

Future Temporal Reference in New Brunswick Acadian French

Mélicca Chiasson-Léger (*Université d'Ottawa*)

According to the received wisdom, Acadian French is a conservative variety par excellence (Comeau 2011; King 2013). A frequently invoked example of its grammatical conservatism concerns the variable expression of future temporal reference (Comeau 2011; King & Nadasdi 2003). In contrast to other varieties of Canadian French (Poplack & Dion 2009; Poplack & Turpin 1999; Grimm & Nadasdi 2011), Acadian French is claimed to exhibit distinctive linguistic conditioning, resulting in particular elevated rates of the inflectional future (as high as 59% in King & Nadasdi 2003). Careful inspection of the literature reveals that much of the evidence in favor of this claim is based on the examination of varieties in Nova Scotia (Comeau 2011), Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island (King & Nadasdi 2003).

In this paper, we bring new data to bear on the characterization of Acadian French as conservative. Innovative in this research is the consideration of geographical varieties that have not hitherto been investigated with respect to the variability of future temporal reference. Drawing on the infrastructure of variationist sociolinguistics, we make use of complementary data sources based on spontaneous speech recorded in different geographical locations. The first corpus (Beaulieu 1990) is a variety of Acadian French spoken in northeastern New Brunswick, where it is the majority language. The second variety (Perrot 1990) comes from a corpus recorded in the southeast, where Acadian French is in intense contact with English.

Circumscribing the variable contexts to the events and states that transpired after speech time, all exponents of future temporal reference, including the inflectional future (ex. Elle **marchera.**), the periphrastic future (ex. Elle **va marcher.**) and the futurate present (ex. Je **marche.**) were exhaustively extracted from the two corpora (459 tokens and 460 tokens respectively). These exponents were then coded for a number of independent predictors hypothesized to affect variant choice (e.g. age, sex, temporal reference, polarity, presence of “quand”, certainty, contingency, grammatical person and type of adverbial specification) and subsequently analyzed distributionally and via variable rule analysis (Sankoff 1988).

A first remarkable finding is that the variant distribution is strikingly similar to that reported for Quebec French: the periphrastic future is the lead variant in both corpora. Nevertheless, compelling intra-variety differences emerge from the inspection of the fine conditioning of variant choice: polarity is the overriding determinant of the selection of the inflectional future in the northeast, whereas temporal distance is the pre-eminent constraint in the southeast. Moreover, in the southeast, the periphrastic future is particularly favored with distal future reference, contrary to its association with the proximal future in other varieties of Acadian French (Comeau 2011; King & Nadasdi 2003).

The results converge in demonstrating that the idea that all varieties of Acadian French form a conservative variety is a spurious one, at least with respect to the variable behavior of future temporal reference. Furthermore, the periphrastic future appears to be grammaticalizing differently across varieties of Acadian French, affording new insights into the study of grammaticalization pathways in different varieties of the same language.

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