



**English Grammatical Features of First Nations Kindergarteners: Differences, Not Mistakes**



**Les caractéristiques grammaticales de l’anglais parlé par les élèves de maternelle des Premières Nations : des différences plutôt que des erreurs**

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**KEYWORDS**

- ENGLISH DIALECT
- ENGLISH VARIETY
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**Abstract**

Students who speak local varieties (i.e., dialects) of English that differ from standard varieties promoted in school are at a disadvantage. Differences from the standard in the vocabulary speakers know and use, their phonological awareness, syntax, and how they use language may negatively affect their literacy development and even their achievement in science and mathematics. In Canada, many students who are First Nations may speak a local English variety. Lack of documentation of their variety can lead to inappropriate assessment and teaching. However, research concerning Indigenous Englishes in Canada is scant. To address the crucial necessity of learning more about First Nations children’s Englishes, the results of an analysis of kindergarteners’ oral narrative language samples are presented. This analysis showed evidence of at least 23 grammatical features. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, supporting evidence that these are more likely varietal features rather than grammatical errors is provided. Respectful evidenced-based ways to assess and intervene are also discussed so that diverse ways of speaking English can be celebrated in Canadian classrooms.

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### Abrégé

Les élèves qui parlent des variantes (c.-à-d. des dialectes) de l'anglais qui diffèrent des variantes standard promues à l'école sont désavantagés. Les différences dans le vocabulaire connu et utilisé par ces locuteurs, dans leur conscience phonologique, dans leur syntaxe et dans leur utilisation du langage peut avoir un effet négatif sur le développement de leurs habiletés de littératie et même sur leur réussite en sciences et en mathématiques. Au Canada, de nombreux élèves issus des Premières Nations parlent une variante régionale de l'anglais. Le manque d'informations sur ces variantes peut mener à une évaluation et à un enseignement inadaptés à leurs besoins. Malgré cela, la recherche sur les variantes de l'anglais parlées par les enfants des Premières Nations du Canada se fait rare. Ainsi, afin de répondre à ce besoin criant d'informations sur les variantes de l'anglais parlées par les enfants issus des Premières Nations, les résultats d'une analyse d'échantillons du discours narratif oral d'élèves de maternelle sont présentés. L'analyse a permis d'identifier au moins 23 caractéristiques grammaticales. Les données recueillies à l'aide de méthodologies qualitative et quantitative suggèrent que les caractéristiques relevées sont davantage des différences de la variante de l'anglais parlée par les enfants des Premières Nations que des erreurs. Des moyens d'évaluation et d'intervention respectueux et supportés par les données probantes sont également discutés afin que la diversité de l'anglais parlé au Canada puisse être célébrée dans les salles de classe du pays.

Scholars and researchers in various disciplines increasingly accept that many people of First Nations ancestry speak a variety or dialect of English. Because they speak a dialect, their English may differ from the more “standard” way English is spoken in Canadian schools, post-secondary settings, and the workplace (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Battisti et al., 2014; Epstein & Xu, 2003; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Genee & Stigter, 2010; Hart Blundon, 2016; Heit & Blair, 1993; Kay-Raining Bird, 2014; Peltier, 2009; Sterzuk, 2011; Toohey, 1986; Wiltse, 2011). By *standard*, we refer to the version of a language that influential people with status speak, such as educators and employers, who are usually White members of the middle class (Fought, 2006; Wolfram & Christian, 1989). It is the standard version that has been standardized and codified in dictionaries and grammar books (Trudgill, 1999). As for *dialect*, in popular ideology, we refer to “a particular social or geographical variety of English that is not the ‘standard’ one” (Wolfram & Christian, 1989, p. 2). However, because the technical definition of dialect is “any given variety of a language shared by a group of speakers” (Wolfram & Christian, 1989, p. 1), the standard is itself a dialect. Because dialects are associated with ethnic groups that are the subject of racial discrimination (Lippi-Green, 1997), the term dialect has been stigmatized by outsiders. Because of this, henceforth in this paper, the author will use the term *variety*, and will not capitalize the term *standard*.

Among speakers of varieties, there may be differences in vocabulary from the standard variety (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; Labov, 2003), grammar (Siegel, 2010), and how language is used to communicate with others (Siegel, 2010; Wolfram & Christian, 1989). Also, just as all languages vary (Lippi-Green, 1997), there is variation in the way people speak a community variety, with some members using features at high rates, and others using them at lower rates (Washington, 2011). As Wolfram and Christian (1989) pointed out, “dialects simply do not come in neat, self-contained packages” (p. 6).

The process by which varieties arise is likely complex. They may develop from pidgins and creoles (Siegel, 2008) or when whole communities shift to speaking the dominant communicative partner’s language (Siegel, 2008). They may evolve from learner varieties of English (Fought, 2006). Universal properties of grammatical simplification and phonological reduction (Leap & Stout, 1976, as cited in Flanigan, 1987), variety mixing, or reduction in the differences (Siegel, 2010) may influence their evolution. These processes explain why features overlap among varieties from diverse ancestral languages (Flanigan, 1987). Importantly, the structure of the specific ancestral language can carry over to

or influence the English variety (Genee & Stigter, 2010; Leap, 1993). Varieties are associated with community identity; the desire to fit in with a community’s way of speaking may explain why varieties persist (Fought, 2006).

Just as many First Nations adults may speak varieties that differ from the standard, so too may many First Nations children. Toohey (1986) was one of the first educators to argue that the distinctive grammar observed among some of her First Nations students in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario were likely features of an English variety, rather than grammatical mistakes. Furthermore, she argued that using these grammatical forms put speakers at an educational disadvantage in Canadian schools. A decade later, Heit and Blair (1993) expressed their concern about negative implications for the assessment and teaching of First Nations students if teachers did not recognize the differences between Indigenous English and standard Canadian English. Since then, concern about the disadvantage experienced by First Nations children who speak varieties has grown (e.g., Ball & Bernhardt, 2008; Battisti et al., 2014; Eriks-Brophy, 2014; Genee & Stigter, 2010; Hart Blundon, 2016; Kay-Raining Bird, 2014; Larre, 2009; Peltier, 2008, 2009; Sterzuk, 2011; Wawrykow, 2011).

There is good cause for concern. Empirical evidence is mounting that suggests that students in jurisdictions outside Canada who speak varieties do not do as well in school as those who speak the standard form (Biddle, 2013), and their use of a variety can be a contributing factor to lower achievement (Bühler et al., 2018; Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015). Research has shown that school-aged students who speak varieties have difficulties with phonological awareness, reading, spelling, and writing when they need to perform these tasks in a second variety in school (Gatlin & Wanzek, 2015; Hart Blundon, 2016). Some scholars propose that their difficulties may be due to linguistic interference or a mismatch between the sound systems of their variety and the standard (Labov, 2003). Others argue their challenges might be related to linguistic awareness and flexibility (N. P. Terry et al., 2010). In other words, students may not be aware of the need to switch between the two varieties. Differences can even affect learning in math and science (Charity Hudley & Mallinson, 2011; J. M. Terry et al., 2015). Also, cultural differences in the way language is used can lead to teacher and student misunderstandings and result in changes in teacher perspectives about students, which may negatively influence academic outcomes (Siegel, 2010) and cause them to underestimate the abilities of children (Mallinson & Charity Hudley, 2017). Moreover, the use of assessment tools designed for speakers of standard varieties can result

in unnecessary pathologization and ineffective pedagogical approaches (Hibel et al., 2008).

Battisti et al. (2014) showed that issues that affect students who speak other varieties might also affect First Nations students in Canada. In British Columbia, districts receive funding for students who are identified as speaking a variety (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020). Monies are used to support students in acquiring the standard. Battisti et al. found that a 10-percentage-point increase in the number of students identified as speaking a variety in a district was associated with significant improvement in Reading Comprehension on the provincial Foundation Skills Assessment (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021).

