

Use vs non-use of negative particle *ne* in French: A hyper-style variable?

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According to Bell (1984), hyper-style variables differ from regular socio-stylistic variables in that, in casual speech, the non-standard variant is highly dominant and social stratification is low. Unexpectedly, with hyper-style variables the amplitude of style-shifting from casual to hyper-formal speech in a Labovian interview sharpens and far exceeds that of social stratification. Further, the sharp drop in frequency of non-standard variants on the casual↔hyper-formal scale is observable even in careful speech (typically when broaching informal topics).

Recent *ne* studies in Canadian or European spoken French have found that *ne* non-use (the NS variant) dominates in casual speech, having lost much of its social markedness. Some studies examined the influence of topic (in)formality, claiming an association between formal topics and *ne* use in Labovian interviews, which led to the acceptance of *ne* as a hyper-style variant.

In this paper, we re-examine research on the socio-stylistic markedness of *ne* use/non-use and argue that it does not provide strong evidence of this as a hyper-style variable. Further, we analyze *ne* use/non-use by Grade 9 and 12 Franco-Ontarian students from four communities recorded in Labovian interviews and in the classroom and by teachers while performing various discursive functions in the classroom.

Our study shows that, in the interviews, *ne* non-use is highly dominant in the students' casual speech, it is not socially stratified in three of the four communities (and only to some extent in the fourth), and topic (in)formality has no effect in all four communities. Further, when the students' frequency of *ne* non-use is compared in the interviews and classroom, there is virtually no difference in three of the communities. In the fourth, where some social marking was documented, *ne* non-use drops in the classroom, but the amplitude is similar to that of social marking. Thus, according to Bell's criteria, *ne* use/non-use does not evidence the sharp style-shifting typical of hyper-style variables, at least for the students' speech.

Our analysis of teacher in-class speech is informed by Poplack's (in press) finding that high school teachers from Hull, Quebec displayed 89% *ne* non-use in Labovian interviews compared to 99.5% for the general population (Sankoff & Vincent 1980). Yet, the overall rate of *ne* non-use in-class by the teachers under study, originating either from Ontario or Quebec, is only 87%, suggesting that, even for this special segment of the population, *ne* use/non-use is not a hyper-style variable. That said, we show that *ne* non-use is not devoid of stylistic markedness in the classroom. French teachers avoid it more than teachers of other subjects, and teachers avoid it most when lecturing, somewhat less when providing instructions to the class, and even less when addressing individual students. These findings are in keeping with the mechanisms of interpersonal accommodation formulated in Bell's audience design framework.

In sum, while teacher classroom speech does not provide strong evidence for *ne* use/non-use as a hyper-style variable, our findings are, nonetheless, useful in paving the way for variationist research to focus on the classroom for the investigation of style-shifting (see Mougeon & Rehner, 2014, for findings on another sociolinguistic variable in this same educational setting).

References

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