The Variable Grammar of Negative Concord in Montréal French

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While negation in French has generated a lot of attention in terms of the absence of clitic *ne*, very little has been done regarding the variable presence of *pas* with n-words (a*ucun* 'no/any', (1a) *personne* 'no one/anyone', *rien* 'nothing/anything' (1b), *jamais* '(n)ever', *nulle part* 'nowhere/anywhere' and *pantoute* '(not) at all'). In Montréal French, like in other varieties of French, n-words can appear bare in post-verbal position and contribute a semantic negation to the sentence. However this variety also exhibits another variant conveying the same meaning. In such case when n-words appear within the scope of the propositional negation *pas*, unlike in the other variety where such sentences have a double negation interpretation, the only interpretation of a sentence like *J'ai pas vu personne* is a single one: 'I saw no one'.

(1) a. <oui. Tu as aucune idée> Tu-sais j'ai **pas** aucune idée tu-sais. (130 857)
         <yes. Tu have no idea.> You-know I have **not** no idea you-know
         '*<yes. You have no idea> You know, I have no idea, you know.*
     b. j'appelle **pas** ça rien   moi je trouve ' c'est rien.   (44 1684)
          I call   **not** that nothing   me I find   ' it's nothing.
         '*I call that nothing. Me I find that it's nothing.'*

Previous studies of negative concord in Québec French have been based on traditional 'native speaker judgment' methods, which are limited given: 1- the existence of disagreements concerning the grammaticality of core sentences, 2- the fact that native MF speakers are themselves often unsure about the acceptability of the concord sentences which are not part of the spoken standard dialect, and 3- the discrete grammatical frameworks within which previous descriptions have been set are ill-suited to describe the inherent variability and gradience of the phenomenon. Our paper thus highlights the contributions that corpus-based sociolinguistic research can make to the empirical foundations of theoretical syntax.

This paper provides an analysis of the sociolinguistically conditioned variation in negative concord for a corpus of Montréal French. We present a study of the distribution and interpretation of the 2790 n-words in the *Montréal 84* corpus (Thibault & Vincent 1990). We observe that, contrary to previous claims in the literature (cf. Léard (1995), Déprez (2002), Déprez & Martineau (2004)), concord with *pas* is possible with the entire class of n-words. Using variable rule analysis, we show use of structures with *pas* is conditioned by a strong lexical effect and combination of syntactic factors such as syntactic position, embedding, complement-taking. Additionally, the variation is also constrained by social factors such as education, age and sex, leading us to hypothesize a change in progress towards standardization (change from above).

References

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