

VOICES OF NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR: MOBILIZING CULTURAL HERITAGE FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE

Sandra Clarke

THE BEGINNINGS OF *VOICES OF Newfoundland and Labrador* date back a decade and a half. This research project was initially inspired by inquiries from the public (actors and dialect coaches in particular) as to the availability of recorded speech samples representing the major regional dialect types of the province. The 10th International Conference on Methods in Dialectology (Methods X), hosted by Memorial University in the summer of 1999, indicated that scholars likewise were highly interested in audio recordings of traditional Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) dialects. Yet despite the massive holdings of the university's archival collections, there existed no readily accessible and comprehensive sound "sampler" of traditional NL regional speech.

Consequently, in the fall of 1999, several of us affiliated with the English Language Research Centre (ELRC) of Memorial's Faculty of Arts (folklorist Philip Hiscock, English language specialist Robert Hollett and myself, a linguist) resolved to fill this gap. Our initial aim was to produce a CD of three-to-five minute recorded segments representing traditional speech patterns from all areas of the province. We envisaged that this would be accompanied by a booklet containing orthographical transcriptions of each segment, along with a summary of its principal linguistic features, whether phonetic, grammatical or lexical. Given the considerable public interest in previous ELRC-based research endeavours – notably, the internationally-acclaimed *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1982) – we also resolved that our end product should appeal to a general as well as an academic audience.

In regular weekly meetings, the research team's early efforts were dedicated to tracking down speech samples of reasonable sound quality; selecting appropriate segments; transcribing their content; and converting the selected sound files from analog to digital format, while improving sound quality as necessary through application of the audio editing program Sony Sound Forge. Between 2000 and 2006, as one of several ELRC-based research projects, *Voices* advanced slowly but steadily, assisted by funding which enabled the hiring of part-time undergraduate and graduate students to work on the various project components. We are grateful for financial support from Memorial's School of Graduate Studies, via allocations to the departments of English, Folklore and Linguistics; university-administered provincial and federal

student job programs (MUCEP, GradSWEP, SWASP, Canada Summer Jobs); and the NL government's Department of Tourism, Culture and Heritage.

Given the wealth of recorded interviews of traditional NL speakers by Memorial researchers and students held by the university's Folklore and Language Archive (MUNLFA), this collection became our primary source. We also drew on recordings of the CBC NL daily radio program *Fisheries Broadcast*, some of which were available at MUNFLA. In light of the lack of accessible recordings of traditional Labrador speech, in 2003 Philip Hiscock obtained funding from Memorial's J.R. Smallwood Foundation, which enabled him to travel to Labrador to search the extensive sound archives of *Them Days* magazine. Remaining regional gaps were filled largely by recorded interviews from the research team's personal collections. As of 2004, we also added a temporal dimension to the project, by incorporating interviews with ten Memorial University students, all but one recorded by Philip Hiscock. These speakers, in their twenties, represent a full range of urban and rural communities, from Labrador City, Corner Brook and Grand Falls/Windsor to the relatively remote south coast community of Burgeo. As a result, *Voices* contains a total of 62 speech samples from 59 different communities throughout the province; 12 of these samples are from Labrador, and include residents of small isolated settlements with substantial aboriginal input. The birthdates of *Voices* speakers (1871 to 1984) span more than a century.

After 2007, we reluctantly put the *Voices* project on hold, given the time demands of a second large-scale project also developed by the research team: the online *Dialect Atlas of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Clarke et al. 2013). One of the very few online dialect atlases in the English-speaking world, our atlas displays the regional distribution of 31 phonetic and 27 grammatical features in the traditional speech of 69 communities on the island of Newfoundland, and documents thousands of lexical variants in 20 representative communities throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

The delay, however, has proven highly beneficial, in that the experience we gained in construction of the online atlas has led to re-conceptualization of the *Voices* project. Like the *Dialect Atlas*, *Voices* naturally lends itself to an online digital presentation. In March 2015, we were successful in obtaining a 12-month Connections grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC); with the technical expertise of Memorial's DELTS division (Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support), we are now in the process of converting the *Voices* materials to online formats. This will produce a considerably enriched end result, including not only enhanced visuals, but also links to a range of further information, in particular community-related.

Like the *Dialect Atlas*, *Voices* will mobilize linguistic knowledge on NL speech varieties in a format accessible to a general audience, including school students, the acting community, and cultural and heritage groups. Many

of its recorded excerpts are of interest from a historical perspective – among them the story told by a speaker from the Hopedale, Labrador area, who, as a seven-year-old during the Spanish flu pandemic of 1919, had to care for his very sick family by getting wood and water, and had to walk six miles all alone to get help to bury the body of his dead grandmother.

At the same time, however, *Voices* will have much to offer an academic linguistic audience. It provides a wealth of linguistic data, including narrow phonetic transcription and sound files suitable for acoustic analysis. Its detailed documentation of the linguistic features associated with each speaker provides new insights into regional feature distribution, among them the geographic range of postvocalic /r/ deletion, and its conditioning linguistic factors. In addition, inclusion of both traditional and contemporary speakers facilitates the investigation of language change in NL, including such supposedly recent phenomena as /u/ centralization and creaky voice.

Currently under development, *Voices* is expected to go online in late 2016.

Sandra Clarke is Professor Emerita
in the Department of Linguistics,
Memorial University.

References

- Clarke, Sandra et al. 2013. *Dialect Atlas of Newfoundland and Labrador*.
Available at: www.dialectatlas.mun.ca.
- Sound Forge 8.0. 2006. Madison, Wisconsin: Sony Media Software. [computer program]
- Story, G.M., W.J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson (eds.). 1982 [2nd ed. 1990]. *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. Available at: <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/dictionary>.