



Language Dialects

What is a dialect?

The term *dialect* refers to the variations in pronunciation (accent), vocabulary and sometimes grammar of a single language. For example, the English that we hear around us is the Canadian English dialect. It sounds a bit different from American English, and very different from British English or Australian English. However, because we can understand and communicate with people from the United States, England and Australia, we consider these variations (Canadian, American, British and Australian) to be dialects of English.



Our Living Languages exhibit at the Royal BC Museum

One dialect is not better than another. Most differences between dialects of the same language follow a pattern and are easily predictable. An example of this is regular sound change, such as when an “l” sound in one dialect is pronounced as an “r” sound in another dialect. The patterns associated with these changes can be learned, allowing for speakers to switch back and forth between dialects quite easily. When differences are so great that speakers can’t understand each other, we consider these dialects to be separate languages.

Why do dialects matter?

Just as language is an expression of our identity and culture, so are individual dialects. Language dialects help provide speakers with a sense of common community and shared identity. Your dialect identifies the particular region you are from and the unique aspects of the culture and heritage in that region. Dialects also link us back to our grandparents, great-grandparents and ancestors. As a result, we often feel protective of our dialect.

While we want to maintain the distinctions that express our unique heritage, over-protectiveness can get in the way of language revitalization.

“When I was a child, our people spoke many languages and used all the dialects. They didn’t argue about which one was better than the other.”

- Dr. Lorna Williams, Lil’wat Nation

Because of the shortage of funding and resources for language revitalization, communities and speakers of the same language can work together, even if they have different dialects.

What are the challenges?

Focusing on dialect differences can lead to a divide between language speakers when we should be creating unity and equality within a shared language. Attachments to a dialect can be positive for short-term language revival but harmful to the language in the long term.

All dialects of Indigenous languages in B.C. are threatened. We need to consider what efforts will be most successful in revitalizing *all* Indigenous languages and the dialects within each language. Accepting all varieties of your language will allow you to share

resources and work together so that you can achieve more in your language revitalization efforts. We shouldn't ignore language variations, but we can avoid looking at language variation in terms of which is the "right" way to say something. Mutual support is needed to revitalize and maintain Indigenous languages in B.C. for future generations. This support will provide advantages for communication between regions, creating opportunities to use the language and share resources.

What can I do?

Learn about other dialects of your language. What is different? What is the same? If possible, learn the patterns of change between the dialects so you can switch between them.

Encourage people to be aware and supportive of language dialect differences. This will help create a shared understanding of the language that is inclusive of all its dialects.

EXAMPLES OF DIALECT DIFFERENCE

Sound differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tom[a]to / Tom[ah]to • A[sh]phalt / A[s]phalt
Vocabulary differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Garbage / Trash • Bathroom / Restroom
Grammar differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have told you once already / I done told you once • You must read this / Read this you must

Communities should aim for an environment in which all dialects of the language may be used and respected, and all speakers are proud of the dialect they speak. When we understand that every dialect has value, our efforts for language revitalization are strengthened.

Avoid saying, "that's wrong" or "we don't say it that way" and instead simply acknowledge that someone is using a different dialect from yours. Supporting *all* First Nations languages in B.C. and respecting their diversity will increase the success of language revitalization efforts.

KEY TERMS

- **Language:** a form of human communication (spoken or written) consisting of the use of words in a structured and predictable way.
- **Dialect:** a variety of a language that is developed from the same ancestral language and is understood by people who speak other dialects within the same language.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE?

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