

“We’ve gotten rid of the accent!”
A Canadian story of variation and change in the 20th century

The use of the verb form *gotten* as the past participle of ‘got’ has a contested pedigree in North America. A long-standing view is that in American English it is an historical retention from the original British founders (e.g. Curme, 1927; Marckwardt, 1958; Mencken, 1962). However, more recent research argues that it was a 20th century revival driven by mainstream ideology. To date, no studies have considered vernacular dialect data and none to my knowledge have considered Canadian English, the other major North American variety.

This study tackles this contested pedigree by analyzing variation between *got* and *gotten* using vernacular speech from the largest province of Canada, Ontario that spans more than 100 years in apparent-time comprising individuals with birthdates from the late 1800’s to the early 2001’s, covering the time period in which *gotten* is thought to have emerged in the United States. The data are socially stratified by age, gender, occupation, education and represent a continuum of urban to small and remote communities enabling the analyst to probe intersecting geographic, social and linguistic factors.

Comparative sociolinguistic methods and mixed effects modelling using R (2007) reveal that the form *have got* was dominant among Canadians in the early period. *Gotten* emerged in the 20th century in the same time frame that it is claimed to have ‘revived’ in the United States consistent with the findings of Hundt (2009) and Anderwald (2020). The key question is what propelled this development? In the US, American “honor” is considered the social force that propelled American English divergence from British English. In Canada however there was no comparable endonormative sentiment. Another possibility suggested by Anderwald (2020), following Jespersen (1933), is that *gotten* is the result of influence from Scots-Irish founders who would have used *gotten*. However, the developmental trajectory in Ontario shows no heightened use of *gotten* in Scots-Irish dominant communities. Instead, there is a strong and overarching correlation of *gotten* with females, more education and larger communities, especially Toronto, the capital and urban centre of the province, arguing for a change from above.

In sum, the Canadian evidence confirms that *gotten* cannot simply be historical retention, further debunking the myth of American conservatism but implicating American influence on Canadian dialects. More broadly, the rise of *gotten* in North America can take its place among other changes from above in grandstanding the strong and important influence of metalinguistic discourses and ideology in language change (e.g. Anderwald, 2013; Hinrichs et al., 2015).

Selected References:

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