What the Capitalization of nouns in Early Canadian English may tell us about ‘colonial lag’ theory: methods and problems

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THERE is scarcely anything of so much importance to a community, as a suitable SPELLING BOOK; it excerts an influence peculiarly its own, whether in regard to first impressions, or the formation of character and conduct. The sentiments acquired at school are generally retained through life. (Davidson 1845: iii)

The capitalization of nouns is both a superficial and a fascinating topic: superficial, as it is not a typical area of interest in linguistics and often deemed irrelevant, but also fascinating as discussions about ‘how to write words’ have dominated large stretches of the more recent language history. Put to extremes, orthography has frequently had to serve, in the sense of the quotation above, as an indicator to a person’s character.

Everybody concerned with writing or printing is confronted with questions of capitalization. German speakers probably have the edge over speakers of many other languages in this respect, as questions pertaining to capitalization have not only ruled the discussion of a simplified German orthography for some 30 years, but also most of their school experience. In the English language and its varieties, this issue has played a prominent part in earlier times, about some 250 to 350 years ago, when the discussions of what to write ‘big’ or ‘small’ and when must have been not less thrilling (and superfici-

1 This article is part of a bigger project on Early Ontario English (cf. fn 4). As the first publication of this work-in-progress, it is bound to raise more questions than it may answer but will, it is to be hoped, stimulate further discussion.

2 As a matter of fact, this discussion is much older: nineteenth-century Germanophone philologists generally strictly rejected the extended capitalization in German and used their publications to state an example – in lower case (e.g. Grimm 1826, Schleicher 1866).
cial?) than what we have recently seen in Germany, Switzerland, Austria and the countries with sizeable German-speaking minorities.

1. Capitalization in context

In a Canadian context we may ask a few specific questions that may not be so obvious in other societies where English has had its fair share in communication. It is often stated that colonial societies tend to be linguistically conservative in general (for a diverging view see Görlach 1987) and it has been argued that Canadians, some of them United Empire Loyalists and therefore most loyal to the King, were, to paraphrase Jack Chambers (1998: 253), the ‘conservative of the conservative ones’. Especially in the light of the new nation to the south that had been producing its own national dictionaries and reference tools since 1784 (Finegan 2001: 374, cf. Webster 1787), such conservatism is extralinguistically plausible. However, it remains to be empirically proven if, and to what extent, Canadian English is more conservative than other colonial varieties or British English varieties. Since the capitalization of nouns lends itself very easily to public comment, it is to be expected that linguistic conservatism would certainly be reflected at this level and should therefore be a good test case to see if Canadian speakers of English were more conservative than speakers of other varieties.

The purpose of this paper is to draw a first sketch of capitalization in Canadian English for the earliest period of central Canada, i.e. the time shortly after the American Revolution in 1776, and to see if capitalization meets the expectations as a test case for colonial lag theory. The aim is to produce language internal evidence that allows us to gain further insights into the question whether, and to what extent, a colonial lag existed in early Canadian English. What seems so plausible for extra-linguistics reasons, as outlined above, must, however, be primarily be shown language internally. In order to arrive at meaningful conclusions, we have to compare our data with other varieties. British usage will serve as the backdrop and Osselton (1985) is the point of reference. The Canadian data comes from three genres: diary writing, newspapers, and semi-public letters. All examples used in the presentation in sec-

3 Comparison with historical American data is another way to go, especially since we have early indicators for significant differences in Canadian and American English as early as the 1830s (Bailey 1982: 145f based on Thomas Haliburton’s early Canadian novel from 1836, *The clock-maker, or the sayings and doings of Samuel Slick of Slickville*). Corpora like ARCHER feature components that may serve as a backdrop.
tion 3) are taken from the *Corpus of Early Ontario English*, 1776-1900, which is currently being compiled at the University of Vienna.² Therefore, the claims made are only based on Upper-Canadian (Ontario) material and may not hold true for Lower-Canadian, i.e. Québécois, English or Eastern Canadian varieties.

