

Contesting meaning: *Newfie* and the politics of ethnic labelling¹

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The ethnic label *Newfie* is a site of ideological dispute: for some, it is simply an informal term for residents and expatriates of the Canadian province of Newfoundland, for others it may function as an in-group term of solidarity which takes on negative connotations when used by non-Newfoundlanders, and for still others it is the equivalent of a racial slur. In this study we first trace the history of the term, a fairly recent innovation. We then examine present-day attitudes as expressed in (provincial and national) media discourse and in self-report data. We argue that debate over *Newfie* is part of a larger ideological struggle concerning the commodification of an 'invented' Newfoundland culture, which itself must be understood in terms of Newfoundland's socio-economic position as Canada's poorest province. Finally, we compare the *Newfie* case to other instances of contested group labelling.

KEYWORDS: Ethnic labels, ethnic identity, language attitudes, discourse analysis, Newfoundland

INTRODUCTION

The importance of ethnic labels to the constitution of identity is evidenced in debates in the late 1980s and in the 1990s over changing terms of self-reference for (in Baugh's 1991 term) American slave descendants, as *African American* has come to replace *Black* as the term of choice (cf. Baugh 1991; Larkey, Hecht and Martin 1993; Smitherman 1991, 1998). This last decade has also seen considerable controversy over the designation of sports teams and team mascots which negatively portray indigenous peoples, among them such U.S. baseball team labels as the Cleveland Indians and the Atlanta Braves (cf. Neussel 1994 for a compendium of objectionable designations).² In this article we focus on the ideological struggle over the group label *Newfie*, used to refer to residents and expatriates of the Canadian province of Newfoundland, a struggle which has been played out in Newfoundland (and to some extent mainland Canadian) media over the past several years. Like many ethnic labels, the term *Newfie* in effect serves as a vehicle of social marginalization. Yet, as we show, even among ingroup members its meanings are complex.

Within Canada, Newfoundlanders constitute a minority group which is marked in a number of ways: socioeconomically, linguistically and culturally. As an impecunious member of the British Empire which in 1949 became Canada's newest and poorest province, Newfoundland, along with its residents, has never enjoyed high status. Many residents of the province are well aware of mainland Canadian stereotypes of Newfoundlanders, and indeed Atlantic Canadians more generally, as 'welfare bums,' a term used by the current premier of the western Canadian province of Alberta, Ralph Klein, during his tenure as mayor of Calgary in the 1980s. Since Confederation with Canada and the collapse of the traditional employment source, the fishery, vast numbers of Newfoundlanders have been forced to leave the province in search of work, often in plants and factories in urban centers located in prosperous areas of the Canadian mainland. As one of the characters in *Waiting for Time*, a recent novel by Newfoundland writer Bernice Morgan, declares, Newfoundlanders are 'the country's greatest reserve labour pool – Canada's Okies' (Morgan 1994: 208, cited by Byrne 1999). In the province itself, there is a clear sense of isolation from the Canadian mainstream, and strong feelings of regional solidarity.

The distinct identity of the province is reinforced by its linguistic characteristics. Unlike much of central mainland Canada, whose original English-speaking settlers were post-revolutionary migrants from the American colonies to the south, and which subsequently underwent waves of multiethnic in-migration, Newfoundland was settled almost exclusively by working-class West Country English and southern Irish migrants, from which sources it derives its readily-identifiable accent. Pringle (1985) suggests that Newfoundland English is one of three stereotyped accents in Canada: pronunciation of interdental fricatives as alveolar stops, pronunciation of the 'oy' diphthong with a fronted onset and 'a vague Irish cast to the vowels . . . are sufficient to suggest to English Canadians that the speaker being represented is an uneducated fisherman from a Newfoundland outpost' (1985: 186). In mainland Canada, distinctive Newfoundland accents are typically associated with laziness and stupidity. In a recent study of attitudes toward a number of regional Canadian accents (McKinnie and Dailey-O'Cain in press), Newfoundland English was especially singled out as negative on both 'correctness' and 'pleasantness' ratings by residents of Ontario and Alberta, Canada's most wealthy provinces. This finding was also reflected in respondents' use of the labels 'drawl,' 'Newfie talk' and 'extremely fast lower class' to refer to the variety. Likewise, a negative evaluation of Newfoundlanders in terms of social and educational status, as well as speech characteristics (pronunciation, vocabulary and fluency), emerged from an earlier attitudinal study in the neighbouring Canadian province of Nova Scotia (Edwards and Jacobsen 1987).³

In their focus on multilingualism and multiculturalism, contemporary treatments of ethnicity in Canada (e.g. Berry and Laponce 1994) typically make no mention of Newfoundlanders as a distinct ethnic group. Yet, following contemporary research on ethnicity, we define Newfoundlanders as an ethnic

group, not on the basis of background or geography, but rather, on emic grounds. Giles and Coupland (1991: 106) define an ethnic unit as comprising: 'those individuals who say they belong to ethnic group A rather than ethnic group B, are willing to be treated as A rather than B, allow their behaviour to be interpreted and judged as A's and not B's, and have shared systems of symbols and meanings, as in norms and rules for conduct, normatively associated with community A.' Larkey, Hecht and Martin (1993: 302) argue that group labels play an important role in constructing identity as they 'express a meaningful identity, and identity may be formed and experienced through socially available meanings expressed as labels.'

The label *Newfie* – one created and imposed from without – serves as a highly salient marker of a particular stereotype of Newfoundland identity, and in turn plays a role in reinforcing the (socioeconomic) marginalization of Newfoundlanders. However, this stereotype is strongly contested. Our research reveals three general attitudes to the label. While some Newfoundlanders are 'proud to be Newfies,' others recognize that the term may be used derogatorily in some contexts but argue that in other contexts it functions as a term of solidarity. Still others consider the label the equivalent of a racial slur.

