

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF *EH* IN CANADIAN ENGLISH*

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1. Introduction.

The recent surge in sociolinguistic investigation of pragmatic markers such as general extenders (*and stuff, and things like that*), discourse and quotative *like*, and utterance final tags (*right, you know*) has been primarily fuelled by questions about grammaticalization and language change (D'Arcy 2005; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2007; Cheshire 2007; Tagliamonte and Denis 2010; Pichler and Levey 2011; Denis and Tagliamonte *pear*). Included in that set of pragmatic markers is *eh*, a very special variant (at least for Canadians). In this paper, I build on earlier work (Avis 1972; Johnson 1976; Gibson 1977; Gold 2005, 2008) and discuss the development of this very Canadian feature in terms of indexical order and indexical change, along the lines of Silverstein's seminal 2003 paper and Johnstone and Kiesling's (Johnstone and Kiesling 2008; Johnstone 2009) work on Pittsburghese, which applies Silverstein's framework.

Although *eh* is well-known as the quintessential Canadian English stereotype, there has been little research that discusses how exactly it came to hold this status. By tracking the points in time at which *eh* gained meanings at subsequent orders of indexicality, à la Silverstein (1993, 2003) and Johnstone (2009), I establish a timeline of the development of *eh*'s social meaning in Canada. My arguments draw on evidence based on the metadiscourse surrounding *eh*, performances of Canadian identity, real- and apparent-time data that tracks the usage of *eh* in Southern Ontario English over the last 130 years (Tagliamonte 2006; Denis 2012) and the commodification of *eh*.

I then consider the discourse contexts in which *eh* is used in vernacular speech and compare these patterns with Gold's (2008) survey data. Mismatches in actual and reported usages of *eh* point to the contexts in which *eh* is most salient and illuminates how and in what contexts *eh* does the indexical work that it does.

2. Social Meanings and Indexical Orders.

This paper borrows heavily from Gold's work on *eh* (2005; 2006; 2008) as well as Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) and Johnstone's (2009) work on ENREGISTERMENT and the COMMODIFICATION of local vernacular features of Pittsburgh English. Johnstone and Kiesling's analyses build on Silverstein's (2003) orders of

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indexical meaning. Johnstone and Kiesling’s (2008) interpretation of Silverstein (2003) is presented in Table 1.

Silverstein (2003)	Johnstone and Kiesling (2008)
n-th-order indexical: A feature whose use can be correlated with a socio-demographic identity. The occurrence of the feature can only be interpreted with reference to a pre-existing partition of social space.	first order indexicality: The frequency of a variant in a person’s speech can be correlated with whether he/she is a member of a social group. Not noticeable.
n+1-th order indexical An n-th order indexical feature that has been assigned a meaning in terms of one or more native ideologies. The feature has become ‘enregistered,’ i.e., associated with a style of speech and can be used to create a context for that style.	second-order indexicality: When a feature becomes available to do social work. Speakers attribute social meanings to variants according to ideologies about class, correctness, gender etc.
(n+1)+1-th order indexical: A subset of features of a n+1-th order indexical feature comes to be meaningful according to another ideological schema. Usage presupposes the context that was created by the use of features at the n+1-th order and can create new contexts.	third-order indexicality: Involves explicit metadiscourse. Links social meanings of second-order indexical features to identity practices. Used in reflexive performance of identities.

Table 1: Orders of Indexical Meaning

Linguistic features (like articles of clothing for example) can be INDEXICAL, in the sense that they are semiotic signs associated with social identities. However, Silverstein (2003) argues that individual features may point to (or ‘index’) multiple, overlapping, and competing meanings. Over time new and subsequent meanings develop out of older meanings, supplanting, “or at least blend[ing]” with, previous indexical values (Silverstein 2003: 194). Such a “dialectical effect” is “a major vectorial force in formal linguistic change” (Silverstein 2003: 194).

