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Whose English Counts? Indigenous English in Saskatchewan schools
Quel est l'anglais qui compte ? L'anglais amérindien dans les écoles de la Saskatchewan

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Article abstract

Drawing on the body of North American literature related to English dialect-speaking Indigenous students schooled in majority group classrooms, this commentary paper explores two aspects of institutional racism at work in Saskatchewan schools: (a) the disproportionate representation of First Nations and Metis students in remedial language and speech programs and (b) the relationship and power imbalance between differences in home and school English varieties and educational attainment.

WHOSE ENGLISH COUNTS? INDIGENOUS ENGLISH IN SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT. Drawing on the body of North American literature related to English dialect-speaking Indigenous students schooled in majority group classrooms, this commentary paper explores two aspects of institutional racism at work in Saskatchewan schools: (a) the disproportionate representation of First Nations and Metis students in remedial language and speech programs and (b) the relationship and power imbalance between differences in home and school English varieties and educational attainment.

QUEL EST L'ANGLAIS QUI COMPTE ?
L'ANGLAIS AMÉRINDIEN DANS LES ÉCOLES DE LA SASKATCHEWAN

RÉSUMÉ. En se basant sur le corpus des textes nord-américains qui traitent des élèves amérindiens parlant un dialecte anglais dans des classes où ils sont minoritaires, le présent article étudie deux aspects du racisme institutionnel qui existe dans les écoles de la Saskatchewan : (a) Le pourcentage disproportionné d'élèves autochtones et métis dans les programmes de rééducation du langage et de la parole et (b) les déséquilibres entre les variétés d'anglais parlées à l'école et à la maison et les conséquences sur la réussite scolaire.

POWER IMBALANCE IN SASKATCHEWAN SCHOOLS

Saskatchewan. I have heard it described as a place of extremes. I think whoever made that comment was probably referring to the weather, but the description is equally apt when applied to the range of possible experiences for students enrolled in the province's schools. In Saskatchewan, the population consists almost exclusively of White settlers and Indigenous Peoples. Citing Tymchak (2001), O'Reilly, Crowe, and Weenie (2004) explain that Indigenous children currently represent 33% of school-aged children in the province. By 2016, First Nations and Metis children will make up 46.4% of the student population. While the two groups may soon be roughly equal in terms of school enrollments, the educational experiences of Indigenous students differ in many ways from the experiences of White settler students.

Indigenous Peoples in Saskatchewan experience a myriad of social problems as well as discrimination in many forms in their interactions with White institutions (Adams, 1989). Schools are one of the locations where First Nations and Metis children experience institutional racism. Battiste (2000) argues that national educational attainment levels have been lower among Indigenous students than non-Indigenous students. More specifically, Mendelson (2004) cites statistics from the 2001 Canadian census to explain that only three in ten of all Canadians aged fifteen and older had less than a high school diploma in 2001. Of the Indigenous identity population in the same age group, almost one half had less than a high school diploma. In terms of differences among Canadian regions, Mendelson describes that inequality between the two populations is lower in Eastern Canada and higher in the Prairie Provinces and the North. Alarmingly, in the province of Saskatchewan, a young Indigenous male is more likely to go to jail than to graduate from high school (Thompson & Hubbard, 2004). The same statement cannot be made about a young White settler male living in Saskatchewan. By drawing on relevant literature, the goal of this opinion paper is to examine some of the educational practices and issues that contribute to the power imbalance in Saskatchewan schools.