Even though First Nations students in Canada who speak varieties might be at an educational disadvantage, it is important that they not be discouraged from speaking their variety. That is because “dialects are important linguistic markers of Indigenous identity and solidarity” (Ball & Bernhardt, 2008, p. 573). Viewing varieties as broken English or viewing grammar differences as mistakes can lead to inappropriate teaching and devaluing students’ English and identity. Rather, a bidialectal approach may be appropriate, whereby students are taught the differences between the varieties in respectful ways and when to use what form, using effective yet culturally sensitive approaches such as contrastive analysis and code-switching (Sterzuk, 2011; Wheeler & Swords, 2004). A bidialectal approach places both the community and the standard varieties in positions of respect (Malcolm, 1995).

Unfortunately, information regarding Indigenous English varieties in Canada is scant, and there are few appropriate assessment tools. Because of this gap in knowledge and resources, educators and educational professionals, such as speech-language pathologists (S-LPs) and psychologists, might not be aware that their students may be speaking a variety. Therefore, they are at risk of inadvertently using inappropriate teaching methods or labeling a feature as a mistake needing correction. Also, because many of the grammatical distinctions that characterize a variety are similar to those produced by a child with a language disorder, they may consider a feature to be an example of disorder, score tests more poorly than is warranted, and pathologize a student unnecessarily.

The paucity of research on First Nations Englishes motivated this author’s study of the grammatical features of First Nations kindergarteners in a small community in Northern British Columbia (Hart Blundon, 2019). Given anecdotal reports by local staff and residents

and observations made for speech-language pathology purposes, it was hypothesized that many children were speaking a variety of English characterized by grammar distinctions from more standard Canadian English. To test this hypothesis, Hart Blundon (2019) attempted to answer the question, “Are students speaking an identifiable local English variety, and, if so, what are the grammatical features?”

To answer this question, Hart Blundon (2019) selected four objectives: (a) create an inventory of grammatical features based on observation, literature review, anecdotal reports, and retroactive analysis of kindergarten language samples; (b) corroborate the inventory by consulting scholars who have general expertise in Dene languages to ascertain whether these features could have had their origin in the community’s ancestral language, examining grammatical features reported to characterize Indigenous American and other First Nations English, and examining published narratives of community adults to see if they also contained the features; (c) provide statistical support for these being grammatical features of a variety rather than examples of language disorder by demonstrating that all children, regardless of whether they had a history of speech-language pathology or Special Education Support or designation (referred to in this paper as SPED) or not (referred to as NOSPED), used features; and (d) explore the frequency of production of individual features, as well as the rate at which individual children used features overall, to inform educational professionals about the level of variance they can expect to observe among children who speak varieties.

An exploratory sequential mixed-methods research design was adopted, which combined qualitative analysis (e.g., examining the literature and published corpus data, and gathering the opinion of staff and experts in Dene languages) with quantitative analysis (i.e., statistical analysis of the rates with which children used individual features, as well as the rates with which each child used features overall). The design was based on the approach suggested by Pike (1967) when studying new child languages. When documenting languages for the first time, *etic* (i.e., “behavior as from outside of a particular system”) and *emic* (i.e., “behavior as from inside the system”) are used (Pike, 1967, p. 37). Like Craig and Washington (2006), who also used Pike’s approach to document child African American Language, the author used *etic* and *emic* derived units to create an inventory of grammatical features. *Etic* derived units were those contained in inventories in nearby regions, in the literature, and in published narratives of local adult speakers; *emic* derived units were discovered during speech-language pathology observation and retrospective analysis. The

method was influenced by Cazden (2001), who encouraged teachers to become ethnographers of African American Language, using their observations and reports from the students themselves. The approach also aligned with one suggested by Wolfram and Adger (1993): When documenting a dialect, one begins with observation. Using these methods, Hart Blundon (2019) compiled an inventory of features and analyzed language samples using a metric used for speech-language pathology purposes, namely the percentage of words in a language sample marked with features.

While addressing the same objectives outlined in Hart Blundon (2019), this paper presents the features again, using slightly modified operational definitions, to provide more clarity for those working with First Nations students. Language samples have been re-analyzed based on an improved level of reliability for transcription of samples. Also, the author has reassessed her ability to identify features reliably. In this study, rather than employing a words-marked-with-features token-based metric that had been used in Hart Blundon (2019), a feature-per-utterance rate metric has been applied, which aligns with the type of measurement used in other studies of children's grammatical varietal forms (e.g., Oetting & McDonald, 2001; Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010). Because this paper represents a reanalysis of data collected using the method presented in Hart Blundon (2019), the method has been reiterated here.

### Positioning the Researcher

When researchers study issues that affect First Nations people, they must position themselves so their biases are fully transparent and the community's trust can be gained (Absolon & Willett, 2005). As the researcher and author, I disclose that I am a non-Indigenous S-LP, raised in a white middle-class home in New Brunswick, Canada. While I have never experienced racial discrimination, I have been judged because of my Maritime accent, which may explain my interest in varieties. I used some forms of Indigenous research methodology in this study, such as personal contact with participants' guardians and community members, rather than relying solely on written communication. However, I have used mostly Western methods of data collection and analysis.

### Method

#### Confidentiality, Study Site, and Participants

Because of potential stereotyping of the community's way of speaking English, some Elders and community members expressed their desire to keep the study site confidential. Thus, only limited information has been shared

about it. The community has been called "Bigton" and the school, "Bigton School." All community resources and sources have been anonymized. This research received ethical approval from the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board (Protocol Number 13-260).

While about half of Bigton's residents are First Nations, the majority of the people who live in the region are of First Nations descent (Statistics Canada, 2016), and Bigton is located in the Nation's unceded territory. Bigton School teaches children who live in town and children transported from locations elsewhere in the region. Approximately 90% of the children who attend Bigton School are of First Nations ancestry, and the ancestral language family of most of the students is Athapaskan (i.e., Dene). The Nation is actively engaged in the revitalization of their particular Dene ancestral language.

For the retrospective kindergarten analysis, 13 (seven cis-gendered males and six females) were recruited. They came from a pool of 27 students who had been previously identified as English as a Second Dialect (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2020) by the author in her role as S-LP consultant. These students had been designated as per British Columbia Ministry of Education (2020) guidelines that defined English as a Second Dialect students as those who "speak a dialect of English that differs significantly from Standard English used in school and in broader Canadian society (i.e., significant variations in oral language vocabulary and sentence structure from those used in Standard English)" (p. 10). Students were designated who presented with grammatical differences from standard Canadian English that appeared to be features of a variety. Five participants were NOSPED students and eight were SPED students. Twelve of 13 of the participants identified as First Nations.

#### Steps and Strategies Taken to Create an Inventory of Grammatical Features

As discussed, the approach used to create an inventory of features was based on those outlined by Pike (1967), Cazden (2001), and Wolfram and Adger (1993). The process was iterative, alternating between gathering data from sources outside the new language system (i.e., etic) to analysis within the system (i.e., emic).

#### Creating an Initial Inventory of Features

To begin to address the first objective, an initial inventory was created from reviewing literature and anecdotal reports of clinicians and researchers of First Nations English varieties (e.g., Ball et al., 2006; Peltier, 2008, 2009; Wawrykow, 2011). Also, the literature on well-studied varieties was examined

(e.g., Washington, 2011, on African American Language; Butcher, 2008, on Australian Aboriginal English).

The inventory was augmented by examining language samples collected as part of the author's speech-language pathology practice and by informal observation of children in the school. Included in the inventory were grammatical features that appeared to be "out of the ordinary" in terms of their form, frequency of use, or age when being used when compared to more standard Canadian English-speaking students with whom the author had worked over 30 years of speech-language pathology practice. After discussing the inventory with school staff, long-term residents, and a colleague who was providing speech-language pathology service elsewhere in the region, it was further refined. Codes were then created for 33 features, some of which were taken from Washington (2011).

