

Pas vs. Point: Variation in Baie Sainte-Marie Acadian French

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Recent research on the French negation system has primarily focused on the loss of the preverbal negative particle *ne* (Sankoff & Vincent 1977, Coveney 2000, Martineau & Mougeon 2003), leaving postverbal *pas* as the sole negative marker. Historically, however, other postverbal negative markers have existed, including *mie* (<“crumb”), *goutte* (<“drop”), and *point* (<“point”). Of these additional markers, today only *point* remains in the standard variety, reserved for particular discursive effects in formal style (Price 1997).

Historically, the *pas – point* alternation does not seem to have been linked to particular regions or social classes; rather, 17th and 18th century grammarians comment almost exclusively on use of the latter variant in partitive contexts. While there is evidence that both negative markers crossed the Atlantic, most varieties in Canada as well as in France saw a decrease in *point* usage in the 19th century, leaving *pas* as the main negator (Martineau 2005). However, according to maps from the *Atlas linguistique de la France*, *point* was still found in rural areas of France, such as Poitou, in the *centre-ouest* region of France, the point of origin of Acadian settlers, at the turn of the last century. *Point* is still found today in some varieties of Acadian French, most notably in the variety spoken in Baie Sainte-Marie, Nova Scotia, home to a historically homogeneous and still conservative Acadian speech community (Flikeid 1997).

This presentation reports on a study of *pas – point* variation in a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews from the village of Grosses Coques in Baie Sainte-Marie, representative of both sexes and a wide age range. Tokens for both *pas* and *point* were included in the study, but a few fixed expressions which contain *pas* were excluded (e.g. *pas mal* (“a lot”), *pas même* (“not even”), etc.) because they do not alternate with *point*. Perhaps surprisingly, *point*, not *pas*, is the principal negator in this highly conservative variety, accounting for 83% of all negative tokens (N=1758). Given the very high frequency of *point* usage, what needs to be explained is where and why *pas* occurs. Multivariate analysis reveals that, contrary to claims in the literature, partitive contexts do not play a role in conditioning the variation. Rather, certain subject-verb collocations that appear to have become conventionalized, such as *je sais pas* (“I don’t know”), *c’est pas* (“it’s not...”), etc., are strongly associated with *pas*. When such collocations are removed from the analysis (i.e. when we look only at productive *pas* usage), level of education becomes an important conditioning factor along with sex and age, with the older male speakers being associated with increased *pas* use.

Although these results would seem to suggest a change in progress, I argue that such an interpretation does not take into account the local context. A number of previous studies have shown that Acadian speakers’ use of variants in line with standard usage is related not to level of education alone, but also to degree of exposure to other varieties of French across the lifespan (cf. Flikeid 1992; King, Nadasdi & Butler 2004). The older, educated males in this sample have all travelled widely and their usage can be explained in terms of their increased exposure to external varieties of French (which exclusively use *pas*). I suggest that *pas* is age-graded, in that it is associated with increased exposure to outside varieties of French which is in turn linked to the older, educated male speakers. It is also explicable in terms of local gender roles (women traditionally do not travel widely), in keeping with Eckert & McConnell-Ginet’s (1992) practice-based approach to gender and linguistic variation.

References

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