According to Johnstone (2009: 162), a linguistic feature has a first-order (n -th order) indexical meaning when the use of that feature is “correlated with demographic facts about people.” First-order indexicality is “scientific” (Silverstein 2003: 205) in that it is observable by a “cultural outsider” (Johnstone and Kiesling 2008: 8). Johnstone and Kiesling (2008: 8) compare features with first-order indexical meaning to Labovian INDICATORS (Labov 1972)—variables that are “defined as a function of group membership” but don’t correlate with style; of which speakers are unaware (Labov 1972: 178).

Second-order ($n+1$ -th order) indexical meanings develop once native speakers become aware of a feature and its usage is assigned a ‘metapragmatic’ interpretation (Silverstein 2003: 212). That is, once speakers begin to notice the social correlates of particular forms and link the usage of a feature to ideologies about

class, localness or prescriptive grammar, such as ‘working class people in Pittsburgh say *dahntahn*’, a feature has a second-order indexical meaning (Johnstone 2009: 160). Johnstone and Kiesling (2008: 8) link second-order indexical meanings to Labovian MARKERS—linguistic variables whose usage varies according to contextual style and social categories (Labov 1972: 179).

Lastly, linguistic features come to have third-order ($[n+1]+1$ -th order) indexical meaning when speakers link second-order indexical meanings with some further ideology (Silverstein 2003). For example, in Pittsburgh, speakers began to link salient regional features with local identity “drawing on the idea that places and dialects are essentially linked” (Johnstone 2009: 164). Johnstone and Kiesling (2008) linked this order of meanings to Labovian STEREOTYPES (Labov 1972: 180)—features which are the topic of overt discussions in and out of a speech community. In the next section, I show how the history of *eh* in Canadian English matches up with these three orders of indexicality.

3. The Development of Indexical Meanings of *Eh*.

The earliest attestation is from the 1773 play *She Stoops to Conquer* by Irish playwright Oliver Goldsmith.

- (1) Happening to dine in the neighbourhood, they called on their return to take fresh horses here. Miss Hardcastle has just stepped into the next room, and will be back in an instant. Wasn’t it lucky? *eh*!

Of course, this is not a Canadian play. In fact, the OED does not note that *eh* is particularly Canadian. Indeed, Avis (1972) lists attestations of the form in American, British, Australian and South African work, in addition to Canadian works. Avis’ (1972) intention was to defend his leaving out of *eh* from the *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles* by demonstrating that the form is used all over the English-speaking world, and has been for at least two hundred years. So how then did *eh* come to be a stereotype of Canadian English? An appeal to orders of indexical meaning sheds some light on the issue.

The earliest attestation of *eh* in Project Gutenberg Canada, shown here in (2), is from 1836¹ and throughout the 19th century, Canadian authors used *eh* in their representations of Canadian English, (3)–(4).

- (2) You Yankees load your stomachs as a Devonshire man does his cart, as full as it can hold, and as fast as he can pitch it with a dung fork, and drive off; and then you complain that such a load of compost is too heavy for you. Dyspepsy, *eh*! infernal guzzling, you mean.

(T. C. Haliburton, *The Clockmaker*, 1836)

¹This pushes back Avis’s earliest Canadian attestation by 13 years. Though, the example is from the same author.

- (3) “Well, how are you, Mr. S—?” cried the farmer, shaking my brother heartily by the hand. “Toiling in the bush still, *eh?*”

(S. Moodie, *Roughing it in the Bush*, 1852)

- (4) “Don’t you know me? I am Mister Lapierre.” “O, Mr. Lapierre, *eh?* Been a warm day.”

(J. C. Dent, *The Gerrard Street Mystery and Other Weird Tales*, 1888)

Thus, we know that Canadians have been using *eh* for sometime now. Whether or not Canadians used the form more frequently than elsewhere in the English speaking world is an empirical question.² However, Avis (1972) gives us some clue as to how *eh* may have had a first-order indexical meaning—that is, some indication that the use of *eh* was correlated with the Canadian English dialect.

He observes two discourse contexts in which *eh* is only attested in Canadian English. These include the narrative and exclamative *eh* (Avis 1972: 99,103) as in (5).

- (5) a. ‘Jesus, the old Deacon *eh*—getting off that hot one about the Major, *eh?* Jesus, and that riddle about cookie, *eh?* Jesus!’...