2. 17⁰⁻ and 18⁰⁻century British English usage

Osselton’s survey (1985) gives us an idea of capitalization in British usage from 1500 to 1800. His survey is based on around 50 randomly chosen prose passages from first editions of London printers, but we do not know what genres were used. The table below is taken from Osselton (1985) and provides the percentages of capitalized initials in words that would not be capitalized by PDE standards:

![Figure 1: Percentage of nouns with initial upper case that would not be capitalized by PDE standards (taken from Osselton 1985: 50)](image)

As Osselton’s diagram shows, we can observe a dramatic decline in capitalization around 1760. This descriptive data is complemented by Osselton with prescriptive rules gleaned from grammars and spelling books between

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² For further information see [http://mailbox.univie.ac.at/stefan.dollinger/can.htm](http://mailbox.univie.ac.at/stefan.dollinger/can.htm), for the corpus design cf. Dollinger (forthc.)
1660 and 1720. He identifies two core rules: therefore, a noun is capitalized if the author or printer either wishes to make a word more ‘prominent’ (rule no. 1), or if it fits a certain semantic ‘category’ (rule no. 2). Thus, during the heyday of extended capitalization between 1660 and 1720, a writer was supposed to capitalize the following semantic categories, which are subsets of rule no. 2.

2a) animate nouns (*Persons, Mathematicians*)
2b) names of area of study or disciplines (*Grammar, Science*)
2c) names of concrete, physical objects (*Book, Leaves*)
2d) abstract nouns occur with capital initial the greater their generality (*judgement* as compared to *Ambition*)

(cf. Osselton 1985: 56)

Further prescriptions were possible, e.g. all house-keeping devices were meant to be capitalized, as one contemporary guide recommended (Osselton 1985: 54-57).

For our Canadian data, especially the categories of ‘animate nouns’ and ‘names of concrete, physical objects’ are of importance, as the other two only rarely occur in our text types. We also see that rule, (2d), focussing around the ‘generality’ of abstract nouns, may at times come very close to the prominence rule. A good deal of uncertainty about what to capitalize and what not seems therefore to have persisted. Even the two core principles of capitalization that were introduced before, ‘word-prominence’ on the one hand, and ‘semantic category’ on the other hand, are no water-tight and clear-cut rules. Some contemporary grammars even paid account and “honest recognition that no set of rules could be fully comprehensive”, declaring the shady zones of capitalization up to the ‘writer’s fancy’ (Osselton 1985: 57).

This linguistic insecurity, however, was ingeniously serviced by all kinds of reference materials, above all spelling books. This most basic type of reference book appeared, just as other imprints, rather late in its distinctly Canadian form. While there were of course more pressing problems in early Canada, spelling books were, besides the obligatory bible, probably the most important books in the communities. Their influence on writers’ capitalization habits may have been considerable, but it seems that quite a number of differ-

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5 In an advertisement in the Upper Canada Gazette, July 27, 1799, p. 4, promoting the opening of a school, however, we read, in accordance with rule (b) that “youth will be boarded and instructed in English, Greek and Latin languages; Writing, Arithmetic, Book keeping and the different branches of the Mathematics”. Please note that rule (2a), animate nouns, is violed in “youth”. 
ent spelling books were in use (cf. Parvin 1965: 16), for some of which Ireland (1979: 81-89) provides a first analysis.

3. Canadian data

The data comes from three different text types: diary, newspaper and semi-official letter writing. As such, the data are not really comparable, as will become clear shortly, but illustrate, with the exception of legal texts, the text types used in early Canada. One purpose here is to illustrate these three linguistic resources, as yet unexploited, and to draw preliminary comparisons to British usage. Even though the data will remain exemplary, it provides us with an indicator of the usage of capitalization in early Canada. In each category one example is discussed in greater detail. The texts are:

♦ diary: Anne Powell’s diary from a journey from Montreal to Detroit, 1789
♦ newspaper: Upper Canada Gazette, or American Oracle, April 18, 1793
♦ semi-official letter: Adam Vrooman’s land petition to the Honorable David Wm. Smith Esq. 1797

Land petitions are, in terms of variation, the most remarkable documents in the Corpus of Early Ontario English and may come close to demonstrate the linguistic knowledge of the everyday person moving to Canada around 1800. After discussing Vrooman’s letter, we shall take a closer look at Anne Powell’s travel diary for a specimen of educated usage in the Canadas, before we will look at Ontario’s oldest newspaper for more standardized usage.

