

Contrasting patterns of change in a majority versus minority French-speaking community

Our study focuses on the alternation between causal conjunctions (*à cause (que)* (colloquial or non standard, according to reference works on Canadian French) and *parce (que)* ‘because’ (standard). These conjunctions can both be used with or without *que* and *à cause que* can be used with or without *à*. Thus an analysis of variation makes it possible to determine if alternation between the reduced and full forms of standard and non standard variants is sociostylistically salient.

The study is based on two corpora of Ontario spoken French, one gathered in the strong majority Francophone community of Hawkesbury, the other in the weak minority Francophone community of Pembroke. The corpora were gathered in 1978 and 2005 and hence make it possible to examine change on the basis of real time data. To our knowledge this alternation has not been the object of previous variationist research.

The speakers are adolescent enrolled in French-medium high schools. We expected our investigation would reveal striking differences in the effect of the linguistic and extra-linguistic correlates of variation across the two communities and points in time for several reasons. The speakers reside in communities that differ widely in terms of: i) ethno-linguistic vitality—from 1978 to 2005 Hawkesbury remained predominantly Francophone, while Pembroke’s Francophone minority further weakened; and ii) distribution across the social strata—the Hawkesbury Franco-Ontarian majority remained predominantly working class, whereas the Pembroke Francophone minority remained more evenly distributed across social classes.

The main differences documented by our study are as follows. From 1978 to 2005 (*à cause (que)*)’s frequency rose sharply in Hawkesbury from 1% to 26%. In Pembroke the increase is much more modest (1% vs 5%) and a 3rd variant (hyperformal *car*) is used to a limited extent by several speakers in 2005. Interestingly, in Hawkesbury, the rise of (*à cause (que)*) is driven by male speakers from the upper social strata (a pattern most evident with the reduced variant *cause*). We also found that such speakers, unlike the speakers from the other social strata, do not display the expected (in)formality of topic constraint and use (*à cause (que)*) as often with formal topics as with informal ones. Finally, a phonological constraint influencing *que* deletion in *parce que* was found both in 1978 and 2005 in Hawkesbury, but only in 1978 in Pembroke.

In discussing our results we point out that the Pembroke findings confirm Mougeon and Nadasdi’s (1998) thesis that advanced restriction in the use of minority languages supported by the school has a catalytic effect on standardization and may prevent the acquisition of some of the linguistic constraints of variation. As for the finding that male middle class speakers are at the vanguard of (*à cause (que)*)’s ascent in Hawkesbury, we argue that it may reflect a lower level of linguistic insecurity on the part of such speakers and the fact, revealed by our new 2005 corpus of classroom speech, that (*à cause (que)*) is NOT a fully stigmatized variant—in Hawkesbury teachers use it to some extent in the classroom and students to an even greater degree. In any case, the rise of (*à cause que*) in the speech of the Hawkesbury adolescents is yet another instance of change where adolescent speakers of Canadian French have been found to shift away from prescribed usage in spite of their teachers’ attempt to promote it (see Poplack, 2007).

References

- Mougeon, R., & Nadasdi, T. (1998). Sociolinguistic discontinuities in minority language communities, *Language*, 74, (1), 40-55.
- Poplack, S. (2007). *The role of the school in language change*. Paper presented at the Ontario Conference on Applied Linguistics, University of Windsor, Ontario.