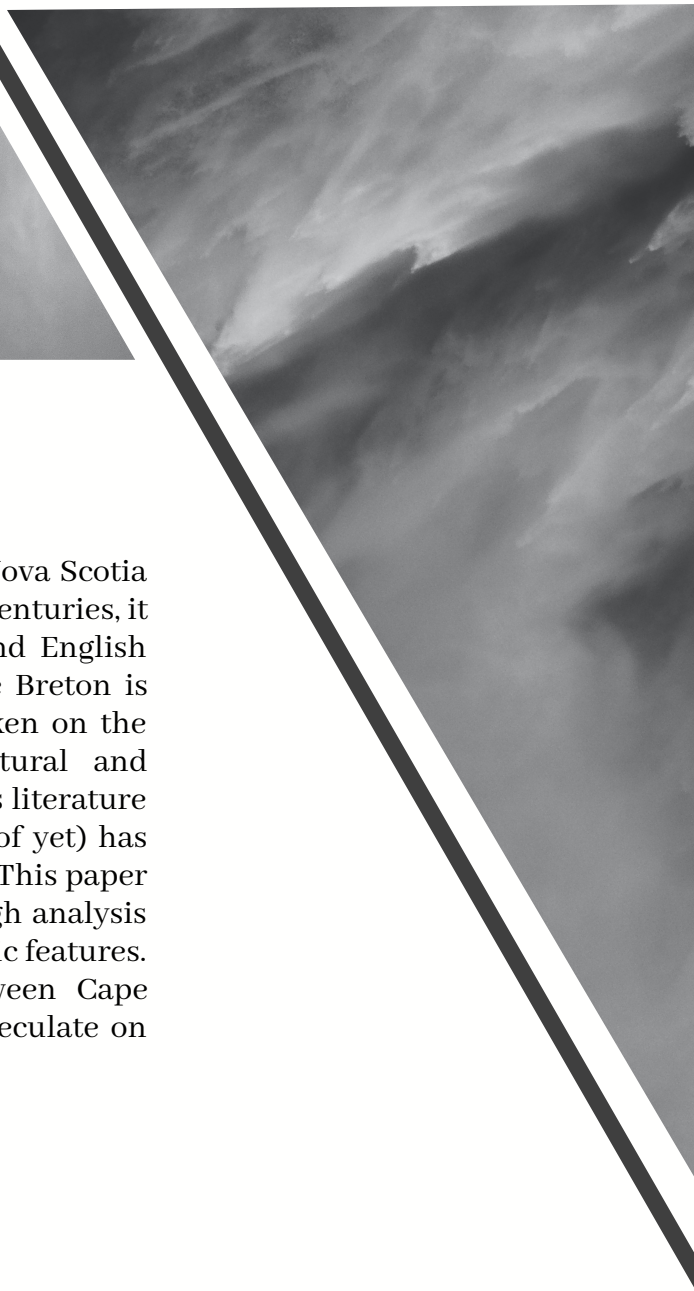
# Echo of the Highlands: A Linguistic Analysis of Cape Breton English Past, Present, and Future

*Mathieu Hergett-Rozier*



**Abstract**

The island of Cape Breton off the coast of mainland Nova Scotia has a unique and varied culture and history. Over the centuries, it has served as a home to Mi'kmaw, French, Celtic, and English inhabitants. As a result, the linguistic status of Cape Breton is complex and diverse, and the variety of English spoken on the island reveals multiple layers of interwoven cultural and linguistic contact and admixture. Although there exists literature on specific aspects of Cape Breton English, none (as of yet) has supplied a unified account of the dialect or its origins. This paper provides an explanation of the dialect's origins through analysis of the region's settlement history, as well as its linguistic features. Finally, this paper evaluates the relationship between Cape Breton English and Standard Canadian English to speculate on its future.