(R. Davies, *Fifth Business*, 1970)

- b. Now that would be real television. *Eh?*

(*Globe and Mail* Oct. 3, 1970)

At some point in the past, a particular usage of *eh* (and maybe a high frequency of the form) could have been correlated with Canadian English and thus, have a first-order indexical meaning, in Silverstein and Johnstone’s sense.

Eventually, Canadians, and evidently Americans, began to notice this correlation. Since at least the mid-fifties, linguists and laypeople have talked about *eh* as a feature of Canadian English. Avis (1972: 91) himself admits to “making noises about *eh*” on radio, in speeches and in publications about Canadian English, noting that it is one feature which Americans “remark on as being characteristic of Canadian habits of speech.” Indeed, critics of the *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles* point out that “both the English and the Americans can spot a Canadian from his ‘*eh?*’ at the end of a sentence” (Moore 1967). Following Avis’s (1972) paper, several linguists wrote about the Canadian-ness of Canadian *eh* (Love 1973; Johnson 1976; Gibson 1977; Schecter 1979).

Thus, beginning in the fifties, *eh* developed a second-order indexical meaning. That is, the correlation between Canadian English and *eh* (or at least some salient uses of *eh*) gained a meaning in terms of a specific national ideology. In Silverstein’s (1993; 2003) terms, the specific ideological schema by which the meaning of *eh* was shaped at this time was the CANADIAN-AMERICAN contrast. This is one of the main characteristics of Canadian cultural identity. It is even

²Avis (1972: 95) observes “[t]here can be no doubt that *eh?* has a remarkably high incidence in the conversation of many Canadians these days.”

apparent in the earliest (Yankee-bashing) Canadian attestation of *eh* in (2). Many of the early “noises” made by those who talked about *eh* contrast Canadian and American English explicitly. This idea, in (6) that *eh* is a shibboleth in the biblical sense, was first noted in 1959 (Allen 1959: 20).

- (6) So entrenched has [*eh?*] become in Canadian speechways that border officials have come to regard it as a pretty good way to spot a Canadian.

(G. James, Canadian English: It’s a little different, eh?, *Time Magazine* 1971)

In 1980, a further shift in the indexical meaning of *eh* began to take place with the introduction of the McKenzie Brothers sketches on the popular Canadian comedy show SCTV. As Gold (2008: 1) puts it, these sketches “both reflected a widely held attitude that *eh* was a marker of Canadian speech, and contributed to the spread of this status.” In addition to flannel shirts, toques, and Molson beer, Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas made liberal use of *eh* in their improvised performance of a profoundly Canadian identity.³

The McKenzie Brothers had two separate and intersecting effects: one in Canada and one outside of Canada. Every Canadian would agree that The McKenzie Brothers were not a parody of *all* Canadians, but rather a specific *subset* of Canadians. Within a strictly Canadian context, this sketch was lampooning the beer drinking, flannel wearing, non-urban, blue collar Canadian male—the HOSER. Indeed, the actors seem to have been picking up on something real.

Corpora of natural vernacular Canadian English reveal several patterns. Figure 1 shows the distribution of individuals in the Toronto English Archive (Tagliamonte 2006) with respect to their normalized frequency of *eh*. Individuals are partitioned with respect to whether or not they have blue collar occupations (red lines and dots) or white collar occupations (teal lines and dots). The split is clear. Only four individuals with white collar occupations use *eh*, while ten—or two and a half times as many—blue collar individuals use the form. Notice also the shapes of the dots. Circles represent females, triangles represent men. Of those who use *eh*, ten are males and only four are females.

Another comparison to make is between speakers from the urban metropolis of Toronto, and speakers from the outskirts of the city. Of the twenty eldest speakers in the Toronto English Archive, five use *eh* (25 per cent). In comparison, in new data from oral histories recorded in the 1970s and 1980s with elderly individuals in three rural areas of Ontario, five of nine (56 per cent) speakers use *eh* (Denis 2012). Furthermore, although these latter results are tentative, there are at least a couple of speakers who use *eh* at a frequency higher than anyone in Toronto.⁴ Taken together, these three attributes—blue collar, non-urban, and male—could be used to describe Bob and Doug McKenzie.