3.1. Adam Vrooman’s petition, 1797

Land petitions are very essential to Canadian history. When during and after the American revolution many colonists of the former British colony fled northwards they were, as loyal subjects of the king, bestowed with land and, in the beginning, even with provisions. Needless to say that sooner rather than later not only loyal subjects migrated northwards, but also people with less honourable intentions than plowing up the land for Britain. The only prerequisite for such land grants was to prove one’s loyalty to the crown and often we find the writer struggling to demonstrate his or her loyalty in the letter. Since Canada’s population saw its first major surge at that time (Chambers 1998: 259-61), the language of those immigrants is particularly interesting for the history of Canadian English. Surprisingly though, no linguistic study has been published on that topic and so I would like to present one example of
what is to be found in the archives. The following letter is a verbatim transcript from microfilm MS-563, Reel 1, text no. 964, from the Archives of Ontario. Some parts of the text, especially the middle section, are almost incomprehensible, but the writer is still literate enough to express his request and explain the rudiments of his case.

Queenstown 25th Jany 1797

Dear

Sir I and my Brather have [Pissanod] the hon-norabile Counsell - if thay see fit to Grant us som small Allowance of Land for our Disceasd Brather Jacob Vrooman Who Was in the Saxoons During the Later War Likewise for our Mother Who Disceased in [Whissilose Whiets] in Knauren by the honorable Ro-bart Hamilton Esq. Sir us it is Wal Knawen and Can Producse Vauses for the Same Singth by Colo Buthan that I have her the meant of Bringin a number of Recrutes in which joind his Magesties forses in the Late War—and have Two Times Eamy year With Latters to be forwared to New York and BransW [xxx xxx] and Latters from thair. and never Got no Rason Since for the Same nor Can I be alowed as Much Lands as Thaes that have fought against me, Sir as I knaw that Lands from Latters Been Granted to Parsons for thair Disceased frinds Sir Since your [han-] is and of the Members of Counsccell and Knaw you take as a father to the Settlement Bay your will do Som thing in my favour .... ....... and Will for Ever obledge .......

Sir you Humble Sarvent

Adam Vrooman

to the Honorable

David Wm. Smith Esq.

Vrooman’s land petition is of interest to the linguist not only for its features pertaining to capitalization, which will, however, be the only feature considered here. Disregarding proper names and the beginning of sentences,

6 Letters and words in [ ] are the result of ‘guesswork’, while [xxx] stands for a word that could not be deciphered at all.
we find 16 capitalized words in the text, of which five are verbs (to Grant, Was, Knawen, Can, Produse), three are adverbs (During, Likewise, Wal ‘well’), one is an adjective (Disceased), and a mere six are nouns (Brather, Counsell, Allowance, Land, Later Water, Mother), which means that less than 50% of all capitalized words are nouns. We do not know where Vrooman acquired his writing skills, he might have been taught in Britain or even have Dutch as a first language, judging from his name.

However, if we take this piece of writing as an indicator of literacy at the time, it illustrates Parvin’s (1965: 16) thesis that teachers had to deal with different problems than capitalization. Although some 18th century grammars recommend to capitalize emphasized words regardless of parts of speech (Osselton 1985: 54 on Anne Fisher’s (1750) and Thomas Dilworth’s (1751) grammars), in Vrooman’s case, chaos prevails. Vrooman does not seem to have any concept about how to use upper case, be it for means of emphasis or some other principle and so his patterns do not make much sense.

Even with his limited writing skills, however, he felt confident enough to write to the Upper Canadian Council and tried to explain a rather complex situation, but clearly he was anything but a frequent writer. Before 1800, literacy was still a privilege of the higher social classes (cf. Bailey 1996: 23). At that time, most Canadians had other worries than proper spelling. If someone from the lower social ranks like soldiers, small scale farmers and settlers were able to read and write at all, his or her competence may have been similar to Vrooman’s level of literacy.

In terms of capitalization, however, his letter is an interesting example of Canadian usage at that time, but it cannot really serve our needs. In a study, where we hope to gain access to people’s deliberate choices of upper and lower case, we would do better to rule out Vrooman’s text.

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7 There is, of course, a chance that Vrooman (and in fact all others that we consider authors) had the letter written by someone else. If this was the case, Vrooman had the letter also signed by his scribe, which is possible, if not very likely. After all, Vrooman was a soldier and was therefore probably able to sign his name. Moreover, since the quality of the writing is rather bad, the potential writer would have been anything but a professional writer. Therefore, we may surmise, the potential scribe would most likely have come from a similar social background than Vrooman himself, being possibly one of his siblings or a fellow soldier. At least socially, we are not that far off.
3.2. Why not to use handwritten texts

Despite the reasons to exclude letters like Vrooman’s in studies on capitalization, there are, however, more fundamental reasons why handwritten texts should be excluded on the whole. Henry Widdowson has pointed out in the discussion of an earlier version of this paper that the question of capitalization would probably have to be dealt with completely differently for handwritten texts than for imprints. In manuscripts, and a good deal of early Canadian data is handwritten material, it may as well be that there is no dichotomous system of upper and lower case forms for every grapheme. On the contrary, the writer may merely have one form for a certain letter in his/her allographic inventory.

