

**Words in the mind of the individual and the community:
De facto standardization of the lexicon**

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Abstract: Avoidance of Synonymy is said to be an important constraint in lexical acquisition. A lexicon is built in the mind of each individual, but the speech community also has a lexicon in its abstract collective “mind.” The avoidance of synonymy in individuals leads each speech community towards one dominant standard form for each meaning. Once a particular community has adopted a standard term, it is difficult for a synonymous term to replace it. For example, five different terms to describe rubber-soled casual shoes are each dominant in a different region of North America and these entrenched terms seem resistant to homogenization or replacement by a new word. New concepts or objects, however, favour innovative words. The process of entrenchment of a standard name for the Canadian two-dollar coin is discussed.

Keywords: lexicon, synonymy, conventionality, acquisition, change, Canadian English, speech community

1. Introduction

Language exists in the minds of language users, but “a language” or “a dialect”¹ only exists in the collective “mind” of a speech community. The lexicon is a key component of any dialect which is agreed upon (mostly below the level of consciousness) by its speakers. Clark has proposed two principles of language acquisition which ultimately affect the language of the community as a whole:

The Principle of Contrast: Every two forms contrast in meaning.

The Principle of Conventionality: For certain meanings, there is a conventional form that speakers expect to be used in the language community. (1987:2)

The Principle of Contrast results in avoidance of synonymy by speakers and consequently by the speech community as a whole. If two synonymous forms appear, they either tend to drift away from each other in meaning or one of them falls out of use. As synonymous forms are rejected, a conventional form arises in

¹ This paper will mainly discuss dialects of English, but the same constraints are generally true of variation and standardization within and among languages, so “dialects or languages” should be understood where the word *dialects* appears.

the speech community and, I will argue, tends to become stronger over time. The stability of established words will be discussed in Section 2.

Although it is difficult to assign new words to existing meanings, new concepts or objects may create lexical gaps that can be filled by innovative words. Section 3 discusses a lexical gap caused by the introduction of a new coin denomination in Canada, which created a strong public desire for a name.

2. Avoidance of Synonymy and the Principle of Contrast

Avoidance of synonymy is a fundamental principle. Clark (1985) says that children as young as two years old have no difficulty with homonymous morphemes, while these same children do not tolerate synonyms. Clark's (1973) examination of diary studies found overextension of meanings to be a common feature of early childhood speech. For example, a child may apply the word *dog* to all four-legged animals. When the child learns the name of another four-legged animal such as *cow*, children will revise the meaning of *dog* to exclude cows, rather than allowing *dog* and *cow* to be synonyms. Clark takes this as evidence that children assume that words contrast in meaning and reject synonyms.

In another type of synonymy avoidance, Aronoff (1976) introduced the idea of *blocking* to explain how a derivational form such as *gloriousness* can block a form such as **gloriosity* (unless each had a different meaning). Aronoff's blocking was extended by Kiparsky (1983) into the domain of inflectional morphology with a rule he called AVOID SYNONYMY: "The output of a lexical rule may not be synonymous with an existing lexical item." Thus **gooder* is blocked if a suppletive such as *better* exists. Clark extended this further to include synonyms in general, even if they are not morphologically related:

Pre-emption by synonymy: If a potential innovative word-form would be precisely synonymous with a well-established word, the innovative word is pre-empted by the well-established word, and is therefore considered unacceptable. (1985:7)

Markman (1984:403, cited in Clark, 1985:25-26) proposed a principle of Mutual Exclusivity for young children: "Category terms will tend to be mutually

exclusive.” The part of this that concerns us here is what Clark calls the Principle of No Overlap: “Speakers do not let the meanings of any two words overlap” (1993), which she says is retained into adulthood (1985).

3. Established words resist change

An example of established words that resist change comes from the following question posed in a Web questionnaire at <http://www.howItalk.com> (Wick, 2004): “Casual wear for exercise usually consists of pull-on pants and a pull-over top. What do you call the rubber-soled shoes you’d wear with this outfit?” Questionnaires were completed by 1263 Canadian respondents. We can draw two major conclusions from the results. Firstly, responses for this question divide Canada into three separate regions, and secondly, no significant country-wide homogenization of this terminology seems to be occurring across the country.