In this article we first trace the history of *Newfie* as an instance of outgroup labelling, from its earliest attestations in the late 1930s and early 1940s, when attitudes of Newfoundlanders themselves towards the term were largely negative, through to the current more complex situation. The present-day struggle is documented through use of *Newfie* in media discourse and through self-report data. We associate the ideological dispute with differing attitudes towards the commodification of Newfoundland culture, in particular an 'invented' Newfoundland culture, dating from the 1960s. *Newfie* has become strongly associated with this 'invented' culture, and with the particular stereotype of the province's residents and expatriates it invokes. In the final section of the paper we offer explanations as to why people position themselves differently regarding such representations.

THE ORIGINS OF NEWFIE

The term *Newfie* appears to be a fairly recent innovation. According to Narváez (1986: 58), the first recorded public use of the diminutive was in 1938, in a radio narrative in which an American is represented as using the term as a slur. The narrative, a tall tale, was told by future premier Joseph R. Smallwood during his then-popular Newfoundland radio broadcast *The Barrelman*. The term was used in a lying competition, in which a New Yorker talks of Americans' superior building skills, and remarks to a Newfoundlander, 'Nothin' like that in your country, eh Newfie?'

Newfie was attested in 1943 by *The American Thesaurus of Slang* (Berrey and Van Den Bark 1962), where it is listed as referring to Newfoundland (1962: 48, 735), a Newfoundland resident (346), a Newfoundland seaman (733), a

Newfoundland fisherman (734) and a Newfoundland ship (739).⁴ The *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* (Lighter 1997) likewise traces the term to the early 1940s. In neither of these publications is there any commentary as to connotation.

The Dictionary of Newfoundland English (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1982) quotes from the novel *The Caribou Hut: The Story of a Newfoundland Hostel* by noted Newfoundland novelist Margaret Duley, who provides a clear description of attitudes toward the term during World War II (Duley 1949: 11):

1. At first the Newfoundland civilian was stunned. He had always had his country and his roads to himself. He could dawdle, and enjoy both in the spirit of undisputed ownership. Now he felt dispossessed, crowded on his own streets, mowed down by the ever increasing numbers of dun-coloured army vehicles. The strangers were strutting, becoming the 'big shots.' They looked down their noses at the natives . . . They began to call the townfolk 'the Newfies' and like Queen Victoria, the Newfoundlanders were not amused.

The 'strangers' referred to are British, American and Canadian military personnel stationed in Newfoundland during the war. In fact, Newfoundlanders in their 70s and 80s with whom we have discussed this issue mention that the term was introduced by such military personnel and suggest that *Newfie* is not a term they identify with or would be likely to use themselves. Additional evidence that Newfoundlanders of the period objected to the label comes from an Associated Press dispatch of October 13, 1948, which advocated use of the term *Newlander* because residents objected to both *Newf* and *Newfie* (Dickson 1997: 134).⁵

In short, as an outgroup-invented rather than self-generated ethnic label, *Newfie* seems to have been resented from its inception by a not inconsiderable segment of the Newfoundland population.⁶ As we shall see below, the label has become the source of extensive public debate since its association with a particular stereotype of Newfoundlanders.

NEWFIE AND NEWFIE-ISM

The stereotype of the 'goofy Newfie,' the butt of the 'Newfie joke,' appeared not long after Newfoundland became a province of Canada in 1949. Pringle (1985: 186) notes that '[i]n Canadian popular culture, "the Newfie" occupies the role attributed to "Polacks" in American culture at the same level – Polish jokes which find their way to English Canada are recounted as "Newfie jokes".' Yet this stereotype is at odds with Newfoundlanders' pre-Confederation images of themselves as a people with a long history of survival against all odds, and of outsiders' images of Newfoundlanders as 'simple' fisher folk (cf. Overton 1996). As Byrne (1997: 238) succinctly puts it, '[w]hat began to emerge to replace the traditional culture of Newfoundland [in the minds of outsiders] was "Newfieland" peopled by "Newfies" – a place out of step with

time, inhabited by the numskull figure of the "Newfie" joke, too stupid to realize his own ineptitude and alien status vis-à-vis mainstream North American society, but eternally happy, embarrassingly hospitable, and full of fun, deferential to his betters (read any non-Newfoundlander), but fiercely proud of his homeland and his way of life.'

Byrne goes on to note that Newfoundland's own tourist industry actively promoted this image in the post-Confederation period, a point reinforced by Overton (1980, 1996). For instance, for a number of years in the 1960s and early 1970s, Newfoundland automobile license plates contained the slogan 'Canada's Happy Province' and tourist literature promulgated the image of the simple but happy Newfoundland fisher. 'Newfie joke' books, published in Newfoundland by various entrepreneurs, have abounded since the 1960s, and serve to reproduce and reinforce this stereotype. Newfie jokes are also widely disseminated via the internet. A June 2000 internet search using the search engine Google yielded more than 6000 hits for *Newfie*; one third of a representative sampling of these (excluding references to Newfoundland dogs, often called Newfies) were devoted to Newfie jokes.