# 1 Introduction

The island of Cape Breton, lying just northwest of the Nova Scotian mainland, is a naturally stunning region, whose history has been built by the fishing, forestry, and coal mining industries. Though Cape Breton bears strong political and economic connections to the mainland today and requires only a short drive across the Canso Causeway to reach it, the island has long been considered remote and distinct, differing greatly from the mainland in respect to geography, culture, and history. This is not to say there are no shared features between the island and the mainland, but instead that it possesses its own unique identity, built by the Mi'kmaq, Acadians, Loyalists, Scottish, and Irish alike.

The character and origin of Cape Breton English is highly contested. While some authors, such as Rowe (1968) and Gardner (2013, 2017), tend to make arguments for a predominantly Loyalist origin and associate it closely with Maritime and New England English, minimizing Celtic influences, others, such as Kiefte and Kay-Raining Bird (2010), argue that Celtic influences from Scottish Gaelic and Irish English have had a significant historical effect upon the dialect. What is certain is the admixture and diffusion of the languages and dialects of the aforementioned ethnic groups have led to the development of a unique speech enclave (Boberg, 2010: 26).

This paper will first recount the settlement history and historical sociolinguistic contact situations of Cape Breton, then demonstrate the specific contributions of each settlement group to demonstrate their influences upon the development of the Cape Breton dialect. Finally, it will analyze the current status of the dialect, and its future, given current phenomena of local outmigration, foreign immigration, and modernization.

# 2 Settlement History

## 2.1 The Mi'kmaq

The progenitors of the Mi'kmaq people were the first to inhabit Cape Breton Island, likely arriving around 11,000 BP (Davey and Mackinnon, 2016). The population was estimated to amount to 230 individuals by 1774, roughly 20% of the island's population at the time (Landry, 2009). In spite of their long history and contact with Europeans, I can find no research to suggest the Mi'kmaq or their language have had any discernible impact upon the development of Cape Breton English.

## 2.2 The Acadians

Cape Breton (known to the French as Ile Royale) possessed no permanent settlements until after the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) (Canadian Encyclopedia), which obligated the French to cede all territory in mainland Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to the British crown. In response, the French quickly constructed the Fortress of Louisbourg and Cape Breton boasted an Acadian population of over 4000 by 1752 (Recensements d'Acadie). In 1758, the fortress of Louisbourg fell to the British during the Seven Years War and most of the French population was expelled.

After colonial hostilities between the French and British had ended, many Acadians returned and settled along the coast (Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird, 2010, 60). Aside from donating various lexical items, the Acadians did not make significant contributions to the development of Cape Breton English.

### 2.3 The Irish Newfoundlanders

Beginning in the late 16th century, many English-speaking Irish and West English fishermen flocked to Newfoundland in hopes of profiting from the cod fisheries (Boberg, 2010: 58). However, conditions in Newfoundland were harsh, resources scarce, and geography isolating. Additionally, permanent settlement was prohibited by the British government, though small semi-permanent settlements did appear in Newfoundland (58). After the construction of Louisbourg, a few hundred of the ethnic Irish Catholic fishermen operating in Newfoundland, who were no fans of the British, were permitted to establish their own fishing communities on the island (Gardner, 2017: 17). These Irish communities appear to have been unaffected during the various Anglo-French conflicts of the 18th century. When British forces finally spread their dominion to Cape Breton, the Irish population was allowed to remain, in spite of a ban on settlement (Morgan, 1997: 57). The Irish-Newfoundlanders represented the first English speaking population to inhabit Cape Breton Island and had a significant impact upon the development of Cape Breton English, donating various lexical items, grammatical constructions, and phonological features, relating the Cape Breton dialect closely to that of Newfoundland.

### 2.4 The Loyalists

Following the Acadian expulsion in the 1760s, settlement of Cape Breton Island was prohibited by British authorities (Canadian Encyclopedia). Subsequently, Cape Breton did not receive any of the New England Planters that flooded Nova Scotia after the expulsion (Gardner, 2017: 18). Immigration to Cape Breton was reinstated in 1784, when it was established as a separate colony intended for settlement by American Loyalists who had fled the United States (Canadian Encyclopedia). Loyalists numbered around 400 in Cape Breton (Boberg: 62).