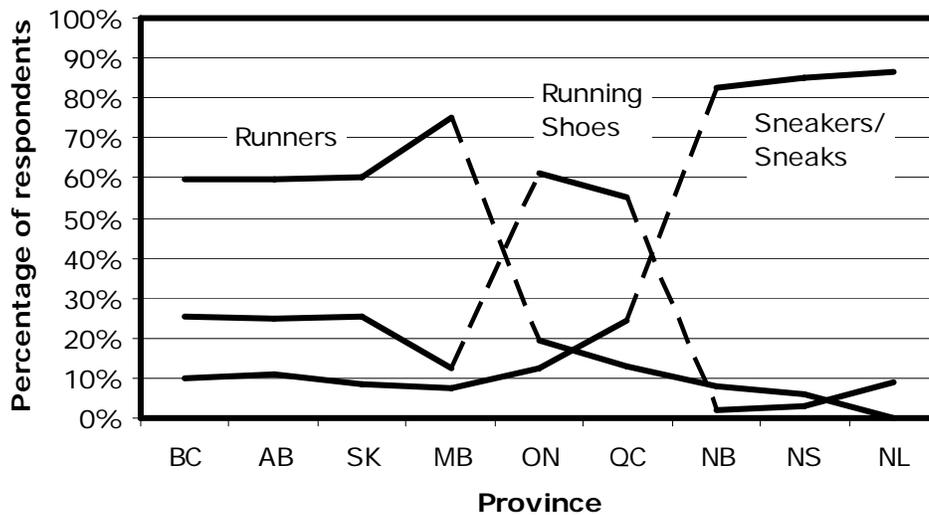


Figure 1: Canadian Preferences by Province for *Runners*, *Running Shoes*, and *Sneakers*. The first variant mentioned by each respondent is shown here. Further details are in Wick (2004).

Figure 1, in which the provinces are arranged from west to east, displays the three dominant Canadian terms: *runners*, *running shoes*, and *sneakers*. The dominant term in the West is *runners*, in the central provinces of Ontario and Québec it is

running shoes, while in the Atlantic Provinces, *sneakers* or *sneaks* is nearly categorical, ranging from 82.4 to 86.4% of responses in each of those provinces.

Having roughly established the regions of Canada where each of these terms is most entrenched, we can investigate the dimension of time. Figure 2 summarizes responses from Canadians still residing in the region of their youth, arranged from oldest to youngest. The graph can be read as an apparent time chart of the progress of entrenchment, assuming that most speakers change their speech patterns little after the age of about 18. Each of the three dominant Canadian terms appears to be stable in its respective region, with preference for *running shoes* actually increasing in the central region from 50.0% of the oldest group of respondents to 90.5% of respondents aged 16 to 19. Unless most speakers change the word they use as they grow older, central Canadians are becoming more and more distinct from their neighbours to the west, east and south with regard to this variable. Use of the term *running shoes* in Toronto dates back to at least 1894, with clear evidence of the modern sense of rubber-soled shoes as early as 1901 (Wick, 2004). *Sneakers* first appeared in print in the Funk and Wagnalls (1895) dictionary which listed it as “Thieves’ Jargon” (Coye, 1986) and it was supposedly chosen as a generic term for *Keds* when mass marketing of those shoes started in 1917 (Wick, 2004).