Full-fledged post-Confederation *Newfie*-ism involved as well the manufacture of a new Newfoundland tradition: the screech-in.⁷ Cheap Jamaican rum, brought to Newfoundland from Jamaica and bottled there, had become popular with visiting military personnel during World War II and was given the name 'Screech.' Drinking screech became part of the post-Confederation tourist experience. An invented tradition (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), legitimized as part of a publicity campaign by the Newfoundland Liquor Control Board, the screech-in is a ceremony during which outsiders become honorary Newfoundlanders by drinking screech, kissing a codfish, and taking part in dialogue with a presiding officer, the chief 'Screecher' (who is dressed in 'traditional' Newfoundland fisher garb), in an exaggerated Newfoundland accent. The tourist receives a certificate at the end attesting to his/her status as an honorary *Newfie*. The screech-in is mounted for visitors in ceremonies throughout the province during the summer months, e.g. on tour boats, at conventions and in pubs. Some expatriate Newfoundlanders even allow visitors to their internet websites to participate in virtual screech-ins, complete with an on-line certificate making them honorary *Newfies*.

The commodification of an invented Newfoundland culture also involves a variety of *Newfie* tourist items: many shops in the province catering to tourists are flooded with souvenirs such as the *Newfie* mug (the handle is inside), the *Newfie* rolling pin (square), the *Newfie* flashlight (a box of matches and a clothespin glued to a block of wood), etc. 'Proud to be a Newfie' tee-shirts and license plates appear, at least at first glance, to be aimed at the more specialized market of the visiting expatriate, a subgroup of Newfoundlanders to which we will return below, along with the 'honorary Newfies' who visit the province.

NEWFIE AS OUTGROUP LABELLING

In an episode of the American situation comedy *Ellen*, aired on January 22, 1997, a character playing a comedian fails to entertain a comedy club audience and, to get them to laugh, says, '[i]t's true. Those Newfies are stupid.' The comedian invokes the stereotype of the 'stupid Newfie,' a stereotype which, as we have seen, appeared not long after Newfoundland became a province of Canada in 1949. This remark prompted a barrage of complaints by Newfoundlanders to the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council and the expression of considerable outrage in Newfoundland media, to the point that it was still being discussed on July 24, 1998, when Glenn Tilley, the host of the local CBC television dinner-time news hour *Here and Now*, summed up the issue as follows: '[a] lot of Newfoundlanders find the term Newfie in and of itself offensive.'⁸

A second incident which drew national attention to the issue involves one of Newfoundland's (and indeed Canada's) most popular musical groups, *Great Big Sea*, and their refusal to accept the appellation. The 'People' section of *Macleans*, a major Canadian newsmagazine, had a short piece in the September 1997 issue marking the release of the group's third CD, *Play*. It concluded as shown in 2:

2. In keeping with the band's previous CD, 1995's *UP*, the new album, which has sold 100,000 copies since its May release, is a mix of 16 traditional and original songs, including a joyous version of REM's *End of the World*. Says [band member Alan] Doyle: 'It's in line with the Newfie attitude of being blindly happy even when times are tough.'

'Tunes with a "Newfie" attitude'
Macleans, Sept. 15, 1997, vol. 110, no. 37

Great Big Sea's reply, published as a letter to the editor in the October 6th issue of the magazine, bears repeating in full:

3. Over the past four years, it has been the mission of our band, *Great Big Sea*, to present Newfoundland culture and tradition in a positive, respectful and intelligent way. As such, we have frequently spoken out against the use of the term 'Newfie' which many Newfoundlanders find insulting and objectionable. We were very surprised and embarrassed, then, to see the term used as a headline for a piece on the band ('Tunes with a "Newfie" Attitude,' *People*, Sept. 15). Alan Doyle was even more surprised to see a derogatory term he never uses inserted into one of his direct quotes.

Alan Doyle, Bob Hallett, Sean McCann, Darrell Power
Great Big Sea, St. John's, Nfld
Letter to the Editor, *Macleans*, Oct. 6, 1997, vol. 110, no. 40

Great Big Sea's refusal to accept being called Newfies resulted in ensuing admonitions by mainland Canadian critics for them to 'lighten up,' a common response in ideological disputes about language. The group has also made news for their refusal to participate in other expressions of *Newfie-ism*, such as appearing on stage in a boat, dressed in fishing gear. This stance is applauded

by a writer in the St. John's (the Newfoundland provincial capital) daily newspaper, *The Telegram*,⁹ who likewise takes exception to 'that Newfie schtick':

4. Thank God for people like Alan Doyle of *Great Big Sea*. He has done us proud! The promoters of Canada Day in Ottawa apparently planned to pull the group out on stage in a dory, rubber-booted and cape-anned. Tis a reckless thing to stir the anger of a Celt. 'Man, you ain't hangin' that Newfie schtick on me,' is, in effect, what he laid on the impressarios who would exploit a group that is the equal of anything in Canada.

'Who needs the "Newfie" schtick?' Gene Malone
The Evening Telegram, September 8, 1997

However, such interventions are not the norm in the national media, where, if one encounters *Newfie*, it tends to appear unremarked upon as an informal term for Newfoundlanders. In 5, the Newfoundland expatriate population of Toronto is referred to matter-of-factly as '500,000 Newfies' in the context of local celebrations to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation with Canada; in 6, Newfoundland actors in a documentary short screened during the Toronto Film Festival are described as 'out-to-pasture Newfie comedians.'

5. Newfoundland's biggest icebergs are 10,000 years old, weigh more than a million tonnes and rise 1,200 metres from the depths of the Atlantic. That's more than twice the height of the CN Tower, which (at 533 metres) even Guinness proclaims as the world's tallest building. But when the Newfoundland government trucks in an iceberg chunk next week to sit beside Toronto's famed needle, the Tower will dwarf it. Because, weighing only 22 tonnes, it's simply a chip off some old block . . . [S]ince Newfoundland and Labrador are celebrating their 50th anniversary in Confederation, they wanted to promote the event in the metropolis where 500,000 expatriate Newfies now reside.