Let me illustrate this briefly. The following is an excerpt from Maragaret Lessiel’s letter to the Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada, dating 12th January 1836 (Archives of Ontario, MS-563 Reel 14, No. 13473), followed by a transcription:

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Sir, my Husband Michael Lessiel was a Soldier in his Majesty's 27th Regiment of foot out of which [Ricd.] he obtained the pention 6[.]P day he Served in the victories in I[red]land, - he went to America about four years 1/2 ago. he Sold out his pention
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If we concentrate on word-initial ‘s-‘ (in boldface), we see the following instances: the first word, ‘Sir’, ‘Soldier’ in the second line, in the fourth line
‘Serv’d’, (or ‘serv’d’?), in the sixth ‘Sold’, (or ‘sold’?). If we take a closer look, we also find that the ‘s’ in served and sold are neither different in shape nor in size so that it seems likely that Mrs. Lessiel had only one form, one allograph for the grapheme ‘S’ in word-initial position, i.e. some kind of ‘case-neutral s’-, in her handwritten inventory. While a writer could do just fine with only one allograph for a certain letter, the printer had to make a choice. This hypothesis is further backed by the problems encountered with the transcription of early manuscripts for the Corpus of Early Ontario English. In the earlier two periods, i.e. 1776-1824, it has sometimes been impossible to decide whether a letter is in upper or lower case, and there may be a good reason for that.

We may conclude that not only do we need more educated writers than Vrooman for a study of capitalization, but we should also rule out all manuscripts for the reasons illustrated. The next two examples, however, should fulfill these requirements. The first is a piece of a member of the Canadian social elite at that time. Her capitalization is expected to be more regularized and more consciously applied and stands as such in stark contrast to Vrooman’s usage. This example will be complemented by a short passage from an early Ontario newspaper. These data, taken together, should allow us to hypothesize about the proposed Canadian colonial lag.

3.3. Anne Powell’s diary, 1789

In 1789 William Dummer Powell was appointed “First Judge” of the newly established District of Hesse, the western tip of what is now south-western Ontario. For that reason Judge Powell travelled from Montreal to Detroit, which by then still belonged to Canada. His sister Anne was ‘part of the household’ and travelled with him. Anne had originally intended to keep a diary while travelling by boat, but soon she became “aware of the difficulties attending the journey” (Powell 1789: 1), and left it [her journal] wholly alone and trusted to [her] memory (which never deserved such a compliment) for recollecting whatever was worth communication (Powell 1789: 1)

8 This, on the other hand, brings in the printers and with them other factors that would need to be considered. In the light of Lessiel’s example, it seems plausible that a rigid dichotomy of upper and lower case is – initially - less the result of the influence of spelling books than of the spread of printing and of printers’ conventions, but this is a question that would have to be addressed separately.
The quotes are taken from a typescript by William R. Riddell for which the typist has “personally seen to it that the original orthography is preserved in the copy” (Riddell: preparatory note), while the current whereabouts of the original are unknown. We can see from a few phrases that Anne was a writer from the other end of the social scale than Vrooman:

We left Montreal on the 11th of May with a large party of our friends who paid us the compliment of seeing us the first Stage where we took a farewell dinner and all the party except Mr. Clarke left us. It was a melancholy parting here. I was the person least interested in it, and partook of it more from sympathy than any real sorrow I felt, all whom I was much attach'd to were going with me, but on those occasions crying is catching and I took the infection. Yet I felt melancholy, for tho' I had no particular friendships, I had received many civilities from the people of Montreal and I felt a general regret at bidding them adieu.

