

Health care gets lost in translation

Published Thursday October 22nd, 2009

Linguists offer medical roadmap to Acadian French

A1 By Jesse Robichaud
Times & Transcript Staff

Imagine a misunderstanding that leaves a doctor under the impression that a patient is claiming to suffer from cholera when that patient is only really complaining of diarrhea.

The situation may seem far-fetched, absurd or even dangerous, but it and other such real-life scenarios prompted Université de Moncton linguists Gisèle Chevalier and Lise Rodrigue to pen a new book that clears the air in doctors' offices where health-care professionals may be unfamiliar with some unique Acadian words.

The cleverly titled "Les mots pour parler des maux" -- loosely translated as "the words to talk about aches" -- was conceived as a lexicological reference for health professionals and interns who are unfamiliar with certain Acadian French words that could be used during checkups.

While not all examples found in the book are as extreme as confusing a symptom with a full-blown epidemic, they all seize on medical-related terms used by Acadians, which have been misunderstood by other French-speaking groups and people who speak French as a second language.

The project was initiated when Dr. Fernand Arsenault approached the distinguished linguists and asked them to create a lexicological reference for students with different language backgrounds who are completing internships in this region.

"Because if they don't understand very well, what can happen is the patient isn't as comfortable and isn't as capable of explaining his state of health," said Chevalier.

"There can be misunderstandings, or patients can have the feeling they aren't well understood by their doctor and that can create frustration."

The book contains translations in English and standard French, and also contains explanations of how and why certain unique lexicological formulas are used.

"We show in the book that many of these words come from regions in France, such as from Poitou where the Acadians originate, so it is not illogical to use it, it was in the language and it's stayed in the language whereas it changed in Quebec," said Chevalier, noting that the book features maps that trace the roots of words.

"If the (doctor) is from Quebec they don't necessarily have the same words."

The choice of words were drawn from the on-the-job experiences of doctors, nurses, and students working in hospitals, clinics, nursing homes and other medical facilities in various regions of New Brunswick.

The linguists asked health professionals to list French words they hear during checkups that might not be used frequently in standard French.

"In the beginning it was really an investigation in the field," said Chevalier.

"We contacted people in nursing homes, clinics, and there are students in nursing who were doing internships a bit every where in the province."

Some health-care professionals were able to pick out words that had initially boggled their own comprehension.

"Often it is words they didn't know, but they heard them from their patients, and after several years of experience they end up by understanding," said Chevalier.

She said the publication will help students be better prepared for misunderstandings and better able to solve them.

Chevalier said doctors and nurses were often surprised by some words that are used to describe certain sexual organs by embarrassed patients.

For example, she noted the example of referring to breasts as "poumons," which is the French equivalent of "lungs."

"Between the lungs and the breasts, if the doctor really thinks they are talking about their lungs it could create real confusion."

The book also features many words that are more commonly used by senior citizens and are relatively unknown to younger generations, she added.

"If there are young people who haven't heard their grandparents use that word, they might not know it."

However, there are many others that are still frequently used by several generations.

Although the book will be distributed among students in the health-care sector by its publisher, the Consortium national de la formation en santé, Chevalier said the book can interest anyone with a flair for the variables of language.

"We did it mostly for interns, and there are many doctors and nurses who come from outside the region. It is addressed to everyone in the health-care sector," she said.