even though residents of those places would correctly point out that there are many varieties of each. This is not the case in Labrador; no single manner of speaking, to my knowledge, is designated as a "Labrador accent." Instead, people recognize a North Coast accent, influenced by the cadence and macaronic speech elements of Inuttitut; a South Coast accent more reminiscent of Newfoundland speech; a dialect particular to the Labrador Straits; a Labrador West English inherited from Newfoundland families and from other parts of Canada; and a central Labrador way of speaking that includes the distinctive accents of Mud Lake and North West River, the "levelling" effects of the air force base and the vigorous language of the Innu communities.

As Sandra Clarke says in reference to the *Dialect Atlas of Newfoundland and Labrador*:

In addition it points to the distinct status of Labrador: though Labrador shares many lexical items with the island – as would be expected from migration patterns from coastal Newfoundland to coastal Labrador – it displays a number of lexical items which have not been documented elsewhere in the province. (Clarke 2010: 12)

When local people are asked about language in Labrador they bring forth a list of terms which they assume to be particular to Labrador and nowhere else. While some of these may be unique to the region, many are not, and the idea that people take pride in a distinctive dialect which may not be especially distinctive is already indicative of a sense of separation.

In the published accounts of Evans, Carleton and Strong, we see short collections of words as curiosities encountered on the South Coast. Mary Evans's account is particularly useful as it clearly states that she was in Fox Harbour, Labrador (now known officially as St. Lewis) in 1930, and thus is a localized source. She was much struck by the resilience of words and phrases which appeared in George Cartwright's 1792 journal, noting that:

Owing to the isolation of the Labrador Coast and the absence of foreign influences, these terms, brought from England by the early white settlers, have remained unchanged among their descendants, some of whom are now part Eskimo. (Evans 1930: 56)

A 1924 article by Fred P. Carleton also draws upon the lexicon of the South Coast (while Carleton does not say exactly where he collected these words, we can assume it was probably in the area ministered to by the Grenfell Mission). He divides them into categories, most of which address the occupations and domestic arrangements of the inhabitants. He lists a number of words which clearly show a connection to the Labrador way of life, such as "Auch Etta," the words used to call sled dogs, and "Nowlok-Unok," a harpoon with detachable head and attached line. This latter term, and the technology itself, are still in existence in North West River, where seal hunting conditions are such that these are the most useful means of securing a seal (Chaulk 2012, personal communication). Several terms listed by Carleton are not in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English (DNE)* and indicate what may be exclusive Labrador usage, such as the use of "track" in the phrase "to track a canoe," meaning "to tow a canoe by rope through rapids too swift to paddle" (Carleton 1924: 139).

The North Coast, understood currently as the communities in Nunatsiavut, as well as the Innu community of Natuashish, is linguistically influenced by the languages that were once dominant there. Charles Boberg makes an observation that refers directly to Labrador:

A final apparently regional division is really more closely related to ethnicity and contact with other languages *per se*. This is Canada's North: the federal territories of the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, plus the northern halves of all the provinces from British Columbia to Quebec and the Labrador portion of Newfoundland. (Boberg 2010: 27)

He situates Labrador linguistically within the north and goes on to describe a situation very much in evidence in central and northern Labrador when he points out that even unilingually English-speaking Aboriginal peoples are heard "to be speaking a variety of English nonetheless influenced by an aboriginal substrate" (Boberg 2010: 27). Expressions such as "some ugly good" and "not even" are immediately recognizable as North Coast speech to anyone in Labrador, and current characteristics described by a young resident of Nain include the following:

- Words and phrases are shortened in Nain, so that "What are you going to do today?" becomes "Wha you go do today?"
- When something is being specified in great quantities, instead of saying "a lot," a Labrador English speaker

might say "rye lot" or "ray lot." (Webb 2012: personal communication)

Nain resident Katie Winters is a rich source of vocabulary used by an earlier generation of speakers in the same region of Labrador. Katie's vocabulary included the following words, defined by her daughter, Beatrice Hope; my observations are added in square brackets.

- *Skunners* 'schooners'
- *Wastard* 'wool' [Probably deriving from *worsted*]
- *Ole* 'old' [A very frequent descriptor amongst all people in northern Labrador, having nothing to do with age; it is merely an emphatic word, as in *big old hill*, *good old time*. When young people from Nunatsiavut write on Facebook they use this word but often write it as *oh*.]
- *Doiyen* 'small snowflakes before a storm' [This appears as *dwy* in the *DNE*.]
- *Stemmin' the wind* 'going into the wind'
- *Garngy* 'a woollen sweater' [Probably *guernsey*]
- *Shimmy* 'a young girl's inside t-shirt'
- *Tracin' et up* 'braiding the hair' [Perhaps a reference to the traces used on dogsleds]
- *Kutsuk* Inuttit word for 'gum'; also refers to the gum on the trees (Turcumtine)
- *Kuluky* 'tree'; from *kuluk* (an Inuttit word referring to a little old shabby tree, a Charlie Brown tree) plus the English addition 'y'
- *Cronic* 'twisted branch of dry wood' [This appears as *crunnick* in the *DNE*.]
- *Wamps* Labrador wamps are made out of duffel. They look like a slipper and even are sometimes worn as a slipper. [Beatrice lists her mother's pronunciation as "wamps."] (Hope 2007: 17)

Other areas of Labrador may be less linguistically distinctive but also display features of language which they believe to be unique. For example, the towns of North West River and Mud Lake are said to have a particular way of speaking, often transposing the letters *v* and *w*, as seen in the case of "wamps" above.