'Baby berg highlight of Newfie pavillion,' Paul King
The Toronto Star, June 19, 1999

6. The first of the Prelude series, the specially commissioned short films commemorating the festival's 25th anniversary, screened last night at Roy Thomson Hall prior to Denys Arcand's gala opener, *Stardom*. Written and directed by Newfoundland filmmaker Mike Jones, and starring himself and siblings Andy and Cathy (both former CODCO cut-ups), it's a grand island humour about the insanity of celebrity tributes.

What do you do with out-to-pasture Newfie comedians who are 'not much use to anyone anymore?'

You get a helicopter to scoop them up, you pretty them up while the trumpets blare, and then you put them on the CBC to salute the Toronto film festival.

How perfectly Canadian.

'Old Newfie comics leave the pasture,' Peter Howell
The Toronto Star, September 8, 2000

It is usage such as found in 5 and 6 that is codified in the 1998 *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Barber 1998a: 978), which describes *Newfie* as merely 'informal':¹⁰

7. **Newfie**: informal n. 1. A Newfoundlander. 2. Newfoundland. 3. A Newfoundland dog. adj (esp. attrib.) of or relating to Newfoundland or Newfoundlanders. [from NEWFOUNDLAND 1 + IE]

In comparison, the group label *Polack* is deemed 'offensive' by the dictionary's editor, as is *wop* (to refer to Italians), *limey* (to refer to British people) and *frog* (to refer to francophones).¹¹ The dictionary ignores commentary such as in 8, from the St. John's daily, *The Telegram*, in which a staff reporter describes the harassment he experienced as a 'Newfie' in mainland Canada:

8. It happened on a strip mall parking lot in front of [a] nationally owned drugstore chain in Truro, Nova Scotia.

'Get out of the way you goddamned stupid Newfie,' one of the young louts shouted at the car with the Newfoundland license plates.

They laughed and drove off in a screech of tires.

Here we were in late June 2000, villified by two young Nova Scotians whose first reaction to a Newfoundland license plate was to yell the N-word.

'Words that say what we mean,' Bob Benson
The Telegram, July 2, 2000

Such experiences, and the author's explicit linking of *Newfie* with *nigger* (euphemistically 'the N-word'), are at odds with the prevailing attitude codified by Canadian editions of mainstream dictionaries and legitimized by national newspapers, i.e. that *Newfie* is simply an informal term for a resident of the province. However, one reviewer of the 1998 dictionary, a Toronto newspaper columnist, commented directly on the 'informal' label for *Newfie*, indicating some awareness that such usage might be seen as controversial:

9. There are more Canadian words and senses – about 2,000 – than in other dictionaries, Oxford says . . . A logophile (the word is not here, yet) will find some wonders among the Canadianisms. I like *bangbelly*, a Newfoundland pudding or pancake or dumpling; *ballicater*, another Newfie word meaning ice accumulated on the shore from waves and spray; *Molson muscle*, a beer belly. (*Newfie*, by the way, is listed as informal, not offensive.)

'A home and native lexicon,' Lew Gloin
The Toronto Star, M18, July 18, 1998

A sample of 110 Toronto university students, who in 1998 responded to a questionnaire asking them to choose appropriate descriptors for *Newfie* and other group labels from a list which included *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary's* (Barber 1998a) 'register labels,' indicated clear awareness of the issue (King and Clarke 1999). They characterized *Newfie* as 'derogatory' and 'offensive' most often but saw it as having positive ingroup uses. One respondent said that 'it usually seems that amongst Newfoundlanders [*Newfie*] has no offensive or derogatory effect. However, when . . . employed by outsiders it can take on a completely different context or effect.' Another added that 'mainlanders used "Newfie" to represent an uneducated, stupid individual, not as a term of

endearment.' Respondents also suggested that it was a term they would be inclined to use more with non-Newfoundlanders than with Newfoundlanders.

Contrary to what obtains in mainstream English dictionaries, two recent dictionaries of Quebec French slang present *Newfie* in an unflattering light. Desruisseaux (1990) gives the meaning of the expression *être Newfie* (lit. 'to be a Newfie') as 'être imbécile, être nigaud' ('to be an imbecile, to be a fool'), saying that the expression *originally* was used to refer (uniquely) to residents of Newfoundland. Dubé and Fortin's (1998) bilingual dictionary translates *Quel Newfie!* as 'What a nincompoop!' One can argue, then, that at least in Quebec French, *Newfie* has as its primary meaning 'a stupid person,' with ethnicity becoming secondary.¹²

NEWFIE AS INGROUP LABELLING

While use of *Newfie* is typically unremarked upon in mainland Canadian media, it is almost impossible to encounter *Newfie* in Newfoundland media without accompanying metalinguistic commentary. We have traced debate over the term in Newfoundland newspapers over a three-year period and found it to occur frequently, in contexts which center on the ideological dispute. Our corpus consists of approximately 300 newspaper texts, comprising mainly 'Letters to the Editor' of *The (Evening) Telegram*, 1997–2000, along with editorials, 'op-ed' pieces and articles from the same period. We have supplemented this corpus with data from radio and television news shows, radio phone-in shows, and television documentaries, all from the same three-year interval.

The newspaper corpus shows that some Newfoundlanders, both expatriates and present-day residents, embrace the term without reservation. This is exemplified by the following letter to the editor, written by an expatriate Newfoundlander living in the United States:

10. I am a Newfie. I am 44 years old and I have been away from Newfoundland for 23 years. I can tell you that all of the Newfoundlanders I have talked to on the computer quite agree with me that Newfie is not a slur on our name but a badge for us to wear with pride.