Schools reflect the culture and beliefs of mainstream society. Children who are not members of majority racial or ethnic groups routinely experience educational challenges that are not faced by those who are members of mainstream society (Ogbu, 1992). Delpit (1988) argues that "those with power are frequently least aware of – or least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence" (p. 282). Because the challenges experienced by minority children are often invisible to members of the dominant society, mainstream educators have traditionally relied on deficit theories to explain the academic difficulties experienced by minority children. Such theories do not offer any real explanation of the challenges faced by Indigenous students in Saskatchewan. Instead, arguments of this nature allow the systemic barriers to remain invisible and place the responsibility for the challenges faced by this student population firmly on the shoulders of the oppressed community. O'Reilly, Crowe, and Weenie (2004) explain that Saskatchewan is home to the highest per capita Indigenous population and that Indigenous peoples are the fastest growing demographic in Canada. In view of this reality, it is all the more imperative that the experiences of Indigenous students be better understood. If school communities do not address the issues of equity and social justice, it is only a matter of several decades before half the population of Saskatchewan will not have access to the necessary skills and education to gain access to employment.

The roots of Saskatchewan's power imbalance date back to first contact between European settlers and Indigenous peoples. Any attempts to justify

Saskatchewan Whites' dominance through arguments of a strong immigrant work ethic is, in fact, an attempt to erase the past one hundred and fifty years of colonialism in Saskatchewan and its devastating effects on Indigenous Peoples. Moreover, the range of systems and relationships constructed by the White majority in Saskatchewan serve the purpose of positioning Whites and Indigenous Peoples in ways that make the institutions and systems of power in Saskatchewan operate to the benefit of White settlers (Adams, 1989). Foucault explains that "the State consists in the codification of a whole number of power relations which render its functioning possible" (1980, p. 122). Without oppression by Whites against Indigenous Peoples, the dominant group could not enjoy the privilege they experience.

The challenges faced by minority students result from issues of power imbalance between home and school cultures (Cummins, 1986). One area where schools have historically marginalized Indigenous Peoples is through the oppression of Indigenous languages (Battiste, 2000; Milloy, 1999). While the importance of maintaining and revitalizing Indigenous languages cannot be understated, the focus of this article is on another aspect of linguistic, and hence cultural, imperialism: the imposition of a variety of English, commonly accepted as standard, on Indigenous students who are members of a discourse community that uses a variety of English that differs from that of the White majority. This discussion of Indigenous English addresses one aspect of the previously described power imbalance between Indigenous and White settler students as language and power are intrinsically linked within educational institutions (Freire & Shor, 1987). Drawing on relevant literature, I argue that Saskatchewan schools employ practices and procedures that are linguistically oppressive towards Indigenous students who use a non-standard variety of English (Heit & Blair, 1993). Furthermore, I maintain that the underlying structures and systems in Saskatchewan schools can be best described as institutional racism and that these discriminatory practices contribute to the lower levels of educational attainment among Indigenous students (Heit & Blair, 1993; Schick & St. Denis, 2003; Cummins, 2000).

WHAT IS INDIGENOUS ENGLISH?

In the Canadian Census of 2001, 198,595 Indigenous Peoples, of a possible 976,305, reported having an Indigenous mother tongue. This statistic indicates that approximately 20% of Indigenous Peoples in Canada speak an Indigenous mother tongue. The remaining 80% of this population are speakers of English or, in some cases, French. The English of this population is, in many cases, a variety that differs from the English spoken by the majority population. Heit and Blair (1993) refer to the varieties of English spoken by Indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan as *Indigenous English*. The authors indicate that regional differences can be observed in Indigenous English; indeed, it may be more appropriate to use the term *Indigenous*

Englishes. For the sake of continuity in dialect literature, I have chosen to employ *Indigenous English* in my own research and writing.

Over the past thirty-five years in the United States, Indigenous English, referred to as American Indian English and Native American English by American researchers, has been studied from a linguistic perspective. Little, if any, investigation has been made into the academic experiences of Indigenous English speakers in the United States. In the Prairie provinces, where this variety of English is very salient, recognition of Indigenous English is limited to its phonological differences, frequently referred to as the "Indian" or "Native" accent. Heit and Blair (1993) indicate that most speakers of standard English in Saskatchewan perceive Indigenous English speakers as simply having a less developed or deviant command of the English language. This variety of English does not enjoy a legitimate status and its speakers are forced to flounder in a standard English school system ignorant of the linguistic differences of Indigenous English (Heit & Blair, 1993).