These word lists from various sources, along with the usages of ordinary English words by Labrador English speakers in context, are revealing. People in Labrador see their primary identity or affiliation as Labradorian, as

opposed to feeling a strong connection with the island of Newfoundland. There is a distinct sense of place because the physical geography and climate are different, as is the ethnic composition, but perhaps the major difference displayed in language use is political. John Widdowson demonstrates that identification with a very specific place helps people define themselves as part of a folk group based on geography (Widdowson 1981: 33). In the case of a place which has lost its distinctive language, the sense of physical place is important, creating a loyalty to the region and a desire to identify with it. Just as we have more in common with other Canadians than we do with Americans, according to Boberg (2010: 188), Labrador communities feel a greater sense of connection to the other parts of Labrador than to Newfoundland, in spite of the isolation of the individual places. Part of this is the result of the long-held belief that Labrador has been neglected and short-changed in its relationship with the much more densely-populated and politically powerful island portion of the province.

In 1975, William A. Fowler submitted a term paper to Dr. John Kennedy entitled "The Growth of Political Conscience in Labrador" in which he quoted a Labradorian:

For as long as we've been here, they've taken millions of tons of fish from our coast and left us the heads and the guts and the bones. Now they're taking iron ore and leaving us nothing for it. They're taking all the power from the Churchill and they're not leaving us enough for a light bulb.

(Fowler 1975: 1)

These words were spoken not of federal politicians, or multinational companies, but of the people who live on the other side of the Straits: the Newfoundlanders, many of whom would be astonished to find themselves cast in the role of colonial overlords. Fowler goes on to reason:

The people who live in Labrador clearly differentiate between Newfoundlanders and Labradorians. One does not refer to a person born on the island of Newfoundland as a Labradorian, and therefore, it is equally impossible for one born in Labrador to be called a Newfoundlander... But apparently, while it is a clear and unassailable fact to Labradorians it is incomprehensible to Newfoundlanders, who are fond of reminding anyone who argues their point that "sure Newfoundland owns Labrador." This attitude merely serves to

strengthen the Labradorians' conviction. To the student of history, the conflict is the classic reaction of a colonized people toward the ruling nation. No people sharing the bitter fruits of exploitation have ever felt the desire to identify with their exploiters. (Fowler 1975: 2)

In July 2013, Labradorians were equally outraged by Premier Kathy Dunderdale's response to the news that Hydro-Quebec planned a court action against the Muskrat Falls project: "They absolutely do not believe that we own Labrador..." (Montague 2013: 1).

The "otherness" of Labrador is reinforced by the local use of the word *Newfoundland*, which Labrador people employ to refer to the island portion of the province, as in "I'm going out to the hospital in Newfoundland." Another expression reflecting the physical and regional difference is "outside," meaning away from Labrador. This is displayed when people remark to someone whom they have not seen recently, "Were you outside?" (Going to Nain, Cartwright, or Labrador City would not constitute "outside.") Labradorians from the South Coast might also use the phrase "Going to Canada." We also hear daily reference to "on the coast." "Coast" is a term which means more than the physical edge of the land; it describes a whole way of life, and is perhaps synonymous with the word "outport" which is never used in Labrador (nor does one ever hear "bay" or "baymen").

A text which gives some insight into this sense of distinction is a play which was written and performed by Mud Lake School in 2007 at the Labrador Creative Arts Festival, an event begun in 1975 and still occurring annually. The 2007 festival explored the theme of "Landmarks," and students and artists were asked to think about the idea of community as a complex relationship between people and the space they live in. Mud Lake students chose to present their ideas through a play called "All Around Labrador." Four students from the community of Mud Lake (the student body of the entire school) wrote and enacted a script which depicted a visitor from Newfoundland conversing with the local Mud Lake population, with the comedy of the piece residing in the inability of the people to understand each other's expressions. The play introduces a woman called Betty who brings her son on a trip to Labrador. When the character Betty says, "Oh me lard!" the Labrador character says, "Why do you talk so funny?" She then continues, "If you're staying here you are NOT talking like that!" Another revealing exchange goes as follows:

Betty: "My poor old feet are rubbed right raw!"

Nina: "Betty!"

Betty: "What? That wasn't a Newfoundland slang!"

Nina: "People from here, we don't say, 'rubbed right raw.' We say, 'My feet hurt.'"

Betty: "Oh, go way maid!"

Amanda: "Hey!"

Betty: "I likes the way I talks, okay? It's how I was raised...it's me culture!"

Nina: "It's annoying!"

Betty: "Well I doesn't like how you talks."

Nina: "What's wrong with my accent? I don't even have an accent...do I?"

Betty: "Yup."

Amanda: "Fine, you can talk freely."

