

# A Comparison of Canadian and British English Through Newspapers

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## Abstract

This paper investigates whether Canadian English has converged with British English during the past fifty years, through the analysis of newspapers. Four groups of newspapers were selected for this study: Canadian newspapers in the 1960s and the 2000s, and British newspapers in the 1960s and the 2000s. The study compares five variables chosen from the 1972 paper “The Survey of Canadian English: A Report” by Scargill and Warkentyne. The five variables are the following: “mailman vs. postman”, “icing vs. frosting”, “chesterfield vs. sofa”, “color vs. colour”, and “defense vs. defence”. For each variable, a British variant and an American variant was chosen to analyze which variant Canadian newspapers would choose to use. For each newspaper, both variants of each variable were searched in all the editions published during the time period of 1960 to 1970 and 2000 to 2010, respectively. The percentages of the variants are then compared. The results showed that, of the five variables studied, Canadian newspapers prefer the British variants over the American one, and that the younger generation seemed to shift towards British English in general.

## 1 Introduction

This report will be based on the 1972 paper “The Survey of Canadian English: A Report” by Scargill and Warkentyne. In this paper, a questionnaire of 104 linguistic variables were designed, ranging from pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary to spelling. The survey aimed to understand how spoken Canadian English differed across generations and provinces. The result contained answers from 14 228 Canadian English speakers who were categorized by sex, generation, and province. The authors provided a discussion for each linguistic variable, which offered insight into spoken Canadian English at the time. With this report, I attempt to compare my results with the Scargill and Warkentyne survey, to determine the changes of Canadian English in the last few decades.

Five linguistic variables selected from Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) will be studied in this report: “mailman vs. postman”, “icing vs. frosting”, “chesterfield vs. sofa”, “color vs. colour”, and “defense vs. defence”. The first three variables are distinguished by choice of vocabulary, while the remaining two variables show differences in spelling. The discussion and hypothesis for each variable is the following.

### 1.1 Mailman vs. Postman

According to Scargill and Warkentyne (1972,) “mailman” is usually associated with American English and “postman” with British English. In the survey, Canadian anglophones generally prefer calling the person who delivers letters “mailman”. The younger generation was even more likely to use “mailman” than the older generation. It is then predicted that our results from the Canadian newspapers in 1960-1970 would use “mailman” and “postman” interchangeably while skewing towards “mailman”. The results from 2000-2010 may have a greater preference towards “mailman” than that of the older generation. British newspapers, on the other hand, are predicted to show a significantly stronger preference towards “postman” in both generations compared to their Canadian counterparts.

### 1.2 Icing vs. Frosting

This variable will determine what word Canadian and British newspapers prefer using when referring to the sweet covering on top of a cake. Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) claimed that “icing” is the British usage

and “frosting” is the American usage. Eastern Canadian answers in the survey showed preference on “icing” in both generations, but the two variants are often used interchangeably. I thus hypothesize that Canadian and British newspapers will both favor the word “icing”. “Frosting” is predicted to appear occasionally in Canadian newspapers, while British newspapers may have a stronger preference for “icing”.

### **1.3 Chesterfield vs. Sofa**

“Chesterfield” is an example of Canadianisms, which is a word that is only frequently used in Canada without being a standard form in the UK or the US (Boberg 2010: 117). The data from the Scargill and Warkentyne survey also indicated that “chesterfield” is strongly preferred by Canadians in 1972. However, “chesterfield” had its prime around the 1950s, and its usage has since declined (Chambers 1990.) As a result, it is hypothesized that “chesterfield” may be the dominant usage in Canadian newspapers from 1960-1970, but “sofa” would be the widespread usage in newspapers from 2000-2010. Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) also claimed that “chesterfield,” though not very common, is also used in British English. It could be hypothesized that British newspapers may consistently prefer the variant “sofa” across the generations, while the variant “chesterfield” is predicted to appear occasionally.

### **1.4 Color vs. Colour**

Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) stated that “color” is the American spelling while “colour” is the British spelling. It was shown in the survey that both generations of Canadians are slightly more partial to “colour”, although the two variants are often used interchangeably. In addition, the survey suggests that the younger generation favors the spelling “colour” more than the older generation. While the general public may prefer the longer variant, mainstream newspapers in Canada used “color” in their articles as the shorter variant requires less effort to type by hand (Pratt 1993). However, readers expressed complaints as they wanted to differentiate themselves from the U.S through spelling. In the 1990s, these newspapers changed back to “colour” because of these complaints (Hefferman et. al. 2010). I thus hypothesize that the older generation of newspapers in Canada will use the variant “color”, while “colour” will be the dominant variant in the younger generation. British newspapers are predicted to utilize the spelling “colour” heavily in both generations.

