

What Acadians and Cajuns Agree on: A Comparison of Third Person Plural Marking

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This presentation involves systematic comparison of third person plural marking in the French of Atlantic Canada Acadians and Louisiana Cajuns, the latter the descendants of 18th century exiles from Acadie. The two varieties preserve, to varying degrees, the vernacular third person plural variant *ils...ont*, exemplified in 1:

- 1 Ils parlont français à leurs enfants.
 ‘They speak French to their children.’

While there exists a wide and complex array of competing variants in Acadian communities (see Flikeid 1992; King & Nadasdi 1996), use of the traditional variant remains robust across Atlantic Canada (see Flikeid & Péronnet 1989; King 1994). The Acadian data come from King’s contemporary sociolinguistic corpora for three communities, along with documentation from the Acadian sociolinguistic literature. We argue that the Acadian situation provides a baseline for examining the internal patterning of variation in Cajun.

Our study involves analysis of Cajun data from a variety of sources: an early 19th century corpus of informal letters (Dubois 2003) and three older generations represented in the Dubois sociolinguistic corpus, i.e. ancestors born in the 1890s, community elders born between 1905-1915, and seniors born between 1920-1932. A number of researchers have documented the erosion of the *ils...ont* variant in contemporary Cajun (e.g. Brown 1988; Byers 1988; Dubois 2002; Rottet 2001). In our own Cajun corpora we locate the advent of the rapid decline in the use of the traditional variant in the community elder generation, along with the rise of competing variants.

Variation in the two corpora diverge in that competing variants which have arguably emerged in Acadian due to contact with normative French are not found in our Cajun corpora. On the other hand, a number of variants which occur with low frequency in the Acadian corpora overtake *ils...ont* in the speech of several of our community elders, such as the use of *ça* with animate reference and the use of *eusse*. In both cases number marking has been lost on the verb. The former occurs sporadically in Acadian French, while the latter is attested as emphatic usage (King & Nadasdi 1997); such a discursive constraint does not obtain in Cajun. Both variants are shown in 2:

- 2 Si eusse avait de la chance, ça volait des *signs*, ça les mettait de l’autre manière.
 ‘If they had the chance, they used to steal signs, they used to change them around.’

On the basis of such comparisons, we argue that the linguistic variation associated with the decline of *ils...ont* in Cajun exploits tendencies already present in the language. Through multivariate analysis of the Cajun data along a number of dimensions (e.g. presence or absence of overt plural marking, use of the traditional Acadian variant versus all other possibilities) we uncover both linguistic (e.g. tense, clause type, choice of verb) and social (e.g. parish, which serves as an indicator of degree of dialect contact) factors which condition variation.

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