A comparison of gender non-marking in Montreal L1 & L2 French

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Our research investigates variation in the second language (L2) French of the first generation of Montreal Anglophones that had access to French immersion schooling. We focus on a series of variables which mask the gender distinctions of traditional French and are constrained linguistically and socially in L1 French. We examine how closely L2 variation resembles that of L1 and seek to determine to what extent gender neutralization is a sign of vernacularity and to what extent it may serve as a strategy to circumnavigate the thorny problem of gender-marking in L2 French. This builds on research presented at previous NWAV(E)s concerning several other linguistic variables in this corpus and addresses the general question of how best to interpret L2 variation.

In order to determine the extent to which these Anglophones acquire the variable grammar of their Francophones peers, we examined 4 sociolinguistic variables in the speech of 29 young Anglo-Montrealers who were interviewed in 1993 and 1994. Those speakers were selected from a larger corpus to represent maximal variation along the fluency continuum (Sankoff et al. 1997) and in their degree and type of exposure to French at school and in their social activities.

This stratification allows us to examine the extent to which L2 variation mirrors previously reported L1 variation. The variables include the pronunciation of the singular demonstrative pronouns (Daveluy 1987), the use of the masculine 3rd person forms "ils" and « eux-autres » for both masculine and feminine, and the use of "tout" (pronounced [tut] to modify both masculine and feminine nouns (Lemieux 1985). To illustrate, in L1 Montreal French, any of the singular demonstrative pronouns ("ce", "cet" and "cette") may be pronounced [se], [sEt], or [ste] ("e" = schwa, "E" = lax front vowel). The alternating use of these variants (which, except for [sEt], are historically gender-specific) illustrates the gender neutralization process. In L1 speech, the variant [ste] is more vernacular.

We examine all relevant tokens in approximately one hour of L2 French speech from each speaker. For demonstratives, there is an average of 10 tokens/ speaker, precluding statistical analysis. For « tout », there are ~40/tokens speaker, allowing a Varbrul analysis of linguistic and social factors. Although « eux-autres » isn't common in our corpus, « ils » appears and is used more productively as a gender-neutral form.

Mastery of gender is often examined in studies of acquisition of French by Anglophones and is commented on in self-reports of the speakers under analysis (Thibault & Sankoff 1997). Gender neutralization could be part of a strategy to manage this problem. However, given that these non-standard variants are also used by L1 speakers, it may not be a simple case of avoidance of forms which are difficult for L2 speakers In fact, we show that this is a more common strategy for the speakers who have more contact with French in their school and/or social environment and illustrate that its use does not necessarily indicate weak mastery of French, but, in fact, can be seen as a sign of adaptation of vernacular L1 patterns which are not taught in school. To illustrate briefly, here are the rates of [ste] use for speakers at the extremes of the integration (into French culture) scale:

Less integrated speakers	More integrated speakers
Alison 0%	Terry 42%
Doug 0%	Victor 33%

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