(The beginning of Anne Powell’s diary)

We need to ask for whom Anne intended to record her ‘communication’. The publication of diaries and journals was unthinkable at the time in Canada, even the more so for women. As no other writings of Anne seem to exist, we may assume that Anne did not have the public in mind as a recipient, but the diary was probably only for herself, or at the most meant for her descendants. Riddell reports that her manuscript is “beautifully written, clear and legible, certainly the productio[n] of a well educated and intelligent woman”. Anne took great care putting down her experiences which provides some reason to assume that she did not adapt her spelling to this more private occasion (cf. Osselton 1984: 124), allowing us to compare her orthography to texts from more public domains.9

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9 During the discussion of this article, doubts were voiced against the idea of adapting one’s spelling for more private occasions. Notions like “Who would do this?” and the idea that spelling is “deeply ingrained” are both plausible statements, but probably more appropriate for 20th century linguistic behaviour. These ideas stand in contrast to the dichotomy of informal and formal spelling (Osselton 1963). There are indicators that after 1755 dictionaries were bought for “the correction of one’s private spelling” (Osselton 1963: 274) and that by the mid-1700s a ‘pedantic’ and a ‘polite’ orthography were in use, i.e. public and private. Before the background of changing norms in the wake of Johnson’s dictionary this finding seems highly plausible, at least for the highly educated.
3.3.1. Capitalization: British and Canadian

If we take a look at the first three of the extant 16 pages, the following picture emerges. In contrast to Vrooman’s letter, we find only capitalized nouns in Powell’s diary. There are 190\(^{10}\) nouns, of which we find 148 types:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>nouns - tokens:</th>
<th>nouns – types:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>53 UC</td>
<td>28 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>137 LC</td>
<td>72 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37 UC</td>
<td>25 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>111 LC</td>
<td>75 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>148</td>
<td>100 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the whole, we find in 25% of all nouns that have an upper case initial letter, as opposed to 0%\(^{11}\) for 1790 and a maximum of around 10% after 1776 in the British data (cp. Figure 1). The Canadian 28%, resp. 25%, would correspond to a British usage of not later than around 1760, but unfortunately, figure (1) spans too broad a period to derive a more precise comparison. Nevertheless, the comparison suggests that hypotheses about a Canadian linguistic conservatism do apply for the late 18\(^{\text{th}}\) century.

At the micro level, the text reveals certain interesting examples. Thus, we find reference to a ‘carriage’ in lower case, while the more specific type of carriage, a ‘Calash’ < Fr. calèche, is always spelt with a capitalized initial letter. The same applies to the word ‘peace’, that is in lower case when referred to in general, but capitalized, when it is talked about the ‘Peace’, referring to the peace treaty of 1783 that marked the end of the American Revolutionary War. Therefore, Powell uses capitalization as a kind of definiteness marker, similar to the use of the definite article. This is carried out pretty consistently, but in other areas there are some examples of what may be termed free variation that create some problems for Osselton’s rules. We find the following spellings, relativizing the animate noun rule (2a):

\(^{10}\) Excluded were proper nouns (e.g. Montreal, Detroit, May, also excluding military ranks – Major, Captn etc.) and the pronoun ‘I’, which is always capitalized; compounds were (e.g. farewell dinner) counted as one occurrence.

\(^{11}\) This is a result of Osselton’s data. It should be easy, though, to produce BE texts from 1790 that did not capitalize all nouns.
Variation of initial letter: animate nouns

| Man – man | sister – Sister |
| girls – Ladies | friend, friends – Parents |
| women – Wife |

These word pairs illustrate nicely that animate nouns appear both with a capitalized initial letter and a small letter in the diary, where no different meaning can be inferred. Since Osselton’s rule (2a) is certainly violated here, e.g. animate nouns (sister – Sister), we can only apply his prominence rule (1). The three remaining pairs are interesting in this respect: while ‘girls’ is written with a small initial, ‘Ladies’ is capitalized. If we take the last two examples, we may hypothesize that the capitalized nouns are somehow ‘more important’ or ‘higher valued’ than the ones on the left. The interpretation may be as follows: a girl does not have the social prestige as a lady does and friends are not one’s social superior, whereas one’s parents are. While this interpretation is possible for late 18th century Canada, it is highly speculative and may also be explained in terms of definiteness, e.g. *her* Parents, *his* fellow’s wife.12

### 3.3.2. Digging deeper: Powell’s use of MAN

We have seen that while Osselton’s semantic category rule (2) does not hold in Powell’s data, his prominence rule may pass, even though it is almost impossible to falsify and better concepts may apply. In this sense, we have not gained very much, but a more thorough analysis may add some clarity. Let us then take a more detailed look at one example, at Powell’s use of the word ‘man’ (pp. 1-3), in greater detail:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anne Powell’s use of MAN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>capitalized initial</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“and has been 5 years married to a Man who is old” (Powell: 3)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