³In Eckert’s (2000) sense, they are “linguistic icons”.

⁴In new data being collected in Northern Ontario, *eh* is “so frequent it’s unbelievable” (S. Tagliamonte p.c.).

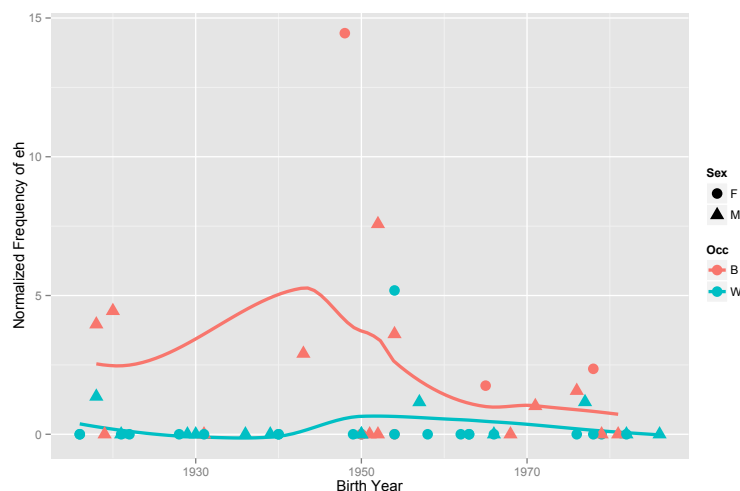


Figure 1: Scatterplot of normalized frequency of *eh* per 10 000 words in Toronto English Archive (Tagliamonte 2006) by age, sex, and occupation. Local regression smoothing lines added for clarity.

Thus, what was previously a regional distinction—Canada vs. America—shifted. *Eh* became meaningful according to further ideological schema: hoser vs. urban Canadian. This is reflected in reflexive performances of the hoser persona. At least within Canada.

However, within the American context, perhaps through metonymic association of Bob and Doug McKenzie, the hoser image now represents a stereotypical image of all Canadians (see *The South Park* movie, *Canadian Bacon*, etc.). Along with this image, *eh* is part of the American cultural perception of Canada, as evidenced in Preston’s work on perceptual dialectology in the United States. When American participants were asked to demarcate places on a map of the continental United States where different accents and dialects are spoken, several respondents went outside of the American borders they were given and marked Canadian English in some way. A large number of informants labelled Canada as *eh*, *ey*, *ay* and even ‘A’, as shown in Figure 2 (Preston 2008).

But as Johnstone and Kiesling (2008: 9) note, “knowing a place means knowing its dialect.” Canadians know something about Canadian English—*eh* is not that frequent in comparison to other features that function in the same ways. As seen in Figure 3 comparison of the frequency of *eh*, *you know*, and *right* in the Toronto English Archive over time (other forms that function similarly to *eh*, see (see Tagliamonte 2006).⁵ Clearly, *eh* is a marginal variant, representing around four to five per cent of the variation.

⁵In the Vancouver area, *hey* is another frequently heard variant.

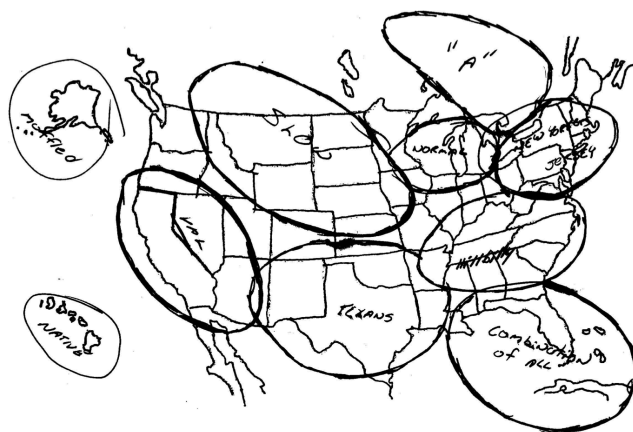


Figure 2: Example of American perceptual-dialectological view of Canada. (Image courtesy of Dennis Preston).