### ***Corroborating and Refining the Inventory***

To address the second objective, the author consulted two scholars who had general expertise in Dene languages and did not reside in the study area. They were L. Saxon of the University of Victoria and P. Moore of The University of British Columbia. Based on their preliminary observations, they agreed to offer their opinion as to whether they thought the potential features of this anonymized variety could have transferred from or have been influenced by the structure of the ancestral language of the Bigton community. The consultation was carried out via in-person interview and followed up by an emailed written account of what was discussed to allow for their confirmation or clarification. If these experts felt that these features might reflect the ancestral language's grammar, then it was reasoned that support would be provided for this being a unique community variety. The original 33 feature categories were subsequently merged, modified, and reconfigured, and their number reduced to 23. As an additional layer of support for these being grammatical features, rather than indicators of language disorder or literacy delay, they were compared to sources of First Nations English (Cruikshank, 1998; Genee & Stigter, 2010) and those appearing in publications of Indigenous American English (Bayles & Harris, 1982; Dyc, 2002; Leap, 1993; Rowicka, 2005; Wolfram et al., 2002). If grammatical differences identified among kindergarteners had also been reported to be features of North American Indigenous English speakers, this would provide external validity to the author's observations and buttress the argument that students' patterns in Bigton School are examples of varietal features as well. Published oral narratives of local adults were also examined to see if they contained the same features identified for kindergarten

children. This comparison also served to support and corroborate the inventory.

### ***Further Refining the Inventory: Retrospective Analysis of Language Samples***

As a next step in addressing the first objective, Bigton kindergarteners' oral language samples were retrospectively analyzed. Narrative language samples were collected from kindergarteners a few weeks after each child had entered school. Kindergarten children's samples were used to identify features because they represented the language model closest to the vernacular baseline before education could become an overlay on the use of community language (Labov, 1984). Narratives were collected because they most closely aligned with language expectations in school (Miller et al., 2011; Mills et al., 2013) and were used for identifying features of Aboriginal English varieties in Australia (Pearce et al., 2015). Also, because narrative sampling is used with benchmark assessments in North America (Mills et al., 2013) and with British Columbia provincial Fundamental Skills Assessment examinations (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2021), narrative samples aligned with current methods of school-based assessment.

To collect oral language samples, children retold a story about a short, animated video that contained no dialogue. As Dollaghan et al. (1990) reported, video narration allows for consistency of content. It also simultaneously maintained high-interest value across a wide age range. Humorous videos that had a clear male and female character, were about 2–3 minutes long, had accompanying music but no dialogue, and had good content to generate productive language samples were evaluated. The videos used included (a) *Fantasia Taurina* (Pérez González, 2003), (b) *Snout* (Vogt, 2010), (c) *Balloons* (Kim, 2008), (d) *Oktapodi* (Premium Films, 2009), and (e) *Wasabi Guy* (Ushko, 2013). Videos proved to be highly motivating for the students. No videos featured animals considered sacred to this Nation (Anonymous, personal communication, date withheld).

Methods for collecting samples for speech-language pathology purposes evolved somewhat over the 6-year period during which the samples were collected, as the author became more aware of potential features and wanted to create conditions that might elicit them. For the first year, children were asked to watch a video and then tell the story of what happened at the beginning, the middle, and the end. This Western style of storytelling successfully elicited a variety of past tense forms. For the remainder of the years, children were also asked to relate what was happening while watching the video to encourage the production of present tense forms. During the last 2 years

that samples were collected, students were also asked to predict what would happen next in an attempt to elicit future aspect forms. Even though samples were collected in narrative contexts, the author also engaged in conversation with the children before obtaining the sample to establish rapport and when they asked a question or made a comment during their video retell or tells. These data were included in the kindergarten analyses because scholars of First Nations Englishes recommend collecting samples in various contexts (Ball et al., 2006).

Samples were collected in a small office in the school. Students were audio-recorded using a Sony IC Recorder ICD-UX70 (recording format: MP3; sampling frequency: 44.1 kHz; bit rate: 128 kbps; microphone sensitivity set at a low level suitable for small spaces) that was held approximately 46 cm from each child's mouth. During video-tell elicited samples, the music volume was adjusted to a level that ensured both the child could hear and enjoy the video experience and what the child was saying could be heard on the recording. Analysis conducted in Hart Blundon (2019) indicated that music did not differentially affect the identification of low-intensity features.

In Hart Blundon (2019), after completing Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) online training, the author's ability to reliably transcribe samples was determined. For this study, the author's ability to transcribe samples was carried out again by comparing her orthographic transcriptions of randomly selected, without replacement, anonymized audio files with those of transcriptionists from SALT Software, LLC (Miller & Iglesias, 2012). Word-by-word agreement on two of 13 transcripts was 94.07%. Agreement regarding the number of complete and intelligible utterances identified was 96.77%.

In Hart Blundon (2019), the author's ability to reliably identify grammatical features in typed non-SALT-coded (except for part word coding) orthographic transcriptions of randomly selected, without replacement, anonymized audio files, while simultaneously listening to the audio files was assessed with an S-LP colleague who was familiar with the variety. The operational definitions of some of the 23 features were refined. They were further refined during reliability assessment for identification of features carried out as part of a longitudinal-cross sectional study (Hart Blundon, 2019). For the current study, reliability assessment was accomplished by comparing the author's identified features with those made by another S-LP who was unfamiliar with this variety but had received a period of training with them. The training involved reviewing the operational definitions of the features and their

accompanying examples, and a practice session with a transcript that was not included in the analysis. Transcripts were assessed one at a time, and each assessor's results were compared after the completion of each transcript. Features were "agreed upon" if assessors (a) both identified the same feature or (b) agreed that each other's choice of feature were correct choices, given different interpretations of what the child intended to say. Feature-by-feature agreement for two of 13 transcripts was 90.67%. Reliability measures for neutralized gender distinction of third person singular pronoun, absent copula or auxiliary, undifferentiated pronoun case, and absent phrase ranged from 92% to 100%. Use of less frequently occurring "that" for "the" and different article had lower rates of agreement, which were 50% (three instances in two samples) and 0% (one instance in two samples) on average, respectively. Features were refined again.

SALT software, Research Version 2012, was used to analyze transcripts. SALT segments utterances into *communication units*, "defined as a main clause with all its dependent clauses" (Miller et al., 2011, p. 34). Only complete and intelligible verbal utterances were included in the analysis to reduce the possibility of misidentifying a feature. For example, in the case of an abandoned sentence such as "I walk >", it would not be possible to disambiguate whether the student intended to use the present tense, as in, "I walk to the store," or the past tense, as in "I walked to the store." Mazes, "filled pauses, false starts, repetitions, and reformulations" (Miller et al., 2011, p. 288) were also excluded.

Due to the nature of the present tense sampling condition, when students were asked to relate, "What's happening" while they simultaneously watched the video, they either gave accounts of what they had just seen or what they were currently seeing. Uninflected verbs were coded according to the inflection that would be expected for the context. If context did not provide clarification, the coding defaulted to the elicitation condition, present tense. For example, if the child said, "He **go** like this," and had been using past tense, then the verb was coded as present for past. If the child had been using both tenses, and so it was not clear what tense the child intended to use, it was assumed the child intended to use present tense. When a child did not inflect a verb in the present tense, and it was not certain whether the child meant to use the simple present or present progressive, then a conservative approach was taken, and one feature was coded, absent third person singular <s>, rather than two features, absent copula or auxiliary, and absent <ing>. When attempting to elicit future aspect, present tense or future aspect were

considered to be acceptable. If the verb was uninflected, the context was again used to guide judgments. For instance, if the child responded with, "He **go** there," when asked, "What will happen next?" context was used to decide whether the child used absent third person singular <s> (i.e., "He **goes** there") or absent copula or auxiliary (i.e., "He **will go** there").

### **Frequency and Variability of Features and Statistical Support**

To address objectives three and four, the mean rate of use of each grammatical feature for all kindergarteners and for NOSPED and SPED kindergarteners was determined. To do so, a token-based ratio metric was derived by calculating average features per utterance for each individual feature for each kindergartener. Then the mean rate at which all kindergarteners used each particular feature was calculated. An independent-samples *t*-test was performed to assess whether the rate at which NOSPED students used individual features was significantly different from the rate at which SPED students used features.

To also address objectives three and four, the overall rate of feature use for each NOSPED and SPED kindergartener (variety density measure) was determined. To determine variety density measure, or what Craig and Washington (2006) called a dialect density measure, the total number of features in the sample was divided by the number of utterances to arrive at a features-per-utterance metric. An independent-samples *t*-test was performed to investigate whether the overall rate at which NOSPED students used features was significantly different from the overall rate at which SPED students used features.