'Proud Newfie,' Linda Patrizi (Mulrooney)
The Evening Telegram, August 9, 1998

The staunchest supporters of *Newfie* and *Newfie*-ism argue that both involve 'pride' and 'security.' Many of those who express this attitude say that they sport 'Proud to be a Newfie' or 'Newfie and Proud of It' tee shirts and bumper stickers. The writer in 11 aligns *Newfie* with other representations of *Newfie*-ism:

11. I was a volunteer at our CHF Canada annual general meeting, which was held in St. John's this year. There were approximately 800 delegates from across Canada in attendance. We had traditional Newfoundland fare, music and of course the 'screech-in,' which was quite a success. The telling of Newfie jokes and stories

was always appreciated. No one looked down on us, or made rude comments. In fact, it was probably the most successful and enjoyable annual meeting to date. So from a secure Newfie and a proud Newfie who takes pride in our province: Long may your big jib draw, b'ys.

'No harm in telling Newfie jokes,' Paul Lowther
The Telegram, August 8, 1999

The writer in 12, the paper's 'Lifestyles' editor, exemplifies a second and somewhat different view. He first characterizes objections to *Newfie* as an example of 'political correctness,' a discursive move commonly invoked to delegitimize political issues (cf. Cameron 1995), and argues that, while the term can indeed be used negatively by non-Newfoundlanders, 'we all have our small-minded jokes at other people's expense.' He links use of the term with 'Newfie jokes' and with other cultural practices aimed at the tourist trade, and argues that none of this should be taken seriously since:

12. . . . our truly talented artists and entertainers are making waves all over the globe. And plenty of Newfoundlanders hold respectable postings in universities and other prominent institutions across the continent . . . Come on, people, relax. Just roll your eyes and shrug it off. The more you rail against Screech-ins and Newfie jokes, the more people will think that you really have a complex . . .

'Why fret over derisive jabs at "Newfies"?' Peter Jackson
The Evening Telegram, May 29, 1998

The implication is that if individual Newfoundlanders can be successful in spite of such practices then Newfoundlanders in general should feel sufficiently confident to ignore them. The parallels to the advice to 'lighten up,' mentioned earlier, are obvious. Those who hold this second view do, however, share with opponents of *Newfie* the idea that the term is linked to the caricature of the 'stupid Newfoundlander' alluded to in the *Ellen* episode, i.e., the lazy buffoon who is the object of the 'Newfie joke.' This is shown in 13, a further comment from the writer in 12:

13. The problem, I guess, lies with those 'mainlanders' who persist in using the word in rather derogatory contexts . . . The fact is, the goofy Newfie is hardly different from other earthy caricatures in almost every other region of the country.

'Why fret over derisive jabs at "Newfies"?' Peter Jackson
The Evening Telegram, May 29, 1998

Among Newfoundlanders who hold this second and somewhat ambivalent stance towards *Newfie* are those who acknowledge that context is crucial to their acceptance of the label. Thus in our earlier self-report study (King and Clarke 1999), young-adult and middle-aged resident Newfoundlanders reported reacting less negatively to ingroup than to outgroup usage, with some saying that for them *Newfie* could function as a term of solidarity when used among friends.

A third attitude stands in marked contrast to the above. Those who decry use

of the term typically consider the sociopolitical implications of both the label and related practices:

14. We have tolerated and used the term *Newfie* and have shared in so many of the derogatory and destructive 'jokes' that we have begun to perceive ourselves and behave in a manner consistent with the attendant buffoon stereotype. This social and cultural malignancy has undermined our collective confidence and our esteem so that we now believe less and less in our collective potency . . . The other destructive aspect of this issue is the image of ourselves as a people that we project to others in North America . . . Is it any wonder that we are treated with such contempt and in such a haughty colonialist manner by federal politicians and bureaucrats . . .

'I won't tolerate "Newfie" slurs,' R. Lloyd Ryan, Telegram Forum
The Evening Telegram, June 8, 1998

Opponents of *Newfie* characterize the term as very potent, as opposed to merely informal. Replying to the writer in 12 and 13, who had likened typical use of *Newfie* to that of *Aussie*, *Brit* and *Canuck*, the writer in 15 draws a parallel with much stronger epithets:

15. Mr Jackson may not mind it in the least . . . but generally the connotation of 'Newfie' is lumped with kikes, wops, polacks, and it is beneath me to even print the N-word hurled about our African-American brothers and sisters. Disgusting, evil terms to portray good people of this world.

'Don't accept Newfie slurs from anyone'
L. Hamilton-McShane, Telegram Forum
The Evening Telegram, June 3, 1998

Another writer makes the same comparison and goes on to decry (some) Newfoundlanders' own usage of the term:

16. It is an undeniable fact of history that the terms *Newf* and *Newfie* originated as terms of derision and contempt, and only God can reckon the toll of pain inflicted upon those subjected through years of that cruel humiliation . . . The whole thing might long since have disappeared if it wasn't propagated by our own people. It's the biggest joke of all.

'Newfie jokes anything but funny,' Lloyd C. Rees
The Evening Telegram, June 3, 1998

As the data presented above show, use of the term *Newfie* is highly charged politically. Newfoundland's arts community, the success of whom is lauded by the writer in 12, has joined in the debate. Like the members of *Great Big Sea*, Newfoundland's most celebrated artists, actors and authors have overwhelmingly negative attitudes toward the term. Interviewed for a recent television documentary marking the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation with Canada, Newfoundlander Christopher Pratt, one of Canada's most respected artists, weighed in on the debate:

17. I wouldn't be wearing my Order of Canada badge here were I not proud of my citizenship. I'm less proud of my Canadian citizenship when I'm out of here, when

I'm on the mainland and I run into this Newfie stuff. It has brought some of us together because to me the word Newfie is the word nigger, it's the word kike and anybody who is prepared to use the word Newfie I would assume is prepared to use those other words.