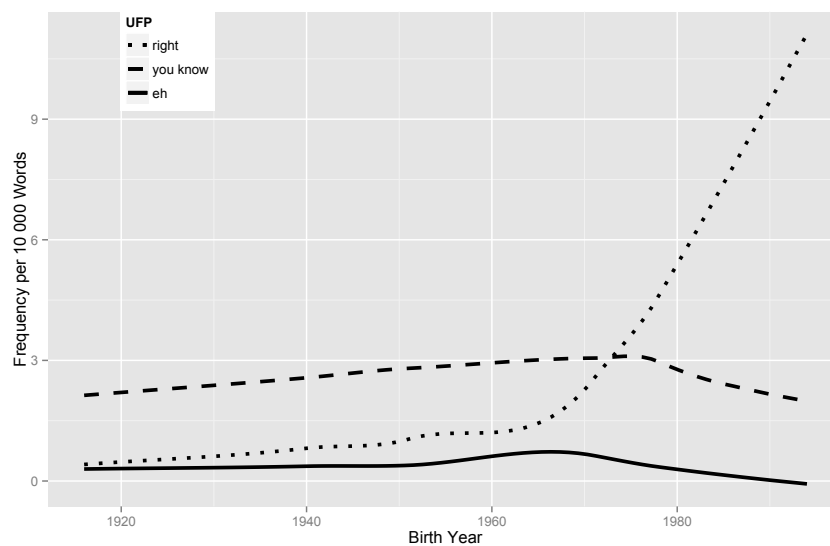
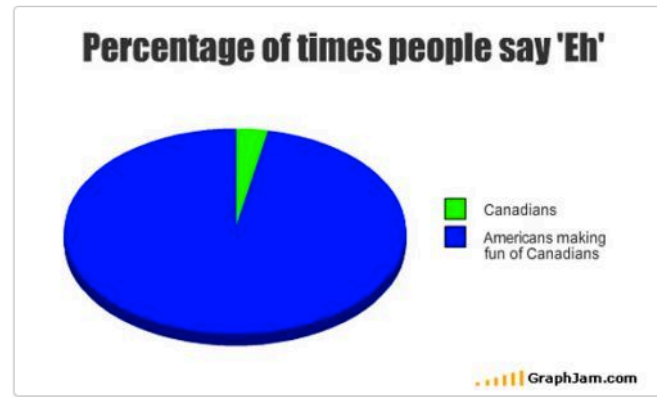


Figure 3: The frequency of *eh* and other forms that function similarly in the Toronto English Archive.

The pie chart in Figure 4 is from a blog, written by a Canadian ex-pat living in North Carolina. There are two points of interest here. First, the creator of the chart observes that despite its relatively low frequency in Canadian English, the use of *eh* by Canadians is highly salient to Americans. Second, the author notes



I really don't think I say eh that much... except when I'm trying to sound Canadian

Figure 4: A Canadian perception of *eh* usage.

under the chart that he only uses *eh* when explicitly trying to sound Canadian.⁶

Thus, the social meanings of *eh* in Canada are quite complex and the ideological schemas on which these meanings are shaped intersect. On the one hand, within a Canadian context, *eh* indexes a non-urban, blue collar Canadian, probably holding court at the local Tim Hortons.⁷ On the other hand, Canadians are quite aware of the negative stereotype held by Americans. However, at the same time, NOT-BEING-AMERICAN is one of the main characteristics of Canadian identity. This is what the blogger and grad student are picking up on—the reappropriation of *eh*. Americans associate *eh* with Canadian English. Canadians do not want to be Americans. So therefore, *eh* can be used ironically in expressions of Canadian identity, especially in contrast with Americans. This linking of the second-order indexical meaning of *eh* (i.e., 'Canadians say *eh*') with Canadian identity is what Johnstone (following Silverstein) would call a third-order indexical meaning.