## **Results**

### **Grammatical Features**

In this section and **Table 1** to **Table 7**, the features are presented. In each table, the features are presented in the first column and an example of each is provided in the second column. An example of a standard Canadian English equivalent is presented in the third column. Whether these features are reported to characterize American Indigenous Englishes is indicated in the fourth column. Whether they are reported to be possible features of First Nations Englishes is indicated in the fifth column. Those features that appeared in published narratives of Bigton community adult First Nations speakers are indicated in the sixth column. Whether experts in Dene feel that these features may have had their origin in or were influenced by the structure of the ancestral language is indicated in the last column.

### **Verbs**

Verbs had the greatest representation, both in variety and number (see **Table 1**). They included (a) absent copula or auxiliary (e.g., "They \_\_\_ waiting"); (b) use of uninflected past tense (e.g., "He **look** there yesterday;" "Then he **hold** it tighter") or use of verbs inflected for present tense to code past tense events (e.g., "Then this kid **comes** over and looked like she was coming from a party"); (c) absence of third person singular <s> (e.g., "He **kick** the ball"); (d) omission of <ing> (e.g., "The girl is **bounce** all over"); (e) addition of an extra <ed> when forming regular past tense (e.g., "He **poppeded** the balloon"), or by adding <ed> to irregular verbs when forming past tense (e.g., "Her **blowed** that;" "The balloon **spinneded**;" "He **felled** down"), (f) omission of the to in the infinitive (e.g., "She was waiting for the girl \_\_\_ come back"); (g) differences in subject-verb agreement (e.g., "They **was** coming"); and (h) use of "gots" for "has" (e.g., "The woman **gots** a ..."). Of the eight categories of varietal features for verbs that were observed in the kindergarten children, all of them were reported to be characteristic features in at least two if not all corroborating sources (i.e., Indigenous American English, First Nations English, and adult First Nations speakers in Bigton) and six of the eight may have possibly been influenced by the structure of the ancestral language.

### **Pronouns**

Pronouns were produced differently in two ways (see **Table 2**). Pronoun case was not differentiated (e.g., "**Her** blew that to him;" "**Them** are in that lake"), and third person singular pronouns were not distinguished by gender (e.g., "**He** is trying to catch it" when referring to a cis-gendered female). Other Indigenous American and First Nation speakers do not distinguish gender (Genee & Stigter, 2010; Leap, 1993), and lack of gender distinction was noted in published narratives of adults in Bigton. Both Dene experts thought this feature transferred from the ancestral language because gender distinction for third person singular does not exist in Dene languages.

### **Determiners and Articles**

As seen in **Table 3**, differences were noted in the use of determiners, such as the use of "that" when "the" would be expected (e.g., "Him got in **that** lake"), the use of pronouns for determiners (e.g., "**Them** bees are going to get him"), or omission of the determiner (e.g., "Then \_\_\_ bull breathe in her face"). There were also differences in the use of articles, such as the use of "a" with a plural noun (e.g., **a** glasses), use of "a" for "an" (e.g., "... **a** apple tree"), or omission of the

**Table 1**

**Verb Features**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Different verb: absent copula or auxiliary [DV:ACOPAUX]	<i>They ___ waitin'</i>	<i>They <b>are</b> waiting</i>	X	X	X	X
Different verb: present for past [DV:PP]	<i>He <b>look</b> there yesterday</i>	<i>He <b>looked</b> there yesterday</i>	X	X	X	X
Different verb: absent third person <s> [DV:A3S]	<i>He <b>kick</b> the ball</i>	<i>He <b>kicks</b> the ball</i>	X		X	X
Different verb: absent -ing [DV:ING]	<i>The girl is <b>bounce</b> all over</i>	<i>The girl <b>is bouncing</b> all over</i>	X		X	X
Different verb: regularization [DV:REG]	<i>Her <b>blowed</b>; It <b>spinneded</b></i>	<i>She <b>blew</b>; It <b>spun</b></i>	X		X	
Different verb: absent "to" [DV:ATO]	<i>She waits for the girl ___ come back</i>	<i>She waits for the girl <b>to</b> come back</i>		X		X
Different verb: subject-verb agreement [DV:SVA]	<i>They <b>was</b> coming</i>	<i>They <b>were</b> coming</i>	X		X	
Different verb: "gots" for "has" [DV:GOTS/HAS]	<i>The woman <b>gots</b> a ...</i>	<i>The woman <b>has</b> a ...</i>		X	X	X

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.

**Table 2**

**Pronoun Features**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Different pronoun: undifferentiated pronoun case [DP:UPC]	<i><b>Her</b> blew that; <b>Them</b> are in the lake</i>	<i><b>She</b> blew that; <b>They</b> are in the lake</i>	X	X		X
Different pronoun: neutralization of gender distinction, third person pronoun [DP:GEN]	<i><b>He</b> is trying to catch it</i>	<i><b>She</b> is trying to catch it</i>	X	X	X	X

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.

article (e.g., "The girl is tryin' get \_\_\_ apple"). Of these three categories of features, all were reported to be characteristic features in at least two, if not all, corroborating sources (i.e., Indigenous American English, First Nations English, and Bigton community adult First Nations speakers), and all three may have possibly been influenced by the structure of the ancestral language.

**Prepositions**

Also of note were differences in prepositions (e.g., "The girl got **along/out of** the way"), as seen in **Table 4**. Different use of prepositions is reported to be a varietal feature of Indigenous American and First Nations varieties. Adults in the community also use prepositions differently than they are used in more standard English. L. Saxon (personal

**Table 3**  
**Determiner and Article Features**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Different determiner: use of <i>that</i> for <i>the</i> [DD:THE]	<i>Him got in <b>that</b> lake</i>	<i>He got in <b>the</b> lake</i>			X	X
Different determiner: pronoun/determiner; absent determiner [DD]	<i><b>Them</b> bees; <b>Then</b> ___ bull ran</i>	<i><b>The</b> bees; <b>Then the</b> bull ran</i>	X		X	X
Different indefinite article [DART]	<i>He gots <b>a</b> glasses; <b>a</b> apple; She is tryin' get ___apple</i>	<i>He has glasses; <b>an</b> apple; She is trying to get <b>an</b> apple</i>	X	X	X	X

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.

**Table 4**  
**Preposition Feature**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Different preposition, absent preposition [DPREP]	<i>The girl got <b>along</b> the way</i>	<i>The girl got <b>out of</b> the way</i>	X	X	X	

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.

communication, August 18, 2015) wondered if the Nation’s early English learners experienced the same difficulty that many learners of English experience when learning English prepositions. Prepositions are notoriously hard to learn because of their complex and often arbitrary meaning (Tyler, 2012).

**Conjunction**

Different use of the conjunction “then” was observed (Table 5). Specifically, “and here” or “then here” were used for “and then” (e.g., “**And here** the bus came;” “**Then here** he is bouncing all over”). This feature appeared to be used more frequently when speakers were telling stories or recounting events. It appeared in a published narrative of a First Nations speaker living in the Yukon (Cruikshank, 1998) and in published narratives of Bigton community adult First Nations speakers. A respected community member felt that use of “here” for “then” might have been influenced by a landscape orientation in their culture (see also Discussion).

**Non-Verb-Related Morphology**

There were differences observed in the way some children expressed possessive (e.g., “The **bull** horns are stuck in the tree”) or plurals (e.g., “The **bee** are gonna come out”); see Table 6. Negation might also be formed differently (e.g., “I **not** know;” “Now they’re **ain’t**;” “He **never** took his nose;” “He **don’t** want him to see”). Of the three categories of varietal features for non-verb related morphology, all were reported to be characteristic features in at least two, if not all, corroborating sources (i.e., Indigenous American English, First Nations English, and Bigton community adult First Nations speakers). The way plurals may be derived in English could have been influenced by the ancestral language structure.

