

Interference-induced linguistic innovations on the continuum of language contact: the case of French in Ontario

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The theoretical concept of *interference* has attracted more than its share of criticism. In our view, the generally bad press it has received is not due to a flaw in the theory that languages in contact may influence one another — no serious linguist would deny this fact — but rather to shoddy methodology (and to some extent also, to ideological bias). As a result, interference has come to be held with much suspicion by many linguists and some have even elected to demonstrate that it plays only a marginal role as a source of variation and change in situations of societal bilingualism and language contact. We believe that there has been an overreaction against the notion of interference in linguistics and the primary goal of the present study is to show that one can rehabilitate this concept and rekindle linguists' interest in it. To that end we examine innovations that have been documented in the variety of French spoken in the Canadian province of Ontario where French is a minority language and comes into contact with English (e.g., the emergence of the verb phrase *prendre un voyage* – English equivalent *take a trip*, which competes with the equivalent phrase *faire un voyage*, literally *to do a trip*). We argue that in order to demonstrate that an innovation such as *prendre un voyage* is interference-induced, one needs to go through the following steps. Firstly, one must consider the innovation from a systemic perspective and weigh the evidence for intersystemic transfer against counter-evidence for intrasystemic development. Secondly, one ought to take into account prior extralinguistic evidence (e.g., attestation of the innovation in question in other contact varieties), if available, that might strengthen the assumption that the innovation in question is due to interference. Finally, one must examine within the speech community where it has been documented the distribution of the innovation as a function of factors such as degree of contact or bilingualism.

In carrying out such an examination in relation to innovations documented in the speech of 118 speakers of Ontario French who exhibit different levels of contact with English and who reside in four communities where Francophones represent either a majority or minority in relation to Anglophones, we find that it strengthens the case for interference for all but one of them. We also bring to light an implicational scale in the diffusion of the interference-induced innovations under study. The scale ranges from innovations that are found across all four communities and/or three groups of speakers exhibiting variable levels of contact with English, to innovations found only in the weakest Francophone minority community and in the French of speakers who experience the highest levels of contact with English. In accounting for this implicational distribution, we argue that it reflects the combined effect of structural factors and variable degree of contact with English.