The arrival of the Loyalists presented a major upset to the ethno-sociolinguistic status of the island (Gardner, 2017: 19). Linguistically, sources seem to imply that the Loyalist dialect differed greatly from the Irish dialect, perhaps because the majority, according to Boberg (2010: 101), were of English heritage. Socially, the Loyalists possessed wealth and education, while the Irish lacked both, and as a result, the Irish dialect became associated with poverty and vernacular culture, whereas the Loyalist dialect became associated with upward mobility, resulting in a "social dichotomy" (Gardner, 2017: 19).

Loyalist settlement is the common link between Cape Breton English and standard Canadian English, being one of the foundational elements of the latter as well. I would argue it is quite possible that the "Canadian" features we see on the island are of Loyalist origin, for without the Loyalist influence, I can imagine Cape Breton speech would be much more similar to that of Newfoundland, which lacked any meaningful Loyalist influence (Boberg, 2010: 100).

### 2.5 The Scottish

Gaelic speaking Highland Scots represent the most culturally and linguistically influential non-anglophone immigrant group of Cape Breton. The Highland Clearances caused the internal displacement of thousands throughout the Scottish Highlands while the British Industrial Revolution instigated widespread poverty due to the collapse of cottage industries (Boberg, 2017: 67). As a result, many Scots sought a better quality of life elsewhere. Cape Breton, which possessed a similar topography to the Scottish Highlands presented an excellent choice. The first 340 Highlanders arrived in 1802 (65), and by the mid 19th century, over 30,000 Highland and Hebridean Scots settled in Cape Breton (Morgan, 1997: 113). These Gaelic speaking Scots vastly outnumbered the existing populations and became the dominant ethnic group. However, their numbers, relative poverty, and late arrival proved major barriers to their advancement (Gardner, 2017: 19). Scots received the most isolated and least fertile lands and were pushed to the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy thus becoming identified as "backlanders", a term which bore prejudiced social connotations (20). However, the Scottish found kindred spirits in their Celtic brethren—the Irish. Cultural similarities allowed for significant amalgamation of the two groups. The majority of Gaelic Scots continued to speak Gaelic throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, though numbers began to wane due to social and political stigmas associated with the language (20). By the mid 20th century, native Gaelic speakers were quickly disappearing to the point that only 5 individuals identified it as the language most often spoken at home in 2016 (Statistics Canada). Despite their linguistic decline, the Scots brought their values, religion, rich folklore and music, and language with them, laying the foundation for what would become traditional Cape Breton culture

Though the Scottish population of Cape Breton spoke predominantly Gaelic, their influence upon Cape Breton English was significant. Many syntactic structures in the dialect are of Gaelic origin, as are many phonological patterns, not to mention numerous lexical items, as will be demonstrated.

## 3 The Ethnolinguistic Social Dynamic of 19th Century Cape Breton

By the mid 19th century, the foundational ethnic groups had firmly established themselves within Cape Breton society (Morgan, 1997: 192), and though there was some Eastern European immigration (Nova Scotia Archives), it does not seem to have had any major impact upon Cape Breton English.

The sociolinguistic hierarchy of 19th century Cape Breton was a decisive factor in the development of the modern dialect and is excellently described by Gardner (2017). Loyalists and their English formed the top of the social strata, while the Irish and their Celtic-influenced English fell to the middle, leaving the Scottish and their Gaelic language at the bottom. The Irish were the key force in uniting these languages, acting as interlocutors between the English Loyalists and the Gaelic Scots and subsequently spreading features of one group to another, while simultaneously introducing their own (20). This interlocution was a driving force behind the homogenization of the dialect.

The economy of 19th century Cape Breton was based upon forestry, fishing, and increasingly mining (Morgan, 2008: 129). From the mid 19th to the late 20th century, the mines and foundries were a driving force behind the cultural diffusion and evolution of Cape Breton (166). Mines were owned and operated by British and American companies and administered by the Loyalist elite, which reinforced the prestige of Loyalist English (Gardner, 2017: 23). The great linguistic variety seen today, however, is likely a result of what took place in the mines. There, men of all ethnic origins toiled, ate, and died alongside each other, sharing and mixing their culture and speech habits in the process, and further uniting the diverse ethnic groups of Cape Breton (23). Due to the linguistic variety of the period, I would argue that English played the role of a lingua franca, with various lexical items, phonological features, and grammatical structures entering it from these diverse inputs.