**Utterance-Level Features**

Five utterance-level differences were observed (Table 7), which were (a) absent phrase, defined as an omission of a subject, verb, or object phrase in an utterance (e.g., “ \_\_\_

**Table 5**  
**Conjunction (i.e., Discourse Connector)**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Different conjunction: <i>and here</i> or <i>then here</i> for <i>and then</i> [DCONJ]	<i>Then here</i> he is bouncing; <b>And here</b> the bus came	<i>Then</i> he is bouncing; <i>Then</i> the bus came		X	X	X

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.

**Table 6**  
**Non-Verb Related Morphology (Possessive, Plurals, & Negation)**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Different possessive [DPOSS]	The <b>bull</b> horns are stuck	The <b>bull's</b> horns are stuck	X	X		
Different plural [DPL]	The <b>bee</b> are gonna come out	The <b>bees</b> are gonna come out	X	X	X	X
Different negative [DNEG]	I <b>not</b> know; they're <b>ain't</b> ; he <b>never</b> took that; he <b>don't</b> want that	I <b>don't</b> know; they're <b>not</b> ; he <b>didn't</b> take that; he <b>doesn't</b> want that	X		X	

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.

waiting for her to come"); (b) string, used when recounting events, was defined as the use of two clauses within an utterance with an optional subject and no coordinating conjunction, or use of more than two clauses within an utterance with optional inclusion of a subject and coordinating conjunction (e.g., "And then they come out then help and sit down and have more apples;"); (c) topicalization, whereby a topic is set and then expanded upon (e.g., "That bull, he was mad"); (d) repetition for emphasis or continued action (e.g., "He got **really** mad and **really, really** mad; "And **jump, jump, jump** on"); and (e) word order differences (e.g., "That you see she have a balloon"). Of the five categories of utterance-level varietal features, all were reported to be characteristic features in at least two, if not all, corroborating sources (i.e., Indigenous American English, First Nations English, and Bigton adult First Nations speakers). As reported previously, Bennett (2008) reported observing word order differences among First Nations English speakers in the Yukon (e.g., "Who's own is it language," p. 1). All five categories may have been influenced by the structure of the ancestral language.

**Other Possible Features**

After completing reliability assessments for the analysis of kindergarten samples, as well as samples collected for a subsequent longitudinal-cross sectional study (Hart Blundon, 2019), other potential features revealed themselves that did not fit into the 23 feature categories. These included the use of definite articles instead of personal pronouns to body parts, the use of an additional copula as in "**they're is**," among others. These require further study in future analyses.

**Mean Rate of Use of Each Grammatical Feature for all Kindergarteners and for NOSPED and SPED Kindergarteners**

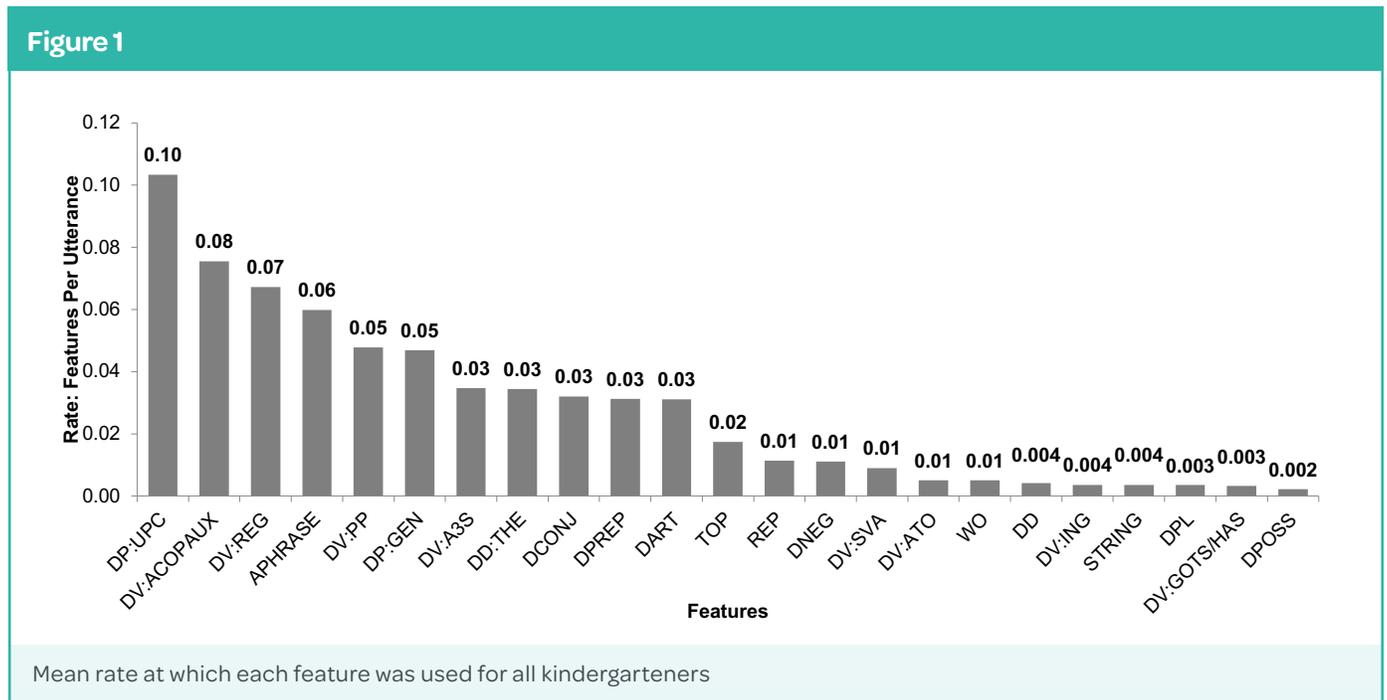
Figure 1 displays the mean frequency of use of each grammatical feature in descending order for all kindergarteners. As a group, the kindergarteners used 23 different features. As can be seen from inspection of Figure 1, undifferentiated pronoun case (e.g., "Him was running") was the most frequently occurring feature, followed by absence of the copula or auxiliary (e.g., "Him running").

**Table 7**

**Utterance Level Features**

Morpho-syntactic feature	Example	SCE form	IAE	FNE	Bigton adult FNE	Anc.
Absent subject, verb or object phrase [APHRASE]	___ waiting for her to come*	<i>She is waiting for her to come</i>	X	X	X	X
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 clauses within utterance; subject optional; no coordinating conjunction or</li> <li>&gt; 2 clauses within utterance; subject &amp; coordinating conjunction optional</li> </ul> [STRING]	<i>And then they come out then help and sit down and have more apples</i>	<i>After he helps her out of the water, they sit down and have more apples</i>		X	X	X
Topicalization [TOP]	<i>That bull, he was mad</i>	<i>That bull was mad</i>	X		X	X
Repetition for emphasis or continued action [REP]	<i>He got really, really mad; And jump jump on</i>	<i>He became furious; He jumps on all the buildings</i>			X	X
Different word order [WO]	<i>That you see she have a balloon</i>	<i>You see that she has a balloon</i>	X		X	X

Note. X = feature present. SCE = standard Canadian English; IAE = Indigenous American English; FNE = First Nations English; Anc. = ancestral language.  
\*the auxiliary is also absent in this example.



Note. DP:UPC = different pronoun: undifferentiated pronoun case; DV:ACOPAUX = different verb: absent copula or auxiliary; DV:REG = different verb: regularization; APHRASE = absent phrase; DV:PP = different verb: present for past; DP:GEN = different pronoun: neutralization of gender, third person singular pronoun; DV:A3S = different verb: absent third person singular "s"; DD:THE = use of "that" for "the"; DCONJ = use of "here" for "then"; DPREP = different preposition; DART = different article; TOP = topicalization; REP = repetition for emphasis or continued action; DNEG = different negation; DV:SVA = different verb: subject-verb agreement; DV:ATO = different verb: absent "to"; WO = word order; DD = different determiner; DV:ING = different verb: absent "ing"; STRING = series of phrases, subject implied and conjunctions optional; DPL = absent plural "s"; DV:GOTS/HAS = different verb: use of "gots" for "has"; DPOSS = absent "s."