CBC Newfoundland and Labrador documentary
A Mixed Marriage: The Canadian/Newfoundland Union, 1999

Also interviewed for the documentary was Newfoundland expatriate writer Wayne Johnston, author of the international bestseller *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*:

18. I hate, I really, I really hate the word Newfie – it's you know it's, it could be a word that is perfectly fine but it's not . . . because of the particular connotations that it has. It's definitely a patronizing condescending word, and it has a whole range of condescension from, you know, the person who's, you know, salt of the earth but not very smart to a person who's an absolute idiot.

CBC Newfoundland and Labrador documentary
A Mixed Marriage: The Canadian/Newfoundland Union, 1999

Newfoundland's political leaders have also made their opinions known. In a 1990 speech to the St. John's Rotary Club, then lieutenant-governor James McGrath denounced the Newfie stereotype, Newfie jokes and screech-ins as 'pejorative and patronizing' practices which resulted in Newfoundlanders 'subjecting [themselves] to ridicule' (cited by Byrne 1997: 245). In *A Mixed Marriage*, then-premier Brian Tobin declared that he believed 'that the age of the **Newfoundland** (our emphasis) joke defining what people know about Newfoundland is over.'

Our Newfoundland media corpus, then, indicates clear lack of consensus among present-day Newfoundland residents and expatriates with respect to the meaning of the label *Newfie* – a change from the early years of usage, when evidence suggests *Newfie* was viewed fairly uniformly as a negative, outgroup label. Three general stances have been identified, ranging from unqualified acceptance to context dependency to outright rejection. In the following section, we forge some explanation for these divergent attitudes.

DISCUSSION

Proponents of *Newfie* typically link the term to pride and confidence, and often characterize those who oppose the label as insecure and small-minded. Such people are said to 'fret' over small matters and try to impose 'political correctness.' Our media corpus suggests that many of the staunchest defenders of *Newfie* are expatriates, for whom a *Newfie* identity may have become emblematic of a romanticized Newfoundland past. Others more favourably disposed towards *Newfie* include at least some younger Newfoundland residents, who have more positive attitudes towards the term than do their elders. This conclusion derives in part from self-report data collected in 1999 from over 50

younger residents of the province in the age range 18–30, as well as from a small sample of middle-aged Newfoundland residents (King and Clarke 1999).

Might we suppose, then, that there is change in progress? It turns out that younger Newfoundlanders whom we have polled whose attitudes are opposed to, say, their generational counterparts in *Great Big Sea*, have had limited exposure to outgroup usage. This is clear in 19, in which a female Newfoundland university student invokes an urban-rural distinction with regard to the referent for *Newfie*, where *Newfies* are just ‘the rurals’:

19. [Mainland Canadians understand Newfie] . . . as a person from Newfoundland, probably seeing the person as someone living in rural Newfoundland . . . When I hear the term Newfie the first thing I think of is someone from rural NF, rather than for ex., a person from St. John’s (we would call them ‘townies’).

Another young Newfoundlander drew a parallel with use of the term *Canuck*, not realizing that it refers to Canadians in general, not just residents of Vancouver, home to the National Hockey League team the Vancouver Canucks:

20. I think they [mainland Canadians] look at it as an affectionate term used to describe people of our ‘distinct’ culture. The same way they would probably view Vancouverites’ use of *Canuck*.

If we explain apparent generational variation within the province in terms of degree of exposure to outgroup usage, how do we account for the more positive attitudes of expatriates, who one assumes have more exposure to outgroup usage than does the vast majority of Newfoundland residents? This more positive stance among expatriates is not merely an artifact of the media data, that is, one might argue that the media data are perhaps distorted by a higher frequency of letter writing on the part of non-residents. In our earlier self-report survey (King and Clarke 1999) we compared attitudes of middle-aged St. John’s residents towards the term with those of expatriate middle-aged Newfoundlanders residing in Cambridge, Ontario who were associated with a local Newfoundland club. We found that the expatriates were more favourably disposed to *Newfie* than were Newfoundland residents. Recall, though, that Newfoundland expatriates such as writer Wayne Johnston (and a number of other professionals with whom we have discussed the matter) are vehemently anti-*Newfie*, so this category needs to be broken down.

Expatriates are a minority group and their ability to object to outsiders’ constructions of their ethnic identity is influenced by this minority status, particularly if their socioeconomic situation is tenuous. This may well be the case with the clientele of Newfoundland clubs, who tend to be working-class Newfoundlanders. A May 2000 CTV *NewsWorld* programme involving the clientele of one such club in Fort McMurray, Alberta, revealed that while the attitudes of club members to the term *Newfie* were said to ‘vary greatly,’ these attitudes echoed the first two stances expressed in the newspaper corpus. None of those interviewed expressed outright objection to the label; rather, they

tended to note either that its connotations were context dependent, as in 21, or that they were ‘proud to be Newfies,’ as in 22:

21. **Male, late 30s:**

I take exception to it sometimes, depending on how it’s said . . . you know, if it’s said with you know a lot of respect I don’t mind it. I’ve heard it in a lot of disrespectful ways and I don’t appreciate it. A lot of my friends in town [Fort McMurray] use it all the time, they are Newfoundlanders but they resent the connotations that can go with it sometimes and those connotations are there.

22. **Female, 50s:**

I’m a Newfie, always was a Newfie, always will be a Newfie. I have no problems telling anyone. It’s a **wonderful** name. I have no problem with it.