Indeed, today, *eh* evokes authentic Canadian-ness in any form (Gold and Tremblay 2006). From workshops on Canadian multiculturalism (*Diversity, eh?*) to museum exhibits about Canadian English (*Canadian English, eh?*). The connection between *eh* and Canadian identity is particularly clear when we consider the commodification of *eh*. Like Pittsburghese in Pittsburgh, *eh* appears on t-shirts, mugs, magnets etc. to be sold to tourists and patriotic Canadians. Sometimes, these commodifications manifest along the Canadian-American ideology. The shirt in Figure 5a implies that American's say "huh" and that is much more vulgar than *eh*. One of the most confusing uses of *eh* on a t-shirt is in Figure 5b. I can only speculate that the ideological context in which this shirt would be a viable commodity, is when Canadians visiting or living in Hawai'i feel the need

⁶I have often heard Canadians admit to using *eh* more frequently when visiting the States to mark their Canadian-ness.

⁷Thanks to Alex Motut for this observation.

to advertise that they are Canadian and in Hawai'i. A clear link between these two shirts is local pride. Pride in being Canadian, and not American. Although many examples of *eh* commodities contain other symbols of Canada (e.g., maple leaves, beavers, red and white colours), *eh* is so connected to authentic Canadian-ness unto itself, that it even appears alone on plain black t-shirts, as in Figure 5c.

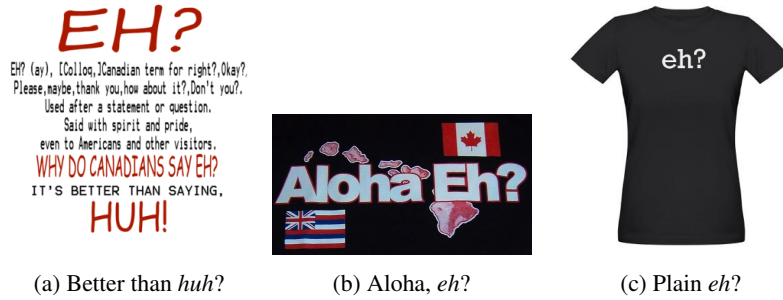


Figure 5: Various *eh* t-shirts.

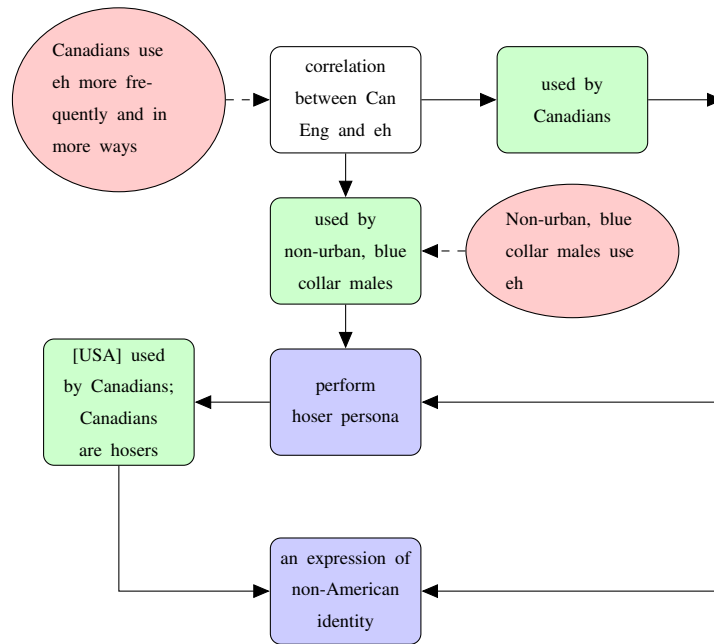


Figure 6: Summary of the indexical meanings of *eh* in Canadian English. Red bubbles observable facts and white, green, and blue bubbles are first-, second-, and third-order indexical meanings respectively.

The diagram in Figure 6 summarizes what I have argued for so far. In the middle of the 20th century, people started to notice that Canadians said *eh*. This correlation can be thought of as a first-order indexical meaning. Speakers began to notice that Canadians use *eh* more frequently than Americans and the feature became meaningful in terms of a Canadian-American ideological schema. This is a second order indexical meaning. Around the 1980s, a shift in the indexical meaning of *eh* happened. People noticed the correlation between *eh* and non-urban, blue collar Canadian males, and the meaning of *eh*, within Canada was associated with hosers. In fact, *eh* was used in performances of hoser identities, operating with third-order indexicality. However, at the same time, Americans associated all Canadians with the hoser persona, including prominently, the use of *eh*. Perhaps as a backlash to this, Canadians successfully reappropriated *eh*, again in terms of a Canadian-American contrast. Now the feature is available for a range of expressions of Canadian identity.