My own research on this phenomenon focused on the experience of these Indigenous English-speaking children in a standard English classroom in Saskatchewan (Sterzuk, 2003). This qualitative study examined the social and academic experiences of four Indigenous English-speaking children and two White, standard English-speaking children in a Grade 3 classroom in a semi-urban community in Saskatchewan. Research tools used in this study included an observational logbook and semi-structured interviews conducted with students and educators. The interview transcripts and logbook were examined using emergent pattern analysis.

My area of inquiry stemmed from the prevailing stigmatization of Indigenous English, perceived by the majority population as a substandard, deviant form of standard English (Heit & Blair, 1993). As a linguistic system, however, Indigenous English differs systematically from standard English on phonological, morphological, and lexical levels and in terms of pragmatics, syntax, and non-verbal language as well (Dubois, 1978; Leap, 1993; Olson Flanagan, 1987; Schilling-Estes, 2000; Wolfram, 1984). The results of my study mirrored other researchers' descriptions of Indigenous English (Dubois, 1978; Leap, 1993; Olson Flanagan, 1987; Schilling-Estes, 2000; Wolfram, 1984).

Additionally, in examining the children's classroom discourse behaviour, it became apparent that silence, story telling, and teasing are important characteristics of Indigenous English. These findings are similarly reflected in the work of other researchers (Darnell, 1981; Ferrara, 1999; Leap 1993). The study also revealed that these Indigenous English-speaking children were all below grade level in Language Arts, followed modified programs, and received additional support from classroom assistants, resource room teachers, and speech pathologists to address phonological and spelling dif-

ficulties. The experiences of Indigenous English-speaking children in the classroom will be further discussed in the following section.

INDIGENOUS ENGLISH IN THE CLASSROOM

In the field of linguistics, it is generally accepted that no language or language variety is more developed than another; no language or language varietiey promotes better or more complex thinking than any other; there is no basis for the evaluative comparison of languages or language varieties. As such, no intellectual deficits can be attributed to speakers of minority varieties of language. In the educational context, opposition to and intolerance of certain languages or language varieties becomes problematic when ill-informed individuals rise to positions of power. Misconceptions regarding linguistic equality – when held by educational policy makers, administrators, and educators – can have devastating effects on the literacy, academic, and social development of speakers of languages or varieties considered less desirable.

Indigenous English-speaking children are affected in many ways in the standard English classroom. Unfortunately, it is not possible to examine all aspects of the experiences of Indigenous English-speaking students in this article. I have chosen to focus on two ways in which this student population is affected by their marginalized position as Indigenous speakers of English. Accordingly, this next section will discuss (a) the relationship between differences in home and school English varieties and educational attainment and (b) inadequate assessment and evaluation of dialect-speaking children by teachers and speech practioners. I have chosen these two areas as they are discussed in much of the literature related to dialect-speaking students in standard English classrooms and because each of these aspects surfaced in my own research.

Ineffective bridging between home and school

Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) argue that linguistic rights are a basic human entitlement and, as such, an indisputable right for every individual. In particular, the authors advocate the right to education in one's mother tongue and argue that respect for this human right can contribute to a reduction in societal conflict. The linguistics characteristics of Indigenous English have been well documented by American linguists (Dubois, 1978; Leap, 1993; Olson Flanagan, 1987; Schilling-Estes, 2000; Wolfram, 1984). Indigenous English is indeed the first language for many First Nations and Metis students and, currently, these children are denied the right to education in their mother tongue (Heit & Blair, 1993).

In Saskatchewan, the Aboriginal Education Unit of the Ministry of Education manages issues related to the development of Aboriginal education in the province of Saskatchewan. The provincial government website for

the Ministry of Education provides electronic versions of its curriculum and policy manuals. *Language Arts for Indian and Métis Students: A guide for adapting English Language Arts* is the only Ministry document to include mention of the issues of many Indigenous English-speaking school children in Saskatchewan (Saskatchewan Learning, 1994). This guide, not included in the Language Arts curriculum but available only as supplementary document, addresses some of the language concerns of Indigenous English-speaking children, albeit in a limited manner.

