

The Life Cycles of a Vernacular Form

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What happens when a vernacular form enters in competition with a supralocal variant? Some potential outcomes are obvious: the vernacular form persists but takes on new, perhaps contested, indexicalities or it becomes stigmatized and declines, perhaps to the point of disappearing from the community repertoire. This talk presents a number of actual outcomes, illustrated through quantitative and qualitative data for the expression of 1st person plural pronominal reference in several Acadian French varieties spoken in eastern Canada. These varieties have similar origins and inter-related histories but have varied in terms of their social circumstances from at the late 19th century.

In a number of past and present-day varieties of French, one way of expressing 1st person plural involves pairing *je*, used as a 1st person pronoun unmarked for number, with the *-ons* verbal ending typically associated with the 1st person plural in French, as in *je dansons* ‘we are dancing’. In at least one of the Acadian varieties spoken in Newfoundland, this is in fact the only way of expressing 1st person plural pronominal reference so there is no sociolinguistic variable. In other Acadian communities, *je+VERB+-ons* is or has been in competition with 1st person plural definite *on+VERB+-Ø*, as in *on danse* ‘we are dancing’. Where *je+VERB+-ons* is a sociolinguistic variant, it is highly salient, as evidenced by metalinguistic commentary and hypercorrection in sociolinguistic corpora. Perceptual salience helps to explain instances of rapid change in communities in New Brunswick and eastern Quebec where *je+VERB+-ons* has disappeared from one generation to the next. In contrast, in a Prince Edward Island community, the variant has decreased in overall frequency but has become strongly associated with the performance of particular speech genres by both older and younger consultants. In other words, it has not faded away but has found new life as a performance key. There is yet another scenario present in the data for New Brunswick involving what might be termed the afterlife of the variant. While it ceases to be part of the day-to-day repertoire of New Brunswick Acadians (it is last reported in a sociolinguistic corpus for elderly speakers recorded in the 1970s), *je+VERB+-ons* now appears in stylized performances of Acadian-ness on the part of adolescents and young adults. Such usage is often, but not exclusively, found in mediated contexts and involves complex styling of vernacularity.

In general terms, this talk addresses the sociolinguistic consequences of dialect contact, the role of perceptual salience in grammatical change, and the recontextualization of vernacularity.