12 The last three examples may also be explained in terms of ‘definiteness’.
Indians as they approach'd us. [...] One man call'd to mind some of Homer's finest heroes.” (Powell: 11)
- “he spoke English with propriety and return'd all the compliments that were paid him with ease and politeness. As he was not only the handsomest but the best drest man I saw” (Powell: 12)
- “One old man diverted me extremely” (Powell: 13)

We have one occurrence of ‘Man’, while ‘man’ occurs seven times and therefore violates the animate noun rule more often than it meets it. If we take a look at the example of ‘Man’, with capitalized initial, we may argue that Powell could hardly stress the fact that the poor woman was married to a ‘Man’, since this was clearly nothing special, and therefore violates the prominence rule as well.

Let us then try to find another principle for the single instance in the left column. One possibility is that capitalization is influenced by the grammatical construction a certain word occurs in. It may be that ‘Man’ is capitalized because a relative clause refers to it. This would support Osselton’s emphasis theory in a different way: she was not married to any man, but an old one. Anne Powell might have tried to emphasize her statement in this grammatically more sophisticated way. However, the first example on the right shows that this principle, if it applies at all, is at least not carried out consistently: “We breakfasted at the house of a man who keeps the Lock” is the exact same construction than on the left side of the table, but this time with lower case ‘man’. That capitalization is used as a definiteness marker, another possibility, is also confronted with counter evidence: in the penultimate example of ‘man’ we see that the lower case is also used where one would expect upper case as a definiteness marker, denoting a certain person. Here, the phrase ‘the best drest man I saw’ is also referring to a person mentioned in the text before.

To sum up, we have not found a guiding principle for Powell’s use of capitalization. Despite an emotional difference of the sentence on the left in comparison to the first sentence on the right, we may wonder why Powell chose to capitalize one word but not the other. We are at a loss here: Powell might have emphasized something, but we do not know exactly what and why.

So far we have shown that Osselton’s semantic category rule (‘animate rule’) is not corroborated by the data, and his prominence rule is at best not entirely contradicted. However, since the latter is so general, we may not be in the position to refute it completely. As the discussion of Powell’s use of MAN should have shown, we have little more than mere conjecture. We may
therefore tentatively conclude, backed by this mini-survey, that Osselton’s semantic category rule (2) and possibly also his prominence rule are not borne out in the Canadian data. It remains to be shown if, and to what extent this is a specifically Canadian feature and if it is part of the proposed ‘colonial lag’, for which we found some indicator in section 3.3.1.

Questions like these need to be addressed by studies based on more comprehensive data. Osselton (1985: 49) refers to his data as “some fifty randomly chosen prose passages from first editions of London printers”, but we do not know what kinds of prose he chose. Anne Powell’s pages are prose, no doubt, but they were not meant for publication, although they seem to be written in public style. In the case of early Canadian newspapers this was of course different. Let us then take a look at the usage of capitalization in this earliest type of imprint from Ontario and see if the results from Powell’s text are borne out. Newspapers, after all, clearly belong to the public sphere where we can rule out interference from the private domain.

3.4. Upper Canada Gazette, April 18, 1793

Newspapers were among the first Canadian imprints. Before 1826, when Canada got its first paper mill (Stabile 2002: 271), all printing was a financially risky endeavour due to a high paper price, but the need for shared information enabled a small central Canadian newspaper culture to grow in the 1790s. Here, we are dealing with public texts and due to the lack of Canadian imprints in book form at that time this kind of data provides the best basis for a comparison with Osselton’s study.

The *Upper Canada Gazette*, in its early years published with the subtitle *American Journal*, was Ontario’s first newspaper that drew, like other early Canadian papers, heavily on governmental support (Burant 1985: 1483). As such, many proclamations and parliamentary speeches, or rather their summaries, were printed to inform the civil servants and the literate public. A good part of these early newspapers are reprints from other imprints for which it is very likely that the printers, working with the mirror image of the texts, did not bother to correct their colleagues’ usage (Juliana Stabile: personal communication). In our particular newspaper from April 18, 1793, we can find evidence for this practice: Lieutenant Governor John Graves Simcoe’s proclamation, surely first printed in this newspaper, features a considerable amount of upper case initials. The reprints of the King’s address to the (British) House of Parliament and some extracts of a Philadelphia newspaper, on the other hand, are more or less already set in PDE conventions, whereas a
following extract from the Quebec Gazette is set strikingly different, featuring many upper case initials. Since texts from the same genre, such as political news from Philadelphia on the one hand and Québec on the other, are printed with different conventions, the differences in capitalization cannot be the result of different text types, indicating the existence of specifically Canadian printing conventions on capitalization.

