

Evolving Linguistic Standards in Quebec

A sociolinguistic analysis of production, perception and evaluation

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Where data on both production and perception are available, speech can be studied as a form of social behaviour where the object of study is not only linguistic structure, but also the operation of greater social processes reflected in this structure (Labov 1972: 111). The inclusion of subjective data in this study of variation and change in Quebec French added considerable richness and nuance to an appreciation of the dynamics of language change. Subjective data proved especially useful in determining the norms that motivated innovators of linguistic change, even where production data was ambiguous or unclear.

While previous subjective reaction studies of Quebec French, such as those undertaken by Laberge and Chasson-Lavoie (1971), Govaert-Gauthier (1979), and Lappin (1982) are helpful in clarifying Quebec French speakers' norms about language in a very general way, there has usually been a lack of rigour in determining precisely which linguistic forms triggered the informants' judgments. Furthermore, no study of Quebec French has yet directly compared informants' production with their perception and evaluation of the same features in others' speech.

The sample of twenty-four informants in this study is stratified by region, sex, age, and education. Interviews elicited data on the production, the subjective evaluation, and the degree of perception of four phonetic or phonological variables: diphthongization of long vowels; laxing of short vowels; assibilation; and deletion of /l/ in pronouns and articles. Production data was elicited by means of a word list and short passage. Evaluation and perception data were obtained by having the informant listen to a recording of a francophone phonetician reading the passage. Because each sentence concentrated a particular linguistic variable, subjective reactions (obtained through five multiple-choice questions) were considered to reflect informants' evaluation of that variable. Information about the informant's perception of the linguistic variable was obtained through the underlining of "well-" or "badly-pronounced" words on an answer sheet. Data was analyzed acoustically (for vocalic variables) and auditorily (for consonantal variables) and group means were cross-tabulated, with significance calculated using t-tests.

For each sociolinguistic variable, I conclude that data regarding perception and subjective evaluation provides a clearer picture of the norms motivating the innovators of linguistic change, and of the evolution of sociolinguistic norms over time, than could be obtained by analysing production data alone. For example, while production data shows that diphthongization of some vowels is increasing in formal styles in Montreal and Abitibi, the innovators of this change (i.e., the younger group) are not motivated by the same evaluative norms in every region: in Montreal, younger informants rated a diphthongized stimulus more negatively than their elders in the same region (the younger group assigned it a score of 33¹,

¹ The evaluation scores are based on a scale of zero to 100, where 100 reflects the highest degree of "acceptance" of the stimulus, and zero the highest degree of rejection.

compared to 38 for the older group), but in Abitibi, the norms of the younger generation have reversed so that they actually prefer a diphthongized to a non-diphthongized stimulus (the score of acceptance for the diphthongized stimulus was 80.2, compared to only 72.5 for the diphthongized stimulus). Similar analyses are made with regard to laxing, /l/-deletion and assibilation.

Keywords: language attitudes, Quebec French, subjective evaluation, perception, innovators of change, overt vs. covert prestige, regionally-defined speech communities

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