## 4 Local Features of Cape Breton English

The multiplex language contact situation in Cape Breton has led to the formation of a distinct dialect in the Canadian context. The various settlement groups have made contributions to the vocabulary, phonology, and grammar of Cape Breton English that have led to the development of many local non-standard forms, though some groups have had more of an impact than others.

### 4.1 Vocabulary

The local vocabulary of Cape Breton is likely best described by Davey and MacKinnon (2016) who recorded several hundred terms in their *Dictionary of Cape Breton English.* The authors identified terms of Mi'kmaq, Acadian, Irish, and Gaelic origin, entering the most well known and frequently used of these into the dictionary.

Integration and assimilation caused the widespread disappearance of Mi'kmaq culture and language on Cape Breton island. However, cultural terms and place names have managed to survive in the form of English loanwords. Examples include *L'nu*, a Mi'kmaq person (94), and *Unama'ki*, the Mi'kmaq name for Cape Breton (182).

Although Acadian French has had no other discernible influences upon Cape Breton English, a wide variety of French terms have entered the English dialect. Though place names and cultural terms represent a great number of Acadian loanwords, they are not limited to these domains. French loanwords include everyday words such as *Les suetes*, characteristic Cape Breton southwest winds (170), and *Cabbane*, a fishing shack (27).

There are many terms of Irish origin found in Cape Breton that occur nowhere else but Newfoundland due to their shared heritage, such as *b'y*, meaning a boy or guy (27), and *Omadhun*, an idiot (111). Many of these are fishing terms such as the verb *make fish*, to preserve fish (99).

There are 51 recorded Gaelic loanwords in Cape Breton English from various domains including folklore, music, food, greetings, insults, religion, and domestic life, among others. Specific examples range from *Ceilidh*, an intimate household party (31), to *Strupag*, a meal

consisting of tea and snacks (169). Loanwords are not limited to nouns, but also include adjectives such as *mozy*, dank, and *dubh*, dark.

### 4.2 Phonology

A few authors such as Shaw (1997), Falk (1989), Keifte and Kay-Raining Bird (2010) and Gardner (2013, 2016) have made observations of the phonology of Cape Breton. They all agree that while Cape Breton English is a phonologically Canadian variety, there are many local features that draw from Celtic and perhaps Loyalist sources.

Although there is consensus among scholars that Loyalists had a strong influence upon Cape Breton phonology, and that this is the reason for the sharing of non-standard forms between Cape Breton and the rest of the Maritimes (Gardner, 2017: 32), (Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird), there appears to be very little literature concerning specific variables aside from the observation of stylistic differences in the pronunciation of the LOT and THOUGHT vowels (Gardner & Roeder, 2013).

Goidelic influences, via either Newfoundland Irish English or Scottish Gaelic, also present themselves in Cape Breton phonology, though the ultimate sources cannot be conclusively determined in some cases due to the similarities between Gaelic and Irish. These include a slit fricative in place of word final stops (Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird, 2010: 68), a common feature in Goidelic languages (Gardner, 2017: 32) and fronting of the low back vowels), both of which are also found in Newfoundland (Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird: 68).

Some features, however, can indeed be directly attributed to Highland Gaelic. Cape Bretoners are known to often use the "Gaelic gasp" pulmonic ingression (Gouthro, 2015), which is also found in highland Gaelic (Thom 2005: 8). Shaw (1998) made numerous observations regarding Cape Breton phonology that derive from Scottish Gaelic. He noted frequent use of preaspiration, nasalization of vowels before and after nasal consonants, and palatalization of [k] and [g] in initial and final positions. In addition, he noted the replacement of /s/ in environments where /z/ would be found in standard variety, attributing it to the lack of voiced sibilants in Gaelic (Shaw, 1997: 313). I would also argue that the monophthongization of the FACE and GOAT vowels observed by Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird (2010: 68) can be attributed to Gaelic phonology, which does not possess the diphthongs normally found in those phonetic environments (Green, 1997).