Towards the end of the papers, which often featured only one sheet of four pages for a good portion of the early times, we find occasional advertisements, some local news and notices. These local notices were either first written by hand and then set, or, if the message was short, the printer may have set the types directly from dictation. In either case, the printer had to choose, between upper or lower case characters and as such we have evidence of the printer’s concept of capitalization. These cases of more local provenance provide a window on the printing conventions of a certain shop and consequently a certain area. In the following, I would like to provide an example from these notices (p. 4):

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TO THE PUBLIC.
THE EDITOR of this News Paper, respectfully informs the Public, that the flattering prospect which he has of an extensive sale for his new undertaking, has enabled him to augment the size originally proposed from a Demy Quarto to a Folio.

The encouragement he has met, will call forth every exertion he is master of, so as to render the paper useful entertaining and instructive, he will be very happy in being favored with such communications as may contribute to the information of the public, from those who shall be disposed to assist him, and in particular shall be highly flattered in becoming the Vehicle of Intelligence in this growing Province, of whatever may tend to its internal benefit and common advantage. In order to preserve the Veracity of his paper, which will be requisite that all transactions of a domestic nature, such as Deaths, Marriages, &c. be communicated under real signatures.

The price of this Gazette, will be Three Dollars per Annum. All advertisements inserted in it and not exceeding 12 lines will pay 4s. Quebec Currency, and
for every additional length a portionable price.

Orders, for Letter Press Printing shall be executed with neatness dispatch and attention, and on the most reasonable terms.

Counting the words in upper and lower case, we find 14 capitalized words, all of them nouns, with the exception of ‘Three’, which determines ‘Dollars’:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>capitalized words (14):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demy Quarto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Folio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehicle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Province</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veracity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deaths, Marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gazette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Dollars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quebec Currency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter Press Printing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(= compound)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On the other hand, 22 nouns with small initials are found in the text. If we complement this example with the other seven notices from that paper, we arrive at the following figures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>nouns - tokens:</th>
<th>nouns – types:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49 UC 45 %</td>
<td>47 UC 45 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61 LC 55 %</td>
<td>57 LC 55 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>110 100 %</td>
<td>104 100 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the notices of this particular issue, 55 % of all nouns that would be in lower case by today’s standards are capitalized. That the ever prevalent uncertainty existed here as well is shown in the use of ‘public’ and ‘paper’, which are found intermingled with their capitalized instantiations. If we refer back to

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13 ‘Orders’ at beginning of line excluded.
Osselton’s figure (1), this would again, if one were to assume a somewhat linear decrease, roughly correspond to British usage of around 1760. However, Osselton’s figure can only serve as a vague indicator, since its scale, spanning three hundred years, does not allow for a closer analysis. While the data are comparable in terms of their use in public domains (newspapers vs. books), it needs to be added that a comparison of newspaper notices with their British counterparts would be needed to derive stronger claims.

4. Language internal and external evidence

We have seen in the discussion that the evidence for a colonial lag is suggested by the data, but we also said that this is what has been said about Canadian English for some time. However, we not only produced some language internal evidence in favour of the theory, but also, I fear, some ambiguity. By trying to ‘date’ the colonial lag, we may have opened Pandora’s box. If one were to base statements of linguistic conservatism on historical facts, that is language externally, one usually does not ask the question how conservative a certain linguistic behaviour is. With our language internal data we seem to have arrived at some more questions, for which neither language internal data nor language external facts can provide us with answers. Let me illustrate this: So far, we have taken our percentages and put them on Osselton’s graph, where we found some corresponding percentage at a certain time. We started in 1790, went back in time on the x-axis, and stopped at the first corresponding percentage, which was, due to the steep decline, both times around 1760. This is where the problem begins: If we take a look at Figure (2), which is still Osselton’s graph, but now adapted to illustrate this point, we see the problem more clearly.