Near the end of the play a cranky Nina reconsiders her stance and Betty ends up forgiving Nina and inviting her to visit:

Nina: "Well, I'm glad Betty is going! I can't stand her accent, it drives me crazy! Well, I guess she wasn't all bad. There were a few fun times. I guess Newfies aren't all fish and accent. They could be fun. Hey Betty, come here!"... (In response to Betty's invitation) "I'm going, but you ain't makin' me eat cod tongues, and you're definitely not making me a Newfoundlander!"

When Betty confirms the invitation, Nina says one last time in a good-natured way, "Sure, why not? It might be fun! But you are not making me a Newf!"

This play says some interesting things about the relationship between the two sections of the province as seen by the children of Mud Lake. (The teacher advisor for the play was a Newfoundlander who taught for several years in the village.) The stereotypes presented show Newfoundland people as extremely friendly, colourful in their speech, and more accustomed to urban life than Labradorians. The Labrador characters are presented as irascible but dignified, and very resolute in their stance of being seen as a distinct society. The recognition by the audience of the kernel of truth in the piece conveyed the acceptance of differing identity more efficiently than anything else.

The distinct collective Labrador identity was something that became evident as the Labrador Institute carried out the "Mug-Up" series of conversations in sixteen Labrador communities in 2002-2003. At most of these sessions, people were asked if they felt they had a Labradorian identity and in all cases, except in Sheshatshiu, the answer was a resounding yes. Identity in

Labrador has been fostered through institutions and organizations such as *Them Days Magazine*, the Combined Councils of Labrador, the Labrador Creative Arts Festival, and the Labrador Winter Games, all of which were established at roughly the same time in the early 1970s. These institutions were designed to meet various needs, but they have also functioned to create a regional identity. As in many places, this identity is sometimes most easily forged in resistance to a larger force. Just as Canadians hasten to define themselves as "not Americans," so too do Labradorians define their essence as "not Newfoundlanders."

What, then, does the term *Labradorian* mean? As in many places, it is not possible to simply self-declare as a Labradorian; there is an assumption that this membership belongs to people whose families have been resident for some time. Although there are pejorative stereotypes about Labrador, mostly to do with the inhospitable climate as evidenced in phrases like "the land God gave to Cain," Labradorians are both proud and defensive about the place.¹

Roger Abrahams' work is especially useful in discussing the establishment of identity for determining and maintaining domain, and in setting up identity so that it must exist in contrast to other identities with which it co-exists, which is certainly the case when looking at Labrador's coexistence with Newfoundland. One might well say that the need to establish identity that differentiates amongst small regions of the same landmass, or sections of the same province, is self-indulgent in view of the close ties that clearly exist in the province. As Abrahams (2003: 199) says, "Claims for the uniqueness of these markers [social and cultural difference] overwhelm the commonsense notion (borne out by genetic research) that human beings are more alike throughout the world than otherwise."

Language in Labrador takes on a different role when terminology is employed to identify the different groups within the territory. Abrahams (2003: 202) posits that when identity ventures into race or ethnicity, it has produced discomfort. This is clearly the case with ethnicity in Labrador. Further, Oring (1994: 226) notes: "Situations in which identity is challenged or denied – that is, situations of identity conflict – may prove particularly promising for investigation, as they are the arenas in which the contours of identity become most prominent and visible."

¹Only recently are we seeing evidence of the kind of self-reflective humour so clearly evident in Newfoundland satire; this is displayed in the Labrador Creative Arts Festival play of 2011 where Nain students examine how Inuit identity has changed.

The complex system of rules around inclusion in the Nunatsiavut beneficiary population and the rising presence of NunatuKavut² show that the sense of "otherness" Labradorians are ready and eager to promote when discussing Newfoundland is also present within the territory itself.

In many communities in Labrador, and of course elsewhere, there is a dual identity, and there may be yet more levels. (Possibly all Canadians see themselves as having a regional identity first and a Canadian identity second.) At the Labrador level, residents may be primarily affiliated with a community, then with their ethnicity and then with the concept of Labrador. We see that language permits both overt expressions of identity, such as the continued use of a minority language, and a background linguistic landscape that is the starting point for every kind of expressive behaviour. Individuality and community are not fixed states of being; instead we choose and re-choose our identity by accepting and rejecting linguistic features. By self-consciously adopting features which please us, and by celebrating language that is distinctive through performance and literary forms, we use language to consciously and unconsciously proclaim who we are and where we belong, and sometimes shift our use of it to belong in a context where we may not feel at home.

This socially constructed concept of identity by its very nature allows people to redefine it, use it for personal gain, and form alliances with others whose goals for using identity may be the same. In the larger world, identity is probably less defined due to a larger population base, intermarriage, and rapidly shifting communities. Yet the need to see a reflection of ourselves in others most closely like us is an immutable fact not altered by either the need or desire to improve communication with others of different groups, and is sometimes, as in Labrador, most clearly understood and exhibited in the act of declaring difference.

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²NunatuKavut is the organization that represents the group formerly known as the Labrador Metis, or Labrador Inuit Metis. The membership is located in communities in central and southern Labrador

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