Standardization of the Lexicon

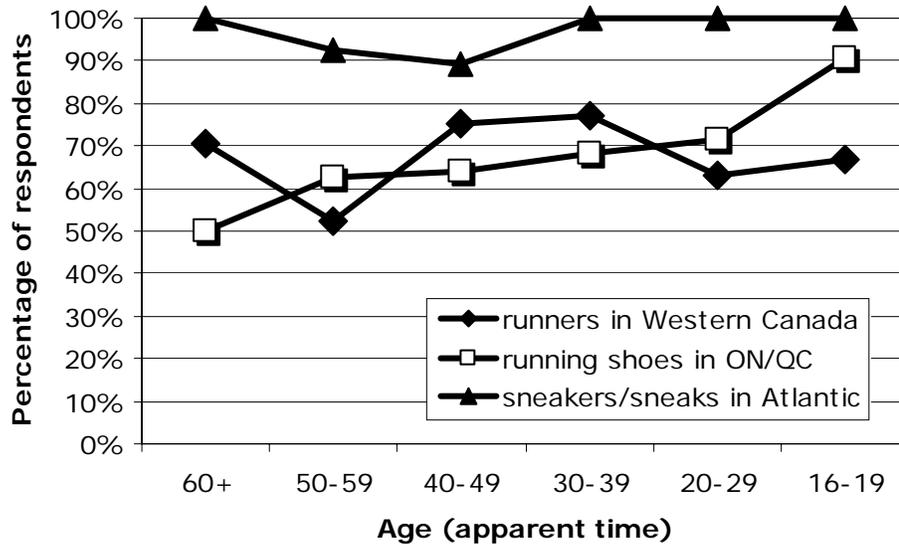


Figure 2: Shoe Word Preference by Indigenes. Only the most popular first response in each region is shown here, and only for respondents still living in the same area of Canada as they were living during the ages of 8 to 18. Further details are in Wick 2004.

In the United States, Coye (1986) asked students from nearly all states beginning in the fall of 1981 for the word they used for canvas and rubber shoes. He was surprised to find that responses split the country into two regions. Students from the north-east, including New York state and eastern Pennsylvania nearly all gave *sneakers* as their first response, while most other Americans gave *tennis shoes*. About 20 years later, a much larger survey on the Web produced an identical distribution. Vaux (2002) asked, “What is your *general* term for the rubber-soled shoes worn in gym class, for athletic activities, etc.?” On a state by state basis, the term *sneakers* makes up more than 90% of responses in each of the north-eastern states (shown in black in Figure 3), with a smaller majority in the adjoining states of Pennsylvania and Maryland, as well as Hawaii and Florida.

A majority of speakers in most other states prefer *tennis shoes* (white in Figure 3) over all other variants, with the sole exception of Illinois, in which *gymshoes* (37.5%) edged out *tennis shoes* (34.4%) by a narrow 3.1% margin.

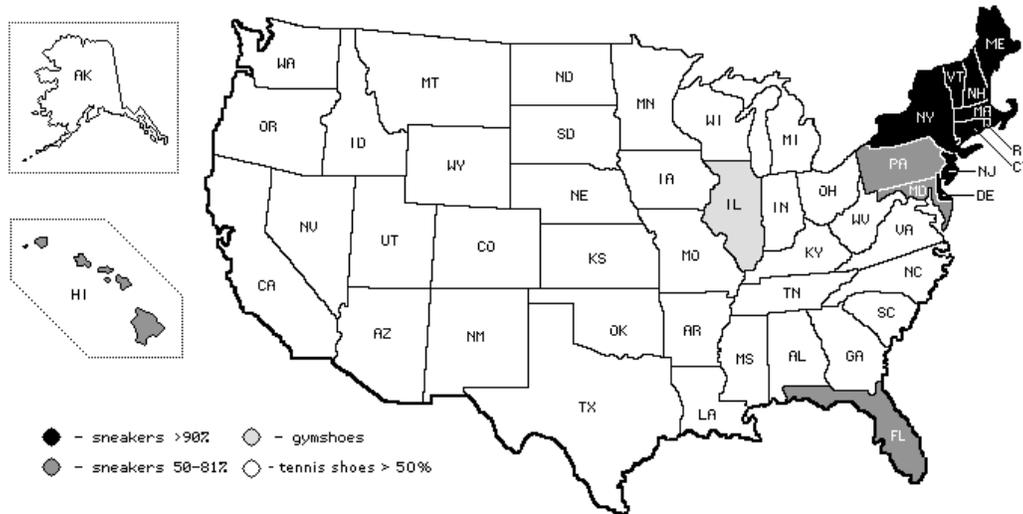


Figure 3: State by state breakdown of the dominant term for rubber-soled shoes. Based on data from Vaux 2002, used by permission of the author.