In terms of the percentages of nouns capitalized (28% and 55%), the Canadian usage would either compare with a usage of around 1760, as suggested before, or to some earlier periods (cf. the points of intersection of the horizontal lines, the upper line for newspapers, the lower one Powell’s diary). This result reminds us a bit of the quadratic equations in secondary school: either of two solutions produces a methodologically proper result, in the case of newspaper usage (upper line) a time lag of either 30 years (for 1760) or some 140 years (for 1650) applies. Like in the days of math classes, we would need to look for another point of reference, and the prescriptive rules that Osselton identified should help us to decide whether 30 or 140 years are the appropriate solution.
We have seen that we could not corroborate Osselton’s two principles in our Canadian texts. The rejection of Osselton’s core rules would imply that Canadian usage does not correspond to British usage between 1660 and 1720, as the principles were gleaned from reference texts from that period. Unfortunately, we are in trouble here: If we were to go by the newspaper data only, we could argue that a level of 55% is reached around 1650 and 1760 (upper horizontal line). Since the earlier cut-off point of 1650 is relatively close to 1660, when Osselton’s rules apply first and which is not the case on the other end of the spectrum (1720 vs. 1760), we would opt for the later point of reference, i.e. 1760.

Let us assume that we would let the comparison of our prescriptive rules with our descriptive data pass for now, our method is bound to fly out the window with Anne Powell’s data: according to our interpolation line, Powell’s use of capitalization is equivalent to the percentages in British usage of around 1580 and 1760, but the data reaches the level again around 1625, providing us with not one, but two much earlier reference points of comparable usage between British and Canadian data. Osselton’s rules cannot be applied
here, and we have no means to opt for either of the three dates. One is tempted to disregard the two earlier dates of 1580 and 1625 as being a bit too far off – after all, Ontario was settled in the 1780s and 1790s and the mathematical principle applied here is a kind of slippery slope. But on the whole it would be thinkable that Canadian loyalists, coming from the newly founded U.S. of A., might have preserved a much older usage in some restricted linguistic area like capitalization. Admittedly, 1580 seems a bit far fetched, but how can we decide whether Canadian usage corresponds either to British usage from 1760, 1650 or 1625? Language external reasoning may help here only partly, based on the notion that people who moved to Canada grew up in the 1760s. But, in the end, we have no clear-cut principle to rule out the other dates, bearing in mind that we are dealing with a very limited area of linguistic behaviour that would not affect comprehension.

5. Conclusion

We have gained some tentative evidence in favour of the colonial lag theory. It seems as if Canadians (or at least Canadian printers) were linguistically conservative with their more frequent application of upper case initials. However, our evidence is ambiguous as to the dating of the lag, allowing us to only tentatively produce two dimensions of the time lag, leaving us either with a lag of around 150 years on the one hand, or a mere 30 years on the other hand. If a lag existed on other linguistic levels to a similar degree, we could rule out the earlier dates on the basis of the documented changes in phonology and on other levels. If the phenomenon was more or less uniform on all levels, we would opt for a shorter time lag, i.e. that Canadian usage of the 1790s roughly corresponds to British usage from around 1760. If, however, different linguistic levels were affected by different time lags, e.g. pronunciation was less affected than the usage of capitalization on grounds so that mutual intelligibility with English speakers from elsewhere was preserved, we have no way to tell how far behind capitalization was in the Canadas: 1760, 1650 or 1625? Or even 1580? We wouldn’t know.

Another limitation of the type of survey presented here is that it is merely based on a quantitative comparison of overall percentages of capitalization. We can therefore say little about the concrete usage of capitalization in early Canadian English, except for that it differed from British usage from around 1700 (1660-1720) and that the notion of definiteness seems to have been one principle to guide the use of upper case. However, it needs again to be stressed that all that could be done in this working paper was to raise and il-
Illustrate a number of issues. The results, therefore, have to be treated cautiously. The tentative British reference point of around 1760, however, would give us a relatively small lag of not even two generations, which means that anything but a comprehensive study would not provide us with the proper data to clarify this question in a satisfactory manner. Osselton’s study covers too big of a time-frame for our purposes so that first we would need to establish better reference points for British, but also American, data, covering the 18th century in greater detail.

I hope to have shown that these kinds of comparison promise, despite their limitations, highly interesting results. More comprehensive studies should be able to empirically not only verify, specify or even falsify colonial lag theory, but also date the time lag more precisely and it is to be hoped that the Corpus of Early Ontario English will facilitate this task.

References


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Riddell, William R. see Powell (1789).