### **1.5 Defense vs. Defence**

The 1972 survey demonstrated that Canadians prefer “defence”, the British spelling, to “defense,” the American spelling. There also appeared to be an increase in using the American spelling among the student generation in the survey. I thus predict that the 1960-1970 generation of Canadian newspapers will favor “defence,” while 2000-2010 newspapers will favor “defense.” I hypothesize that the British usage in newspapers will be “defence” in both generations.

## **2 Method**

I selected five Canadian and five British newspapers to study the linguistic variables in this report. The five Canadian newspapers are the Globe and Mail, Toronto Star, Ottawa Citizen, Montreal Gazette, and the Kingston Whig Standard. All the chosen newspapers are in Eastern Canada, more specifically, Ontario and Quebec. The five British newspapers are the Guardian, the Telegraph, the Times, Daily Mail and Evening Standard, which are all located in England. The newspaper archives are retrieved from the ProQuest databases (<https://www.proquest.com>), Gale databases (<https://www.gale.com>), and the website Newspapers.com (<https://www.newspapers.com>). I then selected two generations, the 1960s and the 2000s, to examine the change in language in both Canadian and British English. The older generation of newspapers is chosen to represent the time of the Scargill and Warkentyne survey, and the younger generation represents the language that is used in modern society. For each newspaper, both variants of each variable were searched in all the editions published during the time period of 1960 to 1970 and 2000 to 2010, respectively. The number of results for each variant will then be compared.



Some considerations were put into the choice of variables. The chosen variables must refer to objects that exist both in the 1960s and the 2000s. For example, “bank machine vs. cash dispenser” would be an unsatisfactory variable as this type of machine was not relevant in the 60s. Since the study was conducted by searching within newspaper archives, the words should have as few meanings as possible to avoid unwanted results. For example, the variable “crisps vs. chips” would be unsatisfactory as the only variable of interest would be the one referring to the thin-layered snack and not French fries. Since both definitions denote food made of potatoes, it could be quite hard to filter them when searching on newspaper archival websites.

Filters were added to two variables to ensure desired results. Many entries of “de-icing” were found when searching the variant “icing”. Therefore, the word “cake” was added when searching for the variable of “icing vs. frosting”. Each variant had to appear with the word “cake” at the same time in each entry to be considered. Likewise, “chesterfield” is a name of several places, a cigarette brand, and a possible last name. As a result, a similar approach was applied to the variable “chesterfield vs. sofa”, where the word “furniture” was added to the search.

### 3. Results and Discussion

In this section, the data of each variable will be presented individually, and the discussion of the variable will follow. The percentages are the number of entries that include the discussed variant in their respective newspapers and decades divided by the number of entries that contain either of the two variants of the examined variable in the respective newspaper and decade. For example, the frequency of the word “mailman” appearing in the Globe and Mail in the 1960s is 43%. This implies that of all the entries that include either the word “mailman” or the word “postman,” 43% of them include “mailman.”

#### 3.1 Mailman vs. Postman

	The Globe and Mail	Toronto Star	Ottawa Citizen	Montreal Gazette	The Kingston Whig Standard
Mailman 1960-1970	43%	39%	36%	39%	48%
Mailman 2000-2010	31%	31%	31%	31%	49%
Postman 1960-1970	61%	68%	70%	65%	55%
Postman 2000-2010	70%	69%	62%	70%	53%

Table 1. The percentage of “mailman” and “postman” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in Canadian newspapers.

	The Guardian	The Telegraph	The Times	Daily Mail	Evening Standard
Mailman 1960-1970	5%	1%	1%	3%	1%

Mailman 2000-2010	5%	2%	2%	4%	3%
Postman 1960-1970	95%	99%	99%	97%	99%
Postman 2000-2010	95%	98%	98%	96%	99%

Table 2. The percentage of “mailman” and “postman” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in British newspapers.

Surprisingly, Canadian newspapers seem to slightly prefer “postman” over “mailman”, as seen in Table 1, which goes against my hypothesis. This phenomenon is present in both decades, as there seems to be no shift towards any of the words in the younger generation. The usage frequency of both mailman and postman seems to be similar among Canadian newspapers, with the exception of the Kingston Whig Standard, in which “mailman” and “postman” seem to be used equally in both decades. There are three reasons that may have contributed to this. Firstly, Eastern Canadians are less likely to choose to say “mailman” than Western Canadians in the Scargill and Warkentyne survey. Instead, they are more likely to choose either one of them. However, according to the survey, Eastern Canadians still prefer to use “mailman” rather than any other variants. Additionally, there could have been other terms containing the word “postman” in the search results, e.g., “postman blue.” On the other hand, British newspapers show a strong preference for “postman” across the two generations to the point where “mailman” is almost never used, as seen in Table 2, which supports the hypothesis. Compared to their Canadian counterparts, British newspapers are more consistent in their word choice across generations.