4. The Discourse Contexts of *eh* and Indexical meaning.

With a timeline of the development of the social meanings of *eh* established, I will consider the functioning of *eh* in discourse and connect this to the indexicality of the form. Gold (2005; 2006; 2008) has done extensive survey studies of the use of and attitudes toward *eh* in Canada. Building on earlier work (Avis 1972; Love 1973; Gibson 1977; Schecter 1979; Woods 1980; Dodds de Wolf 2004), she asked students at the University of Toronto if they had heard or used *eh* in various contexts, as in Table 2. She also asked students if they felt positively or negatively toward using *eh* in each of these contexts. Not surprisingly, there was a strong correlation between attitudes and reported usage. The students are more likely to report using *eh* in contexts that they do not view negatively, as seen in Figure 7.

Type of <i>eh</i> ?	Sample Sentence
1. Statement of opinion	<i>Nice day, eh?</i>
2. Statement of fact	<i>It goes over here, eh?</i>
3. Commands	<i>Open the window, eh?</i>
4. Exclamations	<i>What a game, eh?</i>
5. Questions	<i>What are they trying to do, eh?</i>
6. 'Pardon?'	<i>Eh? What did you say?</i>
7. Fixed Expressions	<i>Thanks, eh?</i>
8. Insults	<i>You're a real snob, eh?</i>
9. Accusations	<i>You took the last piece, eh?</i>
10. Narrative	<i>This guy is up on the 27th floor, eh?</i> <i>Then he gets out on the ledge, eh...</i>

Table 2: Discourse contexts of *eh* (Gold 2005: 2).

However, when we compare actual usage data to attitudinal data, a different picture arises. Using the typology in Table 2, I coded all the tokens of *eh* in

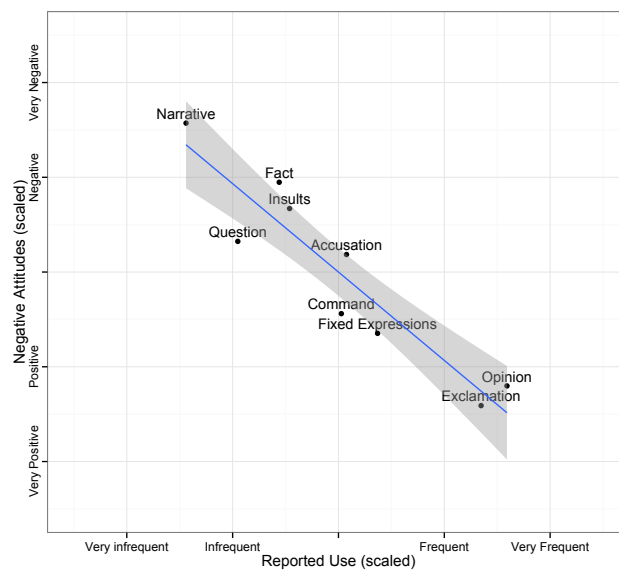


Figure 7: Attitudes toward *eh* by reported usage in different discourse contexts. Data normalized based on Gold (2005).