### 4.3 Grammar

Though the grammar of Cape Breton English is largely similar to that of the rest of Canada, there are some notable local features. Falk (1989), Gardner (2017), and Shaw (1997) have all done extensive research on the subject. The most frequently used non-standard grammatical forms are of Loyalist origin, though there are some common grammatical features of Goidelic origin that have been transplanted into English.

Gardner (2017) recorded the occurrence of nonstandard Loyalist forms in the domains of the stative possessive ("have got" is preferred over "have"), deontic modality ("have got to" is used instead of "need to" or "must"), and the future temporal reference ("be going to" preferred

over "will") which can all be traced to the Loyalists due the occurrence of the phenomena in rural Ontario speech.

In terms of Gaelic influence, Falk (1989) observed the use of "since" with negated particles ("It's been a long time since I haven't seen you") and subject-relative pronoun deletion in existential clauses ("there was bad things (that) happened there"), which can both be traced to the grammar of Scottish Gaelic. Another feature, the after perfect ("I am just after going to town" instead of "I just got back from town"), is more likely to have entered via Newfoundland Irish English. Subject topicalization ("My cousin ***he*** made all kind of knots") also occurs and may derive from either French or Gaelic influence. Shaw (1997) noted syntactic constructions borrowed from Gaelic, specifically the positioning of adverbs in a phrase. For example, in order to emphasize an adverb, Gaelic places the pronoun before the verb, thus producing phrases such as "Very seldom I would kill a calf.", as opposed to the standard English "Very seldom would I kill a calf." (Shaw 314).

## 5 The Current Status of Cape Breton English and its Future

It is a reality that the linguistic and cultural influence of historical settlement in Cape Breton have waned over time. Gaelic is virtually extinct and rates of Mi'kmaq and French are rapidly declining (Statistics Canada). In addition, Cape Bretoners are being exposed to standard varieties of English through media, education, and seasonal migration. However, although there is evidence that the dialect is approaching the Canadian standard (Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird: 2010) indicated by phenomena such as adoption of Canadian Raising and the Canadian Shift, the shift is not as far along as one might expect. It is "…one of quantity, not kind." (Gardner, 2017: 171). In fact, there are several factors that aid in the preservation of the culture and dialect.

The main source of exposure to standard Canadian English is through the contact that Cape Bretoners employed by the petrochemical industry of western Canada have with other Canadians (Kiefte & Kay-Raining Bird, 2010: 68). However, Cape Bretoners that migrate seasonally often emigrate (Shannon, 2014), which likely mitigates the effects upon the Cape Breton dialect. Additionally, Gardner & Roeder argue that the speakers of the most standard versions of Cape Breton English are usually of higher socioeconomic status and education and are therefore more likely to emigrate, while those of lower status are more conservative in their speech (2013: 168). Immigration, another potential source of standardization, is low in Cape Breton (Gardner, 2017: 7). I would also suggest that the strong cultural identity held by Cape Bretoners is likely to reinforce the conservation of the local dialect. Celtic Cape Bretoners continue to hold ceilidhs, participate in highland games, and take Galeic language courses at school; Acadian Cape Bretoners continue to live much of life speaking French and cooking rapure; and Mi'kmaw Cape Bretoners continue to hunt and share oral traditions, all while great effort is being put into revitalizing the Mi'kmaw Language. This strong sense of cultural identity, supported by Cape Breton's cultural tourism, language-planning efforts, geographic remoteness, rurality, and ethnic nationalism are likely to slow the adoption of standard forms and conserve the local dialect.

In conclusion, although there is historical evidence of Cape Breton English's convergence with Canadian English, it is not clear whether that change is ongoing. In addition, cultural attitudes and migration patterns have a preservative effect upon the dialect. Therefore, I would argue that Cape Breton English is likely to remain relatively unchanged, preserving the features of the foundational settlers, most notably those of the Scottish, Irish, and Loyalists.

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