While the document does stipulate that this English variety is rule-governed and that students should not be penalized for their differences, it is unclear as to what degree this document actually affects change. The detailed information of this document is not included in the English Language Arts curriculum that teachers must use in their planning. Instead, the document can easily be overlooked by teachers who would need to know of its existence before being able to access it through the Ministry of Education's website. Though this document became available in 1994, my 2003 research found no evidence that its recommendations are being considered in Saskatchewan educational institutions. While the provincial government is to be commended for including mention of Indigenous English in at least one of its pedagogical documents, these materials are not easily accessible to educators. There is a gap between the creation of the guide and inclusion of the material in teachers' teaching strategies.

Children who speak minority varieties of a language do not automatically become fluent in the standard variety of a language upon entering school (Blake & Van Sickle, 2001; Roy, 1987). Many linguists argue that fluency of this kind can only be achieved through formal instruction and through explicit and direct explanations of the differences between the two varieties (Delpit, 1988; Wolfram, Temple Adger, & Christian, 1999). Lack of fluency in the variety valued by the school causes interruptions and delays in Indigenous students' mastery of literacy skills and, subsequently, subject matter. A number of approaches have been suggested to help students in bridging between home and school varieties of language (Malcolm,1995, 2001; Wolfram et al.,1999). Unfortunately, if Saskatchewan teachers are not made aware of *Language Arts for Indian and Métis Students: A guide for adapting English Language Arts*, no tools are available to them to guide them in the explicit language instruction that is necessary to help dialect-speaking children develop literacy skills. To my knowledge, no program exists in any Saskatchewan school that is specifically designed with the goal of helping Indigenous English-speaking students develop fluency in standard English.

Biased assessment and misdiagnosis

Another way in which Indigenous English-speaking children's academic development can be affected by Euro-centric schools is through biased assess-

ment and misdiagnosis of speech and language. In North American schools, when children experience difficulty in acquiring literacy and language skills, they are referred by their classroom teacher to any number of specialists for assessment. A study conducted by Crago (1992) illustrates the marked effect that culturally derived perceptions of appropriate language behaviour can have on a child's school performance. Crago explains that the Inuit value learning through "looking and listening" whereas the non-Inuit teachers place more importance on "question asking and answering." The following excerpt (Crago, 1992) is taken from a report card interview between an Inuk parent and a non-Inuit teacher:

Non-Inuit Teacher:	Your son is talking well in class. He is speaking up a lot.
Inuk Parent:	I am sorry. (p. 498)

In a conversation such as the one cited in Crago's study, differences in culturally derived perceptions of appropriate language behaviour are apparent. This example illustrates how a situation could develop whereby a child who does not conform to a mainstream educator's understanding of appropriate language discourse could be unnecessarily referred for speech and language assessment.

Speech and language pathologists, resource room teachers, psychologists, and special educators generally perform these assessments by subjecting students to a battery of standardized tests. While the creators of such tests have certainly attempted to address concerns related to problems of culturally-biased norming, Long & Christensen (1998) argue that no standardized test can ever be completely unbiased, making the use of such tests questionable in the high-stakes situation of directing the educational path of a minority student. In spite of warnings regarding standardized tests that have not been appropriately normed or modified for use with a local population, such instruments continue to be used when assessing minority populations (Long & Christensen, 1998). Biased assessment can result in misdiagnosis of speech, language, and learning difficulties, which, in turn, can further exacerbate Indigenous students' attempts to develop literacy skills in mainstream classrooms (Harris, 1985).