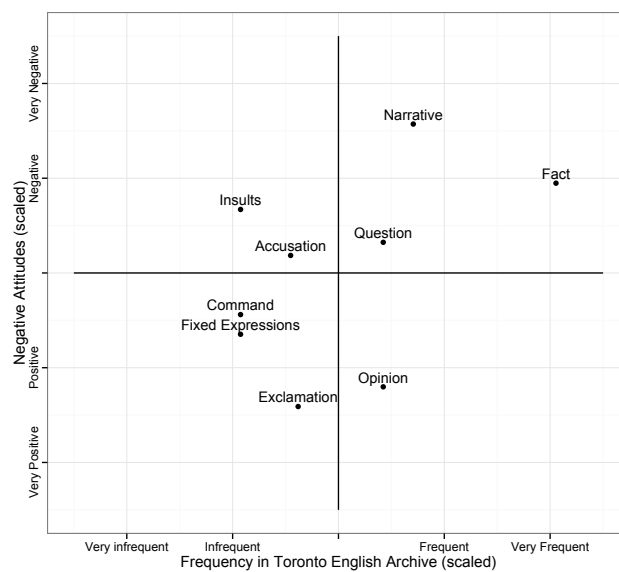


Figure 8: Attitudes toward *eh* by actual usage in different discourse contexts in Toronto English Archive. Data normalized.

the Toronto English Archive for their discourse context and, in Figure 8, I compare the actual frequency of *eh* in each context to the reported attitudes toward using *eh* in those contexts. What emerges are four types of contexts in which *eh* is used: Frequently used, but negatively viewed contexts (narrative, questions, fact reporting); frequently used and positively viewed (opinions); not frequently used and positively viewed (commands, fixed expressions, exclamations); and, not frequently used and negatively viewed (insults and accusations).

This interaction between actual usage and attitudes may provide a window into how *eh* is used indexically. If we were to capture instances of *eh* being used with third-order indexicality by Canadians, that is to either perform a hoser persona or as an expression of Canadian identity, we might find that *eh* is used in different contexts to express these different social meanings. In the case of the hoser persona, the frequently used and negatively viewed types of *eh* may be used. In cases where Canadians use *eh* to express their Canadian identity, the frequently used but positively viewed contexts might do that work.

In support of this hypothesis, consider a transcript from a Bob and Doug McKenzie sketch. There are five instances of *eh* in this performance, on lines 7, 9, 11, 14, and 25.

Bob: Okay, good day. Welcome to the Great White North. Go.	1
Doug: [non-lexical noises...moose call]	2
Bob: Go again.	3
Doug: [non-lexical noises]	4
Bob: Beautiful. Okay, good day. Welcome to Great White North. I'm Bob McKenzie and this is my brother Doug.	5
	6
Doug: How's it going eh ?	7
Bob: And woah. You- did you hear about th- we- well you can tell them.	8
Doug: Okay, you hear about the guy who like uh was opening a beer eh and like went to drink and then did the stupid thing of looking in the bottle and "woah!" there's a mouse in his bottle eh !	9
	10
	11
Bob: Real, real, real mouse. Well I guess it was dead right. Drown. From the beer. And drunk too. Like it died- died from-	12
	13
Doug: Yeah. Drowned happy too. It had a smile on its face eh . (inc).	14
Bob: It died from drunk driving in the bottle. But you know what the guy got? Tell them.	15
	16
Doug: A whole case of beer.	17
Bob: Right.	18
Doug: So our topic today is how to stuff a mouse into a beer bottle without uh, without breaking it-	19
	20
Bob: The bottle.	21

Doug: It's bones.

22

Bob: Right.

23

Doug: So that they'll look at it and give you a case and not think you hosed them by uh by deliberately stuffing one in **eh**. It's like ship building in a bottle, okay?

24

25

26

In this sketch at least, my hypothesis seems to be confirmed. The first instance, line 7, is in the context of a question. The next two, lines 9 and 11, are part of a narrative. The fourth *eh*, line 14, co-occurs with a statement of fact and the last one, line 25, is a narrative *eh* again. In all these cases, Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas are using the frequently used and negatively viewed uses of *eh* in their portrayal of the Canadian hosers *sine qua non*.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, although *eh*'s status as a stereotype of Canadian English is well-known, this paper has attempted to dissect the multiple and intersecting social meanings that led to that status. The two most salient social meanings of *eh* are relevant in terms of the Canadian-American contrast and the hoser-urban contrast. I've also shown that there are mismatches between actual and reported uses of *eh* and between actual usage and attitudes about different contexts in which they are used. These latter mismatches categorize the discourse contexts of *eh* in a way that is relevant to its social meanings. For example, negatively viewed but commonly used contexts, such as questions and narratives, index the hoser persona. These results are a start towards disentangling the social meanings of *eh* in Canadian English.

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