### 3.2 Icing vs. Frosting

	The Globe and Mail	Toronto Star	Ottawa Citizen	Montreal Gazette	The Kingston Whig Standard
Icing 1960-1970	82%	74%	75%	75%	72%
Icing 2000-2010	92%	91%	92%	88%	85%
Frosting 1960-1970	32%	33%	37%	35%	43%
Frosting 2000-2010	10%	13%	13%	16%	21%

Table 3. The percentage of “icing” and “frosting” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in Canadian newspapers.

	The Guardian	The Telegraph	The Times	Daily Mail	Evening Standard
Icing 1960-1970	95%	99%	97%	99%	96%



Icing 2000-2010	98%	99%	99%	99%	99%
Frosting 1960-1970	6%	1%	4%	1%	6%
Frosting 2000-2010	2%	1%	2%	2%	2%

Table 4. The percentage of “icing” and “frosting” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in British newspapers.

As shown in Table 3 and Table 4, my hypothesis for this variable is correct. Both Canadian and British newspapers seem to prefer “icing” over “frosting”. Approximately thirty-five percent of the entries in all Canadian newspapers in the 1960s mentioned “frosting”. However, the percentage dropped to only about ten percent in the 2000s. It is implied that there has been a shift towards a stronger preference for the British variant in the younger generation in Eastern Canada. It also appears that Canadian newspapers sometimes use both terms in the same entry, as some of the percentages of “icing” and “frosting” are well over a hundred percent when combined. In contrast, this phenomenon is quite rare in British newspapers. This suggests that Canadians use the variants interchangeably, while the British are less likely to do so.

### 3.3 Chesterfield vs. Sofa

	The Globe and Mail	Toronto Star	Ottawa Citizen	Montreal Gazette	The Kingston Whig Standard
Chesterfield 1960-1970	70%	78%	89%	77%	85%
Chesterfield 2000-2010	22%	16%	13%	4%	12%
Sofa 1960-1970	46%	46%	40%	64%	29%
Sofa 2000-2010	98%	94%	99%	98%	95%

Table 6. The percentage of “chesterfield” and “sofa” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in British newspapers.

	The Guardian	The Telegraph	The Times	Daily Mail	Evening Standard
Chesterfield 1960-1970	79%	35%	40%	33%	38%
Chesterfield 2000-2010	6%	10%	8%	6%	5%

Sofa 1960-1970	24%	67%	66%	70%	68%
Sofa 2000-2010	95%	96%	96%	96%	98%

Table 6. The percentage of “chesterfield” and “sofa” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in British newspapers.

Overall, the data indicates that the hypothesis on this variable was correct, as seen in Table 5 and Table 6. It appears that “chesterfield” is the predominant usage in Canadian newspapers for the name of the furniture in the 1960s. The data also shows that “chesterfield” and “sofa” often appeared together, which may suggest that they were used interchangeably. However, the usage of “chesterfield” declined drastically in the younger generation, although it hasn’t completely disappeared. The word “sofa” is now the most prominently used in both the UK and Canada. It appears that “chesterfield” is somewhat present in British newspapers in the older generation. The Guardian returned a high frequency of 79% while other newspapers returned frequencies of roughly 35%. Upon closer examination, while some entries still contained “chesterfield” as names of places or brands after the filter, the usage of referring to an upholstered couch also exists. Similarly to their Canadian counterparts, British newspapers also demonstrates a significant drop in “chesterfield” and a rise in “sofa” when moving to the modern generation. The data also suggests that “chesterfield” was more widely used in Canada than in Britain fifty years ago, yet both nations prefer to use “sofa” in the modern times. “Couch” is also a popular variant of the variable, which may have contributed to the decline of “Chesterfield”.

### 3.4 Color vs. Colour

	The Globe and Mail	Toronto Star	Ottawa Citizen	Montreal Gazette	The Kingston Whig Standard
Color 1960-1970	78%	76%	74%	73%	93%
Color 2000-2010	10%	19%	23%	34%	19%
Colour 1960-1970	27%	28%	33%	35%	10%
Colour 2000-2010	92%	86%	85%	71%	85%

Table 7. The percentage of “color” and “colour” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in Canadian newspapers.