The words of one interviewee – reproduced in 23 (where square brackets indicate overlapping speech) – reveal, however, that usage of *Newfie* is linked to expatriate status; we speculate that this may derive from conformity with majority attitudes to the term *Newfie* which prevail in western Canada:

23. **Male, 30s:**

It doesn’t bother me because it’s, it tells you that you’re a unique person. As saying a Newfoundlander, yes but a Newfie, you’re away from home, it’s short. I got no problems with using that phrase. We use it here all the time in our club.

Interviewer:

In Newfoundland you’re a Newfoundlander, if you’re away [you’re a Newfie]?

M:

[you’re a Newfie]

That’s what it seems like, maybe, yeah. There’s a lot of people say, let’s go to a Newfie club instead of a Newfoundland club, that’s the way they . . . they look at it.

While expatriate usage of the term *Newfie* may be comprehended as either emblematic of a distinct – and probably romanticized – ethnic identity, or as an espousal of ‘legitimized’ usage of the term in mainland Canada as an informal rather than derogatory label, what of the attitudes of those Newfoundland residents who maintain in absolute terms that they are ‘*Newfie* and proud of it?’ As the Newfoundland historian Paul O’Neill asked in a 1998 *Telegram* article, ‘why would anyone want to be called a Newfie, in effect, to put themselves down?’ Some of those who would tell the ‘anti-*Newfie*’ side to ‘lighten up’ clearly object to the idea that language can have negative effects: like many opponents of gender-based language reform, they object to ‘making language an issue’ (cf. Cameron 1995). This can only be part of the explanation, however. For many of the pro-*Newfie* writers and survey respondents, language (in particular *Newfie*) and other expressions of *Newfie*-ism matter very much. Byrne (1999) admits that answering O’Neill’s question is difficult, but suggests that the economic situation faced by many Newfoundlanders reduces them to ‘selling’ parodies of themselves and their culture to tourists. But one assumes that only a fraction of those with pro-*Newfie* sentiments gain economically from *Newfie*-ism. Perhaps Newfoundland residents who are unreservedly pro-*Newfie* actually do resemble

many of their expatriate counterparts: they deal with derision by insisting that derision does not exist. Declaring that a slur is actually harmless, and a term of endearment at that, may be viewed as a survival strategy, not only in Newfoundland but also in the minority context in which working-class Newfoundland expatriates find themselves in mainland Canada.

CONCLUSION

We have seen here that outgroup imposition of the label *Newfie*, argued by outsiders to be merely informal, is legitimized by mainstream Canadian dictionaries and print media who endorse the term, despite the fact that many Newfoundlanders view it as derogatory. The situation among Newfoundlanders themselves is complex, in that three major stances obtain with regard to both *Newfie* and to a set of related cultural practices we regard as part of the commodification of an 'invented' Newfoundland culture. These are: the perspective whereby *Newfie* is seen as unambiguously positive; the perspective whereby outsiders' usage is viewed as derogatory but Newfoundlanders' own informal use is argued to involve group solidarity; and the perspective whereby any usage of the term is viewed negatively.

Newfie shares a number of features with other group labels. The term *Hoosier*, for instance, is likewise a site of ideological struggle. In this case the ingroup – residents of the state of Indiana – insist that it is either a neutral or a positive label, and in fact the preferred term for Indiana residents. This stands in obvious opposition to the views of the outgroup, that is, of residents of such neighbouring states as Missouri (cf. Murray 1987) and of Americans more generally, who regard it as a highly derogatory term. Indeed, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961) includes among its definitions of *Hoosier* 'an awkward, unhandy or unskilled person, especially an ignorant rustic' (Dickson 1997: 88–89 discusses how this dictionary definition itself became an important site of controversy in the late 1980s). *Okie*, a well-known term of derision for migrant workers (typically but not necessarily from Oklahoma), was attested as early as 1907 but came into common use following the 1935 publication of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (Dickson 1997: 142). It was subject to amelioration efforts by the Oklahoma government in the 1960s as part of a pro-state publicity campaign, and also enjoyed a certain degree of popular support in ensuing years. For instance, Dickson (1997: 143) cites in this regard a popular country song from 1971, *Okie from Muskogee* by Merle Haggard, in which the singer expresses pride in his 'Okie' values. While these cases clearly show the social effects of labelling, the situation for *Newfie* seems more complex; however, this may well stem from the fact that neither of the two terms mentioned above has been subject to a more detailed study of ingroup attitudes of the type that we have attempted to undertake for *Newfie*.

The complexities associated with the construction of ingroup meaning are well illustrated in several other contexts involving ethnic labelling. In New

Zealand, while *kiwi* (used to refer to non-Maori and non-Polynesian New Zealanders) is uncontroversial, *Pakeha* (a term of Maori origin used to refer to New Zealanders of European extraction) is disliked by some non-indigenous New Zealanders. Since it is an exclusionary term when used by Maori, Orsman (1997) suggests that its opponents make the leap from exclusion to derogation. On the other hand, its supporters argue that *Pakeha* is a more accurate label than 'European' (or 'white') to refer to non-indigenous New Zealanders.¹³ In the United States, use of the term *African American* generated a great deal of public discourse following the rise to prominence of this label in the late 1980s. Proponents of *African American* typically cited in its favour its status as a self-label (rather than one imposed by whites) and its signalling of cultural solidarity and 'blended' heritage. On the other hand, while acknowledging its origins as an imposed label, those in support of *Black* associated the term with racial pride and its relation to political movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular the Black Power movement. Thus the two terms were seen as symbolizing different aspects of group identity, as evidenced in public debate and in the results of attitudinal surveys (cf. Baugh 1991; Larkey, Hecht and Martin 1993).

