

“Like Cajun mother, like Cajun daughter: Knowing when to change”

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we examine the phonetic variation of the sounds *ɔ*, *oe* and *E* in Cajun French in the speech of women born between 1890 and 1974, from four parishes in South Louisiana. Originally built from two different databases -the Gold 1975 corpus and the Dubois 1997 corpus-, our sample is comprised of 40 Cajun French speakers representing five generations. To understand the source of the variation, we will briefly discuss the Latin origin of the phonetic variation and the diachronic evolution of the variable in France up to the twentieth century as well as its usage in Acadia, Canada. We present the intergenerational usage of more than 17,000 occurrences of the dialectal variants *o*, *u*, *ø*, *e* and *a*. The results show a variable but stable use of all dialect variants by all generations over time with the exception of the young generation, which slightly moves toward the standard pronunciations of several variables.

Unexpectedly the variable use of dialect forms is strongly conditioned by style, which corresponds here to two different interview protocols. The first is conducted in Cajun French by a native speaker, while the second is done by a non-Cajun interviewer who learned French at school. Not only does each generation significantly drop its usage of the dialectal features when interacting with an outsider, the young Cajun women show a sharp decline as well. The evidence suggests that stylistic variation is strongly present in Cajun French in spite of the lack of social contexts, networks and institutions supporting the dominant norms. All generations, including the restricted speakers who employ French less regularly and whose speech shows more signs of linguistic dwindling, can vary their production according to style, as opposed to what is reported for Breton (Dressler 1972) and for Spanish (Lavandera 1978) in minority situations. Even the middle-aged who do not speak Cajun French as a mother tongue and whose use is restricted to their grandparent handle the stylistic variation as easily as the elders.

What justifies stylistic variation in Cajun French is a question worth asking. To understand the linguistic behavior of Cajun speakers, we examine in detail the nature of the interaction during the interviews conducted by an outsider. Several metalinguistic clues that can highlight the function of stylistic changes are present, which lead us to claim that the speaker's desire to transmit her message and her exclusive oral transmission of the French language are important factors. What stands out in this analysis is the particularly vigorous communicative function of Cajun French.