	The Guardian	The Telegraph	The Times	Daily Mail	Evening Standard
Color 1960-1970	2%	1%	2%	0%	0%
Color 2000-2010	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%

Colour 1960-1970	99%	100%	99%	100%	100%
Colour 2000-2010	98%	99%	98%	99%	98%

Table 8. The percentage of “color” and “colour” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in British newspapers.

While it may be evident that the results in Table 7 would align with the hypothesis as mentioned in the introduction, knowledge about Canadian English may still be deducted. I analyze these results as showing that the spelling “color” may have been deemed more acceptable in the 1960 to 1970’s than in the 2000 to 2010’s, as newspapers were keen to use it. Since the newspapers switched to “colour” because of the complaints and never switched back, I speculate that Canadians favor “colour” greatly over “color” in younger generations. However, there are still some entries that do not fit with the policies of Canadian newspapers. It may be that these entries are names of brands, shows, or products, etc., from America or Britain, since Canada is largely influenced by both countries (Boberg 2010: 106-108). British newspapers consistently chose to use “colour” over the decades in Table 8, which the hypothesis successfully predicted. The spelling “color” is almost non-existent in British newspapers.

### 3.5 Defense vs. Defence

	The Globe and Mail	Toronto Star	Ottawa Citizen	Montreal Gazette	The Kingston Whig Standard
Defense 1960-1970	6%	3%	5%	15%	2%
Defense 2000-2010	6%	9%	8%	14%	6%
Defence 1960-1970	95%	98%	96%	89%	99%
Defence 2000-2010	95%	93%	94%	88%	95%

Table 9. The percentage of “defense” and “defence” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in Canadian newspapers.

	The Guardian	The Telegraph	The Times	Daily Mail	Evening Standard
Defense 1960-1970	0%	2%	3%	1%	0%
Defense 2000-2010	1%	3%	3%	3%	1%



Defence 1960-1970	100%	100%	99%	100%	100%
Defence 2000-2010	99%	99%	99%	99%	99%

Table 10. The percentage of “defense” and “defence” in the decades 1960-1970 and 2000-2010 appearing in an entry where either of them is mentioned in British newspapers.

As seen in Table 9 and Table 10, both countries seem to favor “defence” over “defense”, contrary to my prediction that newspapers during 2000-2010 in Canada would favor “defense”. The occurrences of “defense” remain low in both decades and both nations. Nevertheless, the usage of “defense” is still somewhat more prominent in Canadian newspapers than that of the British, which aligns with my hypothesis. Montreal Gazette returned frequencies of around 15 % in using “defense” in both decades, which is the highest of all newspapers examined. I hypothesized that the younger generation of Canadian newspapers would prefer “defense”. Yet upon closer examination of the Scargill and Warkentyne survey, the student generation in Eastern Canada at that time did not shift to “defence” significantly. In fact, there was only a slight decrease of “defence” between the parent generation to the student generation. It could be assumed that the student generation in 1972 preferred “defense”, but the shift didn’t last until the 2000s, which could be accounted for this unexpected result.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, of the five variables studied in this report, Canadian newspapers seem to prefer the British word choices and spellings over American ones. The younger generation also seems to shift towards British English, more than the older generation, except for the variable with the Canadianism “chesterfield”. While five variables may be an insufficient sample size to make a conclusion about the variety of language, it could be inferred that of the variables studied in this report, Canadian English has converged to British English since the time of Scargill and Warkentyne (1972). Canadian newspapers also tend to use both variants of a linguistic variable interchangeably, as the percentage of the two terms were often more equally divided while the ones in British newspapers were more extreme. This may provide evidence that Canada is influenced by both America and Britain, at the same time. In contrast, British newspapers are more prone to have a strong preference for one of the two words in a variable. British word choices also remained homogenous throughout time, while it could be implied that Canadian word choices seem to shift between American and British word choices from time to time.

Several ideas could be explored for future studies in the topic of this report. While the searches of the variables were already filtered accordingly, there were still undesired entries in the results. It is possible to ignore these unwanted entries since the total number of each search were often of thousands or tens of thousands. However, it would be ideal if these entries could all be successfully filtered out. As checking through the entries one by one would be time consuming if done manually, using computers and apply algorithms to check through the results would be beneficial in future studies. In addition, comparing written Canadian English to spoken Canadian English would also be interesting. This report does not differentiate between the two, as Scargill and Warkentyne (1972) worked with spoken and written Canadian English and newspapers obviously only represent written English. It would be fascinating to study written and spoken forms complementarily in future studies.



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