Other frequently occurring word-level features included regularization of the verb and use of present for past. The next most frequently occurring word-level feature was related to another pronoun difference, neutralization of gender distinction. As for utterance-level features, complete omission of a subject, verb, or object phrase was the most

frequently occurring utterance-level feature and the fourth most frequently occurring overall. **Table 8** shows a large standard deviation for production rates of individual features. **Table 8** also shows the range of production of individual features; all features had a lower value of zero, indicating every feature was not produced by at least one participant.

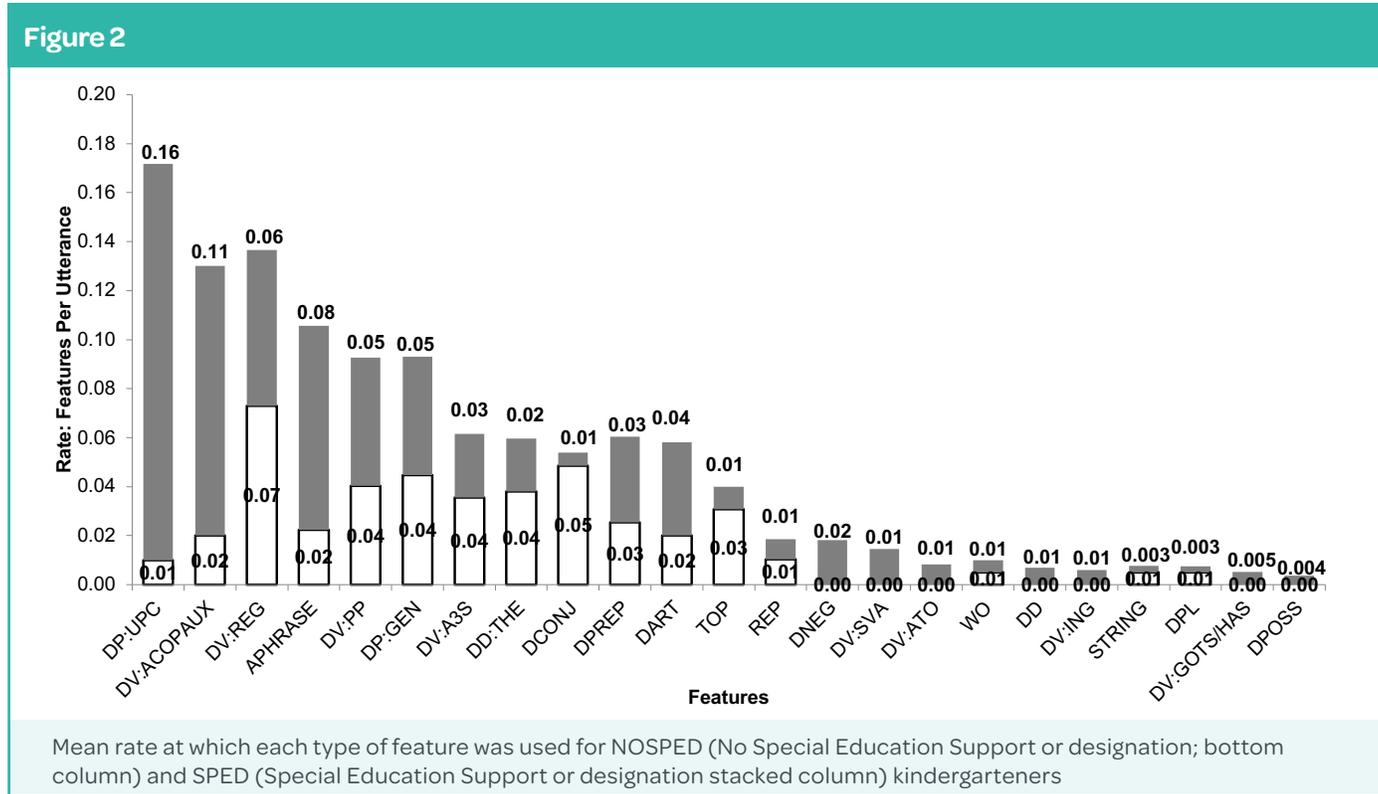
**Table 8**  
Standard Deviation and Range of Features for all Kindergarteners, NOSPED, and SPED Kindergarteners

Feature	All kindergarteners		NOSPED		SPED	
	SD	Range	SD	Range	SD	Range
Different pronoun: undifferentiated pronoun case [DP:UPC]	0.13	0–0.37	0.02	0–0.05	0.14	0–0.37
Different verb: absent copula or auxiliary [DV:ACOPAUX]	0.10	0–0.31	0.04	0–0.10	0.11	0–0.31
Different verb: regularization [DV:REG]	0.07	0–0.16	0.07	0–0.15	0.07	0–0.16
Absent phrase [APHRASE]	0.06	0–0.15	0.03	0–0.08	0.06	0–0.15
Different verb: present for past [DV:PP]	0.06	0–0.15	0.07	0–0.15	0.05	0–0.11
Different pronoun: neutralization of gender distinction, third person singular pronoun [DP:GEN]	0.09	0–0.31	0.06	0–0.15	0.11	0–0.31
Different verb: absent third person singular “s” [DV:A3S]	0.05	0–0.17	0.04	0–0.10	0.03	0–0.08
Different determiner: use of “that” for “the” [DD:THE]	0.07	0–0.22	0.05	0–0.12	0.05	0–0.13
Different conjunction [DCONJ]	0.09	0–0.31	0.08	0–0.18	0.01	0–0.04
Different preposition [DPREP]	0.04	0–0.13	0.04	0–0.08	0.05	0–0.13
Different article [DART]	0.04	0–0.09	0.04	0–0.10	0.03	0–0.09
Topicalization [TOP]	0.04	0–0.15	0.07	0–0.15	0.02	0–0.05
Repetition [REP]	0.02	0–0.05	0.02	0–0.05	0.02	0–0.04
Different negation [DNEG]	0.02	0–0.08	–	–	0.03	0–0.08
Different verb: subject-verb agreement [DV:SVA]	0.01	0–0.04	–	–	0.02	0–0.04
Different verb: absent “to” [DV:ATO]	0.01	0–0.04	–	–	0.02	0–0.04
Word order [WO]	0.01	0–0.04	0.01	0–0.03	0.01	0–0.04
Different determiner [DD]	0.01	0–0.03	–	–	0.01	0–0.03
Different verb: absent “ing” [DV:ING]	0.01	0–0.03	–	–	0.01	0–0.03
Series of phrases, subject implied, conjunctions optional [STRING]	0.01	0–0.03	0.01	0–0.03	0.01	0–0.02
Different plural [DPL]	0.01	0–0.03	0.01	0–0.03	0.01	0–0.02
Different verb: “gots” for “has” [DV:GOTS/HAS]	0.01	0–0.04	–	–	0.01	0–0.04
Different possessive [DPOSS]	0.01	0–0.03	–	–	0.01	0–0.03

