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 (aucun '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 idéée> 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