In this era of mass media and national marketing of items such as these shoes, extensive dialect levelling might be expected. It appears that many rural regionalisms which American dialect surveys described in the first half of the twentieth century have now disappeared (Coye, 1986), but the various terms for this type of shoe remain strong. How have these words managed to resist continental standardization? It seems that the Principle of Contrast and avoidance of synonymy may hold the key. Although most of Coyle's respondents used either *sneakers* or *tennis shoes* to describe the very same pair of shoes, very few were willing to accept the idea that these two terms were synonyms. Of the 63 students who conventionally used *tennis shoes*, only nine (14.3%) said they could use *sneakers* as a synonym (1986), and none of the 47 north-eastern speakers considered *tennis shoes* to be a synonym for their first response, *sneakers*.

Sneakers has some advantages as a generic term, since it is more neutral than *running shoes* or *tennis shoes* which may also designate shoes specifically designed for running or for playing tennis respectively. Even though very early uses of *sneaks* and *sneakers* suggest "shoes for sneaking," being associated with thieves, prison guards, and private investigators (Wick, 2004), these words don't seem to carry such a connotation now, and are well-positioned to replace the other terms, yet the evidence suggests that such replacements are not happening.

Standardization of the Lexicon

Individual speakers' resistance to using synonymous terms and subsequent retention of the conventional terms in their respective communities appears to be stabilizing the current situation which has apparently existed with little change since these shoes first became widely available.

4. Innovative words fill gaps: The process of entrenchment

Speakers coin new words frequently, whenever they need to fill gaps (Clark, 1985). Such a paradigm gap appeared when Canada introduced its two-dollar coin which became known as the *toonie*. Contemporary newspaper accounts from *The Toronto Star* and *The Globe and Mail* offer us a glimpse into the entrenchment of the name.

The names for coins with face values of 1 to 25 cents (*penny*, *nickel*, *dime*, and *quarter*), all likely borrowed from U.S. English, are well entrenched in Canadian colloquial speech. U.S. legislation specifies the names for coins above the five-cent denomination, and the coins bear labels such as “one dime,” “quarter dollar,” and “half dollar,” but the *Canadian Currency Act* gives no such names. A spokesman from the Royal Canadian Mint told *The Globe and Mail* that “naming currency is a U.S. affectation” and that even the *loonie* is known around the mint as “the one-dollar coin” (Clements, 1996), but members of the public use names.

The only circulating Canadian coin which does not seem to have a well-known name is the 50-cent denomination, possibly due to its very limited circulation. In a 2002 press release, the Mint noted that many Canadians had never seen a 50-cent Canadian coin (Royal Canadian Mint, 2002). In the United States, collectors call their 50-cent coins “halves” or even “halfs.”

Speculation on a name began as soon as the new Canadian coin was announced in the February, 1995, federal budget. On March 3, *The Globe and Mail* reported that “the ink was barely dry on Paul Martin’s new budget before lock-up wags were bantering around a new name for the \$2 coin” and *doubloon* was mentioned among other suggestions (“We like Ike” 1995).

Both *The Globe* and *The Star* printed numerous letters hotly debating myriad possible names. One thing seemed beyond debate—writers felt strongly that a

name would emerge. *The Toronto Star* confidently predicted on October 7, 1995, “It will acquire its own nickname” (Aaron, 1995). The *Word Play* columnist at *The Globe* implicitly acknowledged a lexical gap on February 24, 1996: “Writers of letters to *The Globe* and *Mail* have been diligent about filling this void” (Clements, 1996). One reporter even suggested that the coin *needed* a name. On February 16, 1996, a *Star* business reporter stated “All it needs is a nickname—and there is no shortage of suggestions” (Hemeon, 1996).

