



## Royal Society of Canada Annual Meeting

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### Induction Speech

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I am a Linguist, a Sociolinguist and I study language. Linguistics is the scientific study of language.

Language is both a complex adaptive system as well as a socially embedded communication system. By studying language, a linguist like me can probe the deepest reaches of mind and cognition as well as individual behaviour and cultural trends.

My research is founded on three facts about language: ONE: Language varies at all levels. For example, in North America we call a truck a “truck”, but in England, it’s called a “lorry”. In some parts of Ireland and Newfoundland people say “Sali’s after going” when they mean I’ve just left. TWO: language changes: we don’t sound like Beowulf or Shakespeare, we don’t sound like our parents and our children don’t sound like us. THREE: Language conveys far more than simply the meaning of its words. As you are listening to what I’m saying, you are understanding a lot more about me than you consciously realize. Just think, if I was behind a dark screen, you could still tell I’m female, you could probably guess my age, maybe even my nationality... especially if I told you about my *house*, or how to get *out* the building. And if we were to engage in further conversation about *camp*, *packsacks* and the need for *fly-dope* in the *bush* you might even be able to tell what part of Canada I come from.

By collecting audio recordings of a person talking about their everyday life and experiences I can get a blueprint of their linguistic system ... a window on the human mind in place and time. Then, I make these recordings machine readable by transcribing them verbatim, with all the *uhms* and *ahhs* and everything else. Then, I analyze it both qualitatively and statistically.

What kinds of questions are relevant? I look for where the issues are, societal discord, education deficits, technological developments, world affairs. My early research studied the language of African American enclaves in the Caribbean and Nova Scotia. The results contributed badly needed evidence for controversies in the United States over the nature of African American English — why is it so different? ... Which in turn contributed to the Ebonics debate. But a critical missing link was the dearth of information from English dialects in the UK. Lucky for me, my first academic position was in England. I spent six

years collecting data from communities all over the UK and studying their many variegated language features.

Have you ever wondered how your ancestry affects the way you speak? I certainly don't sound like anyone from the UK, but there are still words and expressions in my speech where these roots still show — my use of [æ] instead of [a] in words like *pants*, the past tense *gotten*, the expression *it's a good job* for “it's a good thing” and many others. So, beneath the anecdotes and nonce tales in my recordings are hidden clues and patterns, reflecting the legacy of individuals, but also regional factions, social groups and lines of descent. The type of research I do gives me the means to crack this hidden orderliness.

When I came to the University of Toronto in 2001, I noticed that Canadian English was changing — the question was why and how? So, I started collecting more data, first from Toronto, then southeastern Ontario and more recently into the great expanse of Ontario's north country. I've discovered remarkable transformation and an abundance of homegrown dialects. My results often refute commonly held assumptions. For example, the use of the new quotative, *I'm like*, “*it's cold outside!*” and *my husband's like*, “*yeah!*” Despite popular opinion, this is not an aberration, but systematic and rule-governed with roots in cultural changes in the mid-twentieth century and a bellweather for future developments. My research also taps generational change. For example, older people tend to use 'very' as an intensifier, as in 'I'm very happy', but younger people use 'so' — as in *I'm so happy*. Yet where you come from matters. A famous shibboleth of Canadian identity 'eh' is a feature of the elderly in places like Toronto, but in outlying communities, people of all ages still use 'eh'. Next time you're talking to someone, listen for how they end their sentences! While these phenomena may seem trivial individually, their underlying patterns tap broader trends offering insights into what is driving changes in Canadian society and across the globe.

People are labeled and judged by the way they talk. Take a simple difference in sound. If a girl's name is *K-A-T-Y*, do you say Kady or Katy or Ka?y? How your pronunciation is perceived can cause deep-seated psychological and social problems, especially if you are ridiculed or fail to get a job because of the way you speak. My research can help counteract such negative views. Understanding can change people's beliefs about language, and by extension their opinion of language users, producing a more respectful and tolerant society.

Beyond all the detailed statistics and interpretations that inform my academic work, my research holdings contain a wealth of other information. .... Stories about what it was like to live on a small mixed farm in the 1920's, to drive logs down a river in the 1940's, to participate in a political demonstration in the 1960's and so on. A playwright, or a novelist might want to use this material to write about these experiences authentically. Someday a child will be able to hear the stories of their great-great-great-great grandmother. In this way, my archives have value for all. Finally, I think that if Canadians were to realize the wealth of resources and insights that can be found in our languages it will help us understand ourselves.