

Clustering variants in Acadian French

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Guy (2013: 63) asks “do [...] multiple variables cohere in forming sociolects?” He predicts that the rate of use of a particular variant should be more similar among speakers from the same group, e.g., social class, than across speakers from different groups, and that there should therefore be correlations in the rate of use of particular variants of multiple sociolinguistic variables that index membership in a particular group. To test this hypothesis, this paper examines the clustering behaviour of variants in Chiac, a variety of French that includes extensive borrowings from English.

Chiac, a dialect of Acadian French, as spoken by adolescents in Moncton, New Brunswick, is ideal for exploring these ideas, as locals claim that the speech of students at the two French-speaking high schools in the area is diverging. One is in a predominantly Anglophone municipality, the other is in a Francophone municipality. This paper identifies, describes and compares the sociolects of adolescents attending these schools and determines how multiple variables pattern in each in order to support reports of diverging dialects. Analyzing a set of dependent variables allows us to examine whether multiple variables’ variants pattern in a similar way, an opportunity not available to researchers who report on one or small sets of variables. I elicited and recorded casual interviews and reading passages with ten students, five per school. I analyze phonetic, phonological and lexical variables, whose variants have English, Canadian French and Acadian French counterparts. Seven variables are analyzed: Rhotics (N=1000), Palatalization (N=70), Affirmative (N=984), Nouns (N=2202), Verbs (N=3436), Prepositions (N=840) and Conjunctions (N=1188). Self-reported rates of use of English are considered, along with school attended and gender.

The students’ variants cluster in a way that implies dialectal differences. Multiple analyses were conducted, including examining the clustering of variables across participants, the clustering of variants across participant, and the clustering of the rate of use of variants by school. Guy (2013) is only partially supported by the results of the clustering. The participants at the school in the Anglophone area clearly cluster their variants for the Verbs, Nouns and Prepositions variables; however, the participants at the school in the Francophone area do not. This indicates that clustering is only occurring within one school.