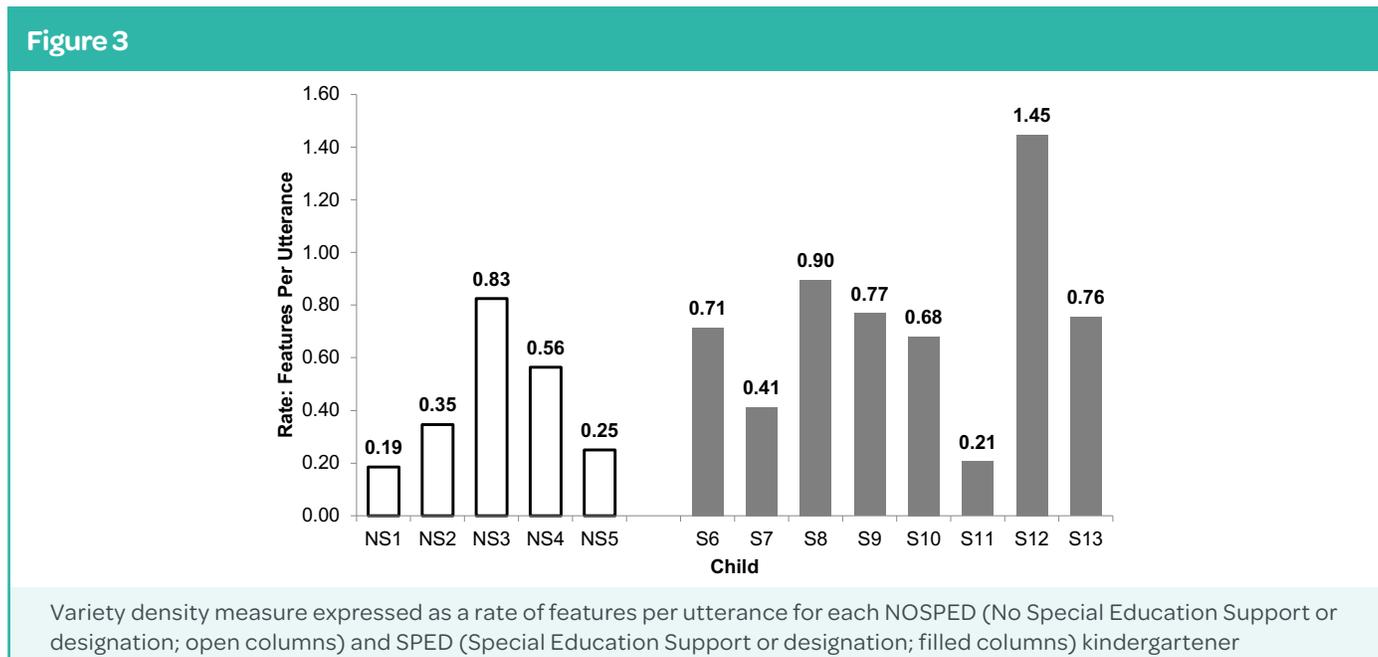
Note. NOSPED = No Special Education Support or designation; SPED = Special Education Support or designation.

Figure 2 shows the mean rate at which NOSPED and SPED students produced individual features. From examination of Figure 2, it can be seen that NOSPED students produced the most features and all of the most frequently occurring features. An independent samples

t-test showed no significant difference between the groups,  $t(44) = -1.36, p = .18$ . Inspection of the standard deviation of production rates of individual features, as reported in Table 8, reveals a large standard deviation for production rates of individual features for both NOSPED and SPED students.



Note. DP:UPC = different pronoun: undifferentiated pronoun case; DV:ACOPAUX = different verb: absent copula or auxiliary; DV:REG = different verb: regularization; APHRASE = absent phrase; DV:PP = different verb: present for past; DP:GEN = different pronoun: neutralization of gender, third person singular pronoun; DV:A3S = different verb: absent third person singular "s"; DD:THE = use of "that" for "the"; DCONJ = use of "here" for "then"; DPREP = different preposition; DART = different article; TOP = topicalization; REP = repetition for emphasis or continued action; DNEG = different negation; DV:SVA = different verb: subject-verb agreement; DV:ATO = different verb: absent "to"; WO = word order; DD = different determiner; DV:ING = different verb: absent "ing"; STRING = series of phrases, subject implied and conjunctions optional; DPL = absent plural "s"; DV:GOTS/HAS = different verb: use of "gots" for "has"; DPOSS = absent "s."



**Table 8** also shows the range of production of individual features for NOSPED and SPED students; all features had a lower value of zero, indicating every feature was not produced by at least one NOSPED and SPED student.

### Overall Rate With Which Features Were Used for Each NOSPED and SPED Kindergartener (Variety Density Measure)

**Figure 3** shows the rate at which each NOSPED and SPED kindergartener used features overall. **Figure 2** shows that all students, whether they had a history of speech-language pathology or SPED services or not, produced features. It also shows that there was an overlap between the rates of feature use for NOSPED and SPED students. Even though inspection of **Figure 2** suggests that SPED students used features more frequently than NOSPED students, there was no significant statistical difference between the groups,  $t(11) = -1.60, p = .14$ .

### Discussion

This study of the form of English being spoken by kindergarten children in a school in Northern British Columbia, where most students identify as First Nations, showed evidence of at least 23 grammatical features of a unique English variety (see **Table 1** to **Table 7**). These included word-level grammar distinctions with the use of verbs, pronouns, determiners, articles, prepositions, conjunctions, non-verb-related morphology such as possessive, plurals, and negation, as well as differences in the way utterances are constructed.

Many features identified are also indicative of the varieties of Indigenous Englishes spoken elsewhere. Descriptions provided by Bayles and Harris (1982), Leap's (1993) comprehensive review of Indigenous American Englishes, as well as more recent publications (e.g., Dyc, 2002; Rowicka, 2005; Wolfram et al., 2002) indicate that three quarters of the features produced by Bigton school children are also reported to be used by Indigenous American English speakers (see **Table 1** to **Table 7**, Column 4). Also, using Canadian sources such as Genee and Stigter (2010), Peltier (2008, 2009), and Wawrykow (2011), and observations reported by participants in an exploratory First Nations English Dialects Forum (Ball et al., 2006), approximately half of the features were also used by other First Nations speakers in Canada (see **Table 1** to **Table 7**, Column 5). Nearly all of the features (87%) observed in Bigton School also appeared in published narratives of adult First Nations speakers in the region that the author was able to review (see **Table 1** to **Table 7**, Column 6).

Of additional note is the fact that 83% of the features listed as being characteristic of the Bigton variety overlap

with those well-documented and studied African American Language and Australian Aboriginal English varieties (Oetting & McDonald, 2001; J. M. Terry et al., 2015; Van Hofwegen & Wolfram, 2010; Washington, 2011, on African American Language; Butcher, 2008, on Australian Aboriginal English). This is not surprising given that scholars have noted that it is common for features of English varieties to overlap. Processes of grammatical simplification and phonological reduction, depidginization (Flanigan, 1987), language shift (Siegel, 2008), or second language learning (Fought, 2006) may explain the convergence. Because Bigton students use features common to English varieties generally, these can thus be ruled out as "errors."

As another source of external validity to the hypothesis that the Bigton way of speaking English is a local English variety, it was the opinion of L. Saxon and P. Moore, general experts in Dene languages whom the author interviewed, that many features of the Bigton variety may have had their origins in or have been influenced by the structure of the community's particular ancestral Dene language. For instance, in Dene languages, verbs are coded as a stem word, to which many inflections may be added. Since the copula and an auxiliary coded as a separate word do not exist in Dene languages, it is understandable why Dene speakers may have deleted it when they were first learning English. As another example, the use of masculine for feminine third person singular pronouns likely transferred from the ancestral Dene language because no gender distinction is made for third person singular pronouns in Dene.

A feature that may have been influenced by the community's way of telling stories is the use of the spatial pronoun "here" for "then" as a discourse connector. A respected member of the Nation shared his theory as to why "here" might be used when telling stories. "When we tell stories, it is more important to mention where a story took place, to make connection to a place, because the land has its own spirit. Time and when things take place is not that important" (Anonymous, personal communication, date withheld).

Use of historical present was another feature that may have had its origin in storytelling (e.g., "Then this kid **comes** over and looked like she was coming from a party"). Historical present is characterized by a "sudden shift into the present tense and the equally sudden shift back into the past tense sometimes even within the same sentence" (Fludernik, 1992, p. 78), and can be used to help the listener feel as if they are present as the story unfolds (Wolfram, 1984). Historical present was included in the inventory because it appeared to be used more frequently than one would expect, given that past tense is the preferred tense to

use when telling stories in English (see, for instance, British Council, n.d.; Hill, 2012). Use of historical present, which was characterized by the tense switching described by Fludernik (1992), was commonly used in published narratives of adults in the community and appeared within sentences, paragraphs, and entire stories. This led the author to believe that the use of historical present is a feature of storytelling in this community.

The notion that the features listed in the Bigton school children's inventory are features of a community English variety is further supported by statistical analysis. Students with no history of receiving services from speech-language pathology or special education used features, and often as frequently as students who did not receive these services. There was no significant difference between the groups in terms of the rate with which each particular feature was used, and the overall rate with which children used features. Statistical analysis also indicated that not all students used all features, and the rates at which they used individual features and used features overall varied. Variability in the use of features is characteristic of all varieties.