The Mint would have no part in settling the debate. A *Globe* story on March 23, quoted a Mint spokesperson: “We’re not in the habit of giving names to any of our coins. For us a 10-cent piece is a 10-cent piece.” Characterizing such coin names as too unprofessional to be used by Mint workers, he declared, “The public will have to sort out [what to call the coin] on its own” (Grange, 1996).

In spite of the heated debates which still continued after the coin’s launch, a consensus was already forming a month before the launch, as evidenced by responses to *The Star’s* request for readers to phone in their name suggestions (Stefaniuk, 1996a). Among 57 names and variations submitted by readers, four stood out. *Teddy* had 11 votes, *Toonie/Twoonie/Twooney* had 10, and two variants were tied for third place with 9 votes each: *Doubloon/Doubloonie* and *Moonie* (Stefaniuk, 1996b). Aaron (1996b) lamented on March 9, that “the horrible term ‘twoonie’ seems to have an edge in public acceptance.”

On February 19, 1996, the official launch date for the new coin, Freeman (1996) wrote in *The Globe* that the new coin “has already picked up a string of unofficial names such as toonie, doubloon, bearbuck, blooney, Doosie and Loonie II.” Meanwhile, a March 14 *Star* article about panhandlers’ experiences with the new coin (DeMara, 1996) used the word *toonie* 10 times without remark, prompting an angry letter accusing *The Star* of “trying to shove the word ‘toonie’ down our throats” (Moshinsky, 1996). “Over here, it’s poly (polar bear – see?) or polies; always was, always will be, *The Star’s* decree notwithstanding,” the reader wrote. This reader may have overestimated the influence of the paper on public consensus. In fact, if the name depended on a *Star* decree, *dubloon* or *dubloonie* probably would have won out. This was the name used most by *The Star* in early

Standardization of the Lexicon

stories, it was preferred by the *Coins* columnist (Aaron, 1995) who found *toonie* to be a “horrible term” (1996a) as already noted, and it was even the personal choice of the chief lexicographer of the new Gage Canadian dictionary (Grange, 1996).

Toronto Star art critic Christopher Hume on March 21, 1996, recognized that the lack of a stable name put the two-dollar coin in a different category than that of the one-dollar coin introduced nine years earlier: “By contrast, the loonie has become part of the culture. The word has entered the vocabulary” (Hume, 1996). He called the two-dollar coin “still, annoyingly, nameless” yet he matter-of-factly called it a *toonie* twice in that same column.

By the end of August, Aaron was describing the coin as “affectionately called the ‘toonie’” (Aaron, 1996a), and by September, *The Star* acknowledged that “its colloquial name ‘toonie’ is part of the vernacular” (Vincent, 1996). In March of the following year, Kesterton (1997) wrote in *The Globe* that “Fairly quickly and dismissively, Canadians have come to call the \$2 coin the ‘toonie,’ despite the many clever terms that were suggested by word mavens ...”

Clearly, cleverness alone was not enough. The winning candidate was efficiently short—less than three syllables as with the other coins’ names, incorporated an allusion to the word *two*, rhymed with *loonie*, and recalled the familiar collocation *looney tunes*. Importantly, it started to build momentum in public acceptance early in the process and once established in a few speakers’ lexicons, there was little chance that those speakers would accept alternatives barring major pressure from another stronger group of speakers.

5. Conclusion

The avoidance of synonymy by individual speakers has implications for the standard lexicon of the speech community. As speakers reject synonymous terms, the speech community tends to converge on one standard term for any particular meaning. This *de facto* standard resists change once established, since the introduction of outside candidates is rejected where an established word exists. Conversely, community avoidance of synonyms is evidence that even mature

adult speakers avoid synonymy. Words are most easily added to the lexicon when a gap appears in a paradigm. In such a situation, a new standard can arise quickly, after only a short period of instability.

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