Harris (1985) describes two errors that a professional may make when assessing the English language performance of Indigenous students. The first mistake is "to assume that a child has a speech or language handicap when, in fact, he or she is using a dialect of English that is appropriate to his or her culture and community" (p. 43). Harris goes on to explain that it is also likely that the full language proficiency of the child will not be tested during assessment. The author explains that a misdiagnosis such as this can result in a number of educational challenges which include negative self-esteem

for the child as well as inappropriate placement in resource room programs, special education classrooms, or modified programs.

The second potential error that may occur when a speech and language professional is not skilled in assessing an Indigenous student's speech and language in a non-biased manner is to conclude that no problem is present when one indeed exists. Harris attributes this error, citing the work of Terrell and Terrell (1983), to the result of "lack of confidence in test instruments, the assumption that a nonverbal child is behaving in a culturally appropriate way, or an absence of information regarding aberrant versus dialectal linguistic forms" (p. 43). The danger is that the speech and language professional will conclude that the child's problem is related to differences in cultural norms and the outcome will be that the student's problem will be overlooked. An error such as this can result in serious long-term effects for a student, including dropping out, being held back in a grade, and being frustrated by having to live with an undiagnosed language disability.

The most alarming effect of biased assessment and misdiagnosis of speech and language disorders is that children do not receive the treatment they require, or receive unnecessary treatment that removes them from other important literacy-building classroom activities. Many of the "errors" that are diagnosed in the speech of Indigenous students result from differences in home and school English varieties and appropriate speech behaviour. Moreover, rather than assuming that Indigenous students have a speech or language disorder, a more effective approach might be to review and modify mainstream bias towards majority culture speech behaviours. In being more mindful of the appropriate speech behaviour of Indigenous' homes, educators and speech and language clinicians could avoid inappropriate assessments and misdiagnoses with harmful long-term effects on students' educational success.

WHAT NEXT?

Based on a review of the relevant literature, a number of changes could be made to improve the educational experiences of Indigenous English-speaking children. Currently, the English Language Arts curriculum that Saskatchewan teachers must use in their planning does not include mention of Indigenous English; this is an error that must be remedied. The current document available to Saskatchewan schools, *Language Arts for Indian and Métis Students: A guide for adapting English Language Arts*, is insufficient in terms of equipping classroom teachers with strong dialect awareness. This provincial English Language Arts Curriculum document must be modified to include a section that outlines the characteristics of Indigenous English, an emphatic explanation of the absolute equality of this variety of English to standard English, as well as the effects of discriminating against dialect-speaking students. A more complete English Language Arts curriculum would

be the first step in developing linguistic diversity awareness in in-service teachers in Saskatchewan schools.

Primary schools in Saskatchewan, in particular, need to make significant changes to their literacy skills programs to recognize the particular needs of Indigenous students in terms of differences in varieties of home English and narrative skills. Speech and language clinicians must familiarize themselves with these same properties so as not to conduct biased assessments of Indigenous students which result in misdiagnosis of speech and language disorders. Children who are misdiagnosed are at risk of following unnecessary speech and language programs, thus missing valuable classroom experiences. The other danger is that students' problems go undiagnosed and they are subjected to unnecessary struggles in their attempts to master classroom material.

Finally, there is a need for more research in the field of Indigenous English. Research in this area is limited to linguistic studies conducted in the United States. Most pressing, however, is the need to examine how best to improve the educational experience of Indigenous English-speaking students. Proposed solutions include teaching dialect speakers to read and write using the non-standard code, designing reading and writing programs to include additional steps for dialect speakers, teacher training, and dialect awareness courses for dialect speakers (Roy, 1987; Siegal, 1999; and Wolfram et al. 1999). While some of these designs, or even the combination of several, may be possible, not enough is known at this time about Indigenous English and further research must be conducted. Saskatchewan schools, as they operate today, marginalize Indigenous English speakers and create an environment where these children are made to feel like outsiders (Heit & Blair, 1993; Schick & St. Denis, 2003; Sterzuk 2003). It is imperative that more research be conducted in an effort to discover viable solutions.

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