Despite evidence that grammatical distinctions produced by Bigton students are features of a variety, some may argue that certain grammatical features should not be included in the inventory because they are used so infrequently. Examples of these were (a) subject-verb agreement; (b) absent "to" in the infinitive; (c) word order differences; (d) different use of determiner; (e) absent "ing"; (f) string; (g) different plural; (h) gots/has; and (i) different use of possession. However, it is premature to discard features based on their frequency of production. These data were obtained from language samples collected by the author, a standard English speaker. It would be important to collect other types of samples, in other contexts such as in conversation, and with other communicative partners, including other community members, before excluding features. Also, given that not all speakers of varieties use features at the same rate, nor use all features that characterize a particular variety, it is possible only a few students in this particular cohort used the infrequently occurring features. Other analyses support the need to retain these features. For instance, although used infrequently by this group, subject-verb agreement is used frequently by adult community members. Also, in a longitudinal-cross sectional study (Hart Blundon, 2019), string increased its frequency of use as the children's Mean Length of Communication Unit increased and became a frequently occurring feature for older students.

It could be argued that some features that have been included in this inventory are examples of everyday English. One example is the use of "gots" for "has." This form was included because "gots" for "has" has been documented as being a characteristic of African American Language (Fodor & Smith, 1978). It also was reported to be a possible feature used by First Nations students on Vancouver Island (Ball et al., 2006), and some adult speakers in the community used it. String is another example of a feature that might be an example of everyday speech. The inclusion of string in the inventory was inspired by a description provided by a participant in the First Nations English Dialects Forum (Ball et al., 2006): "children may string together phrases without the use of conjunctions such as *and*" (p. 101). Not all children used this pattern. However, string constructions appeared to be used more frequently in Bigton School than the author had observed with children who speak more standard English in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Alberta, and British Columbia. It may reflect a more laconic speaking style.

It may also be argued that some of the identified features could be indicators of language disorder or are developmental. Absent copula or auxiliary are both clinical markers of language disorder. However, because they are both well-studied features of other varieties and are used by adults in the community, they are likely features of the local variety. Other features, such as subject-verb agreement or regularization, are developmental for speakers of more standard Canadian English. However, these forms are usually acquired before kindergarten (Bowen, 2019; Miller, 1981) and adults in the community used both. Support for undifferentiated pronoun case, absent possession, uninflected verbs, and absent "to" in the infinitive also being developmental features of this variety is provided by the fact that many of these same features are also identified as being features of child African American Language (e.g., Washington, 2011). Other features such as absent possessive or plural <s> and different ways of forming negation could be developmental speech patterns for kindergarten and early elementary school children. Because these features were identified as features of other varieties, they were included in the analysis (see Butcher, 2008, on Australian Aboriginal English; Washington, 2011, on child African American Language).

This study revealed that the most frequently occurring features observed in this cohort of kindergarteners are also all indicators of language disorder (see **Figure 1**). These were undifferentiated pronoun case, absent copula or auxiliary, regularization, and absent phrase. Therefore, it

is understandable that S-LPs or educators could confuse this variety with language disorder if they are not aware that these are varietal features. It is crucial that we conduct more research to resolve this potential confusion for educational professionals and avoid over-pathologizing students in the future.

### Limitations

Bigton School provided an authentic environment in which to study the children's linguistic behaviour. However, noise, announcements, and unavoidable interruptions likely contributed to experimental "noise." Also, the methods used to collect language samples varied somewhat. As such, the total number of features may differ from what might have been obtained if the sampling conditions had remained more consistent.

Another limitation may be linguistic. Some may regard present for past as being a conflation of two categories, namely uninflected past tense (e.g., "He **look** there yesterday") and historical present (e.g., "Then this kid **comes** over and looked like she was coming from a party"). Historical present refers to the use of verbs inflected for present tense to code past tense events. The decision to combine these two categories was made because of the difficulty disambiguating them with irregular verbs (Oetting & McDonald, 2001; Wolfram, 1984). For instance, using one of Wolfram's (1984) examples of Pueblo English, the utterance "They all **speak** in Indian when we first started school" appears to be a case of uninflected past tense; "speak" appears to be uninflected irregular past tense because of the context. However, if context had not been provided, and the speaker said, "We all **speak** in Indian," the speaker could have been using historical present to recount an event that occurred in the past. Wolfram suggested that historical present may explain some instances of unmarked past tense and might provide an alternative explanation for uninflected verb tense. Present for past requires more study.

### Suggestions for Culturally Safe Clinical Practice

#### Assessment

It is critically important that educational professionals know that many First Nations children speak an English variety, using grammar that is different from the grammar used by speakers of more standard Canadian English. They should also be aware that not all children use all features that characterize a variety, and the rate at which features are used varies. It is hoped that the inventories included in this manuscript (see **Table 1** to **Table 7**) can be used as a guide to help educational professions identify grammatical features, bearing in mind there will be local differences.

This study has demonstrated that it is possible for educational professionals who are unfamiliar with a particular First Nations English variety to identify features when given clear definitions and a small amount of training. The need for clear definitions speaks to the need for more research to identify and provide operational definitions of grammatical features in other communities. The need for practice underscores the need for more training in post-secondary settings.

Standardized tests may unnecessarily pathologize students who speak varieties. Educational professionals are advised against using them when deciding which students present with disorder within a variety. At the same time, we must not assume that all grammatical differences are varietal and underdiagnose, in our effort to not overpathologize. A test-intervene-test type of Dynamic Assessment may be best practice at present; this includes first an assessment, then an intervention, and then a reevaluation to determine whether the intervention has been at least introductory successful. When it is uncertain whether a child needs support, it is important to obtain the community and family perspective and think about a child in relation to peers of the same ethnicity, age, and experience. If educational professionals are still unsure, they must indicate their uncertainty when reporting results.

#### Teaching

Educational professionals must make sure that the community wants their children to become fluent in the standard. This can be accomplished by speaking to parents and Elders. In British Columbia, one can also consult Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements, which are created by school districts, local Indigenous groups, and the Ministry of Education, so that community members can be equal partners when deciding what their children will learn and be instructed in.

When providing interventions, respectful, evidence-based teaching practices, such as recasting, should be used (Larre, 2009). Recasting, which involves rephrasing the child's utterances to provide a model of standard English rather than correcting them directly, has been an effective approach for African American children (Edwards & Rosin, 2016). Using this approach has an additional benefit. Because recasting is an evidence-based technique for stimulating language development (Nelson et al., 1996), children who present with language disorder within variety will also receive the specialized help they need.

Contrastive analysis and code-switching are also effective approaches (Craig, 2016; Edwards & Rosin,

2016; Johnson et al., 2017; Wheeler & Swords, 2004; Yiakoumetti, 2007). For contrastive analysis, the educator systematically teaches the points of contrast between the two varieties. Code-switching involves teaching the student to “choose the language variety appropriate to the time, place, audience, and communicative purpose” (Wheeler & Swords, 2004, p. 471). For persisting grammar differences, it is suggested that we then provide more individualized supports, such as group or individual instruction.

Finally, those working with First Nations school-aged children should cease using the word “mistake” to describe grammar that characterizes varieties and, instead, use the word “difference.” Characterizing grammatical features as mistakes can have deleterious effects on students who speak varieties (Rickford & Rickford, 1995; Wheeler & Swords, 2004), including many First Nations students (Epstein & Xu, 2003; Toohey, 1986). We must stop overpathologizing grammatical features and the students who use them.

## Summary

This study has provided evidence that at least 23 grammatical features of a First Nations English variety are being used by schoolchildren in northern British Columbia. It represents a first step in learning more about child First Nations Englishes and hopefully charts a course for discovering more about the unique ways of speaking English that have evolved in Canadian communities. More research is critically important. Varieties are complex and require thorough investigation. Each feature may require “50 pages of printed text” to fully describe the history, development, and its current use (Wolfram et al., 2002, p. 60). More research will help us distinguish varietal features from symptoms of language disorder so that we can avoid overpathologizing students. It will help us understand that First Nations Englishes are examples of linguistic diversity that should be celebrated in Canadian classrooms.

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