

**Prosodic Consequences of Being a *Beur* : French in Contact with Immigrant
Languages in a Working-Class Suburb of Paris**

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This paper reports on an innovative prosodic pattern in the vernacular of adolescents recorded in a middle school of *La Courneuve*, a predominantly immigrant working-class suburb North of Paris.

Speech data were gathered in six fieldwork sessions of two to six weeks between 2000 and 2002. After two sessions devoted to the establishment of contact and initial ethnographic observations on the school's premises (following Eckert 1989, 2000), eighty-five girls and boys were interviewed and asked to perform a picture-naming task. The 11 to 14 year-olds, born and living in the community, were divided in ethnic groups based on their origins and language(s) spoken at home: *North African* referred to as *Beur* (Arabic or Kabyle), *White Caucasian* (Catholic or Jewish), *Black African* (Sub-Saharan African), and *Black Caribbean* (French Caribbean). The investigation was carried out to confirm whether a prosodic pattern called 'lengthening of the penultimate', and reported as "producing an immediate effect of strangeness" (Conein and Gadet 1998:108), exists in the vernacular of these speakers.

Findings from the picture-naming task with forty male speakers (ten per ethnic group) producing thirty-six target words in Intonation Phrase (IP)-final position indicate the presence of such lengthening in several speakers' speech, regardless of their ethnic origins. As a group, only the *Beurs* uttered significantly longer IP-penultimate syllables in a few target words. Analysis of the intonation contours, on the other hand, reveals a high tonal target on the penultimate of most IPs pronounced by the *Beurs*. This intonation is atypical in non-emphatic uses of middle-class Parisian French, but characteristic of declarative intonation in Western varieties of vernacular Arabic (Al-Ani 1970, Benkirane 1989). Although absent in the Caucasian boys' speech, the 'penultimate high' is also characteristic of some Black African boys. Common to these adolescents is their close contact with *Beur* leaders in tight, ethnically mixed peer-groups in and outside school,

which points to the well-established importance of dense social networks in the use of local variables (Milroy 1980).

The most intriguing finding, however, seems to be the ‘multi-parametric nature’ of this change. It seems as if, in the process of this prosodic change in working-class Parisian French, the transmission of two acoustic parameters—duration and pitch—of the same prosodic unit, i.e. the penultimate of an IP, had been dissociated. While the lengthening of IP-penultimate syllables, due to so-called nuclear pitch accents, is common in several languages (ex. Italian, Picard) that came in contact with French in *La Courneuve* through earlier migrations, and seems to characterize working-class Parisian French since at least the early 20th century (Straka 1952, Mettas 1979), a tonal feature reminiscent of the ‘penultimate high’ shown by *Beurs* speakers cannot be attested to any earlier. Thus, contrary to the duration pattern, the tonal pattern might result from recent contact, presumably with languages from North Africa. Putting together these phonetic correlates from several contact points in time, we indeed obtain a distinctive prosodic (duration and tonal) pattern today.

Keywords: prosodic change, contact, ethnicity, network

486 words (without title, keywords, and references)

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