In our case, we have seen that differing attitudes towards the term *Newfie* tend to correlate with several factors, including degree of familiarity with outgroup usage and attitudes towards the commodification of Newfoundland culture. While negative attitudes towards *Newfie* involve rejection of outgroup stereotypes, positive attitudes involve denial of the intent and/or impact of such stereotyping. Both may be viewed as coping strategies by a minority group. Though the debate over *Newfie* rages on in Newfoundland, it continues to be largely ignored in mainland Canada.

NOTES

1. We thank Gary Butler, Susan Ehrlich, Monica Heller, two anonymous reviewers and the journal's editors for helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper. Thanks also go to Sid Tarrant for his assistance in collecting Newfoundland expatriate data, as well as to Patricia Balcom, Joan Beal and Miriam Meyerhoff for their insights plus a number of useful references. We are also very grateful to Katherine Barber for sharing with us the citations which informed the *Newfie* entry in the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at The Tenth International Conference on Methods in Dialectology (St. John's, Newfoundland 1999) and NWAV-30 (Raleigh, North Carolina 2001); we thank audience members for comments.
2. See the bulletins and newsletters of the Society for the Study of the Indigenous Languages of the Americas for reports on legal action taken by Native Americans and on supportive efforts by professional organizations such as the Linguistic Society of America and the American Anthropological Association.
3. The attitudes of many Newfoundlanders internalize this negative image. A series of language attitude studies conducted in the province (e.g. Clarke 1982) has yielded

consistent results: while urban Newfoundlanders evaluate speakers of Newfoundland English highly on solidarity measures (e.g. in terms of their kindness and friendliness), Newfoundland speakers are downgraded on status and competence measures (e.g. in terms of their ambition and intelligence) by comparison to speakers of standard Mainland Canadian and British English.

4. Page numbers refer to the second edition, published in 1962.
5. *Newf* is a common in-group diminutive but is largely ignored in the *Newfie* debate. The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1982: 343) gives the following example, from Whalley (1978): 'Anyone who knows anything might be inclined to the conclusion that [he] is just another stunned [=stupid] Newf.'
6. Note however that an outgroup label is not necessarily viewed negatively by members of the ingroup. For example, *Geordie* is accepted and adopted by Newcastle residents despite its outgroup origin. Beal (forthcoming) states that the term was never used pejoratively.
7. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Barber 1998a) defines 'screech-in' as 'a jocular ritual by which visitors to Newfoundland are "initiated," involving the drinking of screech [a type of rum] and performing such acts as dipping a foot in the ocean, kissing a cod, etc.' As we shall see below, 'jocular' would be unlikely to be the descriptor of choice for many Newfoundlanders.
8. The theme was also taken up by respondents to an attitudinal survey we conducted in St. John's and in southern Ontario in 1999 (King and Clarke 1999). In the comments section of the questionnaire, a number of St. John's respondents commented on the episode, as in the following remark from a young female university student: 'Newfie jokes have created a general opinion of a "stupid" mentality among Newfoundlanders for some mainlanders . . . prime example, the episode of Elen [sic] DeGeneres' show in which they made fun of Newfie jokes. Many Nflders were extremely insulted. NBC ended up not running the show in reruns.'
9. Prior to September 11, 1998, when it underwent a name change, this daily was known as *The Evening Telegram*.
10. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* is not alone in ignoring the controversy: the 1997 editions of the *Gage Canadian Dictionary* and the *ITP Nelson Canadian Dictionary of the English Language* likewise describe *Newfie* as informal. This is not the only issue relating to Newfoundland in which the point of view of Newfoundlanders themselves is ignored. All three dictionaries allow a number of pronunciations for the name of the province, which is irregular in that the final syllable is stressed. Newfoundlanders in general resent outsiders' 'incorrect' pronunciations, including ['nu:fəndlənd] and [n(j)u:'faundlənd], yet these dictionaries give them without commentary. The sole dictionary of which we are aware which gives only pronunciations acceptable to Newfoundlanders is the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*.
11. The data which informed the *Newfie* entry consist of 51 attestations of *Newfie* from Canadian print media dating from the late 1960s to the mid 1990s. Once we eliminate citations which refer to Newfoundland dogs or which refer to the province itself, along with collocations such as *Newfie joke*, we are left with 38 attestations (20 of them adjectives and 18, nouns). In a personal communication, the dictionary's editor, Katherine Barber, commented to us that these usages either clearly were not or did not seem pejorative. In a public lecture at the 1998 annual meeting of the Atlantic Provinces Linguistic Association, she further characterized such usage as 'affectionate.' However, the range of publications sampled for the dictionary is

limited, and one particular discourse genre is over-represented. Only two of the 51 attestations are from Newfoundland publications: apart from an article from a 1973 edition of a St. John's tabloid and a 1991 issue of the magazine *Newfoundland Lifestyle*, all of the data come from national newspapers, national news and sports magazines, or from lifestyle/travel publications. The overwhelming majority of articles contained in the corpus are striking in that they are aimed at 'selling' quaint, traditional, colourful Newfoundland to the tourist market, hence the label 'informal.'

12. Allen (1990: 16) reports similar usage in the United States, where 'swede is [used] for a blunderer, *turk* for a cruel, aggressive person . . . *pole* for a dumb person, *indian* for a wild and reckless person . . .'
13. Some of the controversy surrounding the meaning of this term may be viewed at <<http://www.jgeorge.com/pakeha.html>>, which summarizes discussion from the *soc.culture.new-zealand* newsgroup.

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