

A comparative variationist analysis of subjunctive use in Hexagonal French and Quebec French Laura Kastronic (University of Ottawa)

French spoken in Quebec (QF) is widely decried as inferior to Hexagonal French (HF). Its many purportedly distinct (frequently stigmatized) morphosyntactic features, often perceived as grammatically degraded due to their nonconformity with prescriptive norms, are believed to have originated and developed on Canadian soil due either to separation from the metropolis or to contact with English. While it is widely assumed that the two varieties are vastly different, this assumption has not been tested empirically. In fact, systematic and accountable analyses of morphosyntactic features in HF are generally absent from the current body of linguistic research on French, which precludes the possibility of reliable comparison.

The French subjunctive has garnered much attention from grammarians and linguists alike. It is prescribed in hundreds of (often contradictory) contexts and is ascribed a wide variety of (often idiosyncratic) semantic readings but studies of actual subjunctive usage in Canadian French (e.g. Poplack et al., 2013; Poplack, 1990; Comeau, 2011) have shown that subjunctive use is largely lexically constrained. In fact, Poplack et al., (2013) found that in QF, the subjunctive is nearly categorically limited to a handful of triggers (*falloir*, *vouloir*, *aimer*) and embedded verbs (*être*, *avoir*, *faire*) despite a very high overall rate of use.

This study represents the first *comparative* Variationist analysis of subjunctive use in HF and QF— a method specifically designed to compare the underlying grammars that condition the linguistic choices made by speakers across cohorts. Data from both the 20th and 21st century were analyzed in order to capture any ongoing change. Our goal is to determine whether a) the subjunctive is used to the same degree in both varieties across time and b) whether there are parallels in the linguistic conditioning of the variability.

In order to address these questions, we analyzed a carefully selected subsample from two HF spoken corpora: “*Corpus de Français Parlé Parisien*” (Branca-Rosoff et al., 2009) and “*Enquêtes Sociolinguistiques à Orléans*” (LLL-Orléans, 1968-2013). Poplack et al.’s 2013 study of subjunctive use in QF was used as a point of comparison and careful measures were taken to replicate their study in the HF data in order to ensure optimal comparability. The contribution of several internal and external factors to subjunctive use was considered.

Results reveal, contrary to expectations, that the rate of subjunctive is significantly lower in HF than in QF under both verbal and non-verbal governors. This result is quite surprising given the commonly cited idea that HF hews more closely to the norm than QF. Interestingly, while rates of subjunctive under verbal governor *falloir* are nearly categorical in both varieties, *falloir* accounts for a much smaller proportion of the data pool in HF than in QF. Without *falloir*, the rates of subjunctive in both varieties are nearly identical! The analysis of the internal conditioning shows that lexical and structural (rather than semantic) factors are prevalent in subjunctive selection in HF- a finding that mirrors that found in QF by Poplack et al. (2013). Where choice of subjunctive is not lexically constrained, it is favored in prototypical subjunctive contexts (those featuring an overt complementizer *que*, no intervening material between matrix and embedded clauses, etc.).

These findings show that the strong community norms governing subjunctive use are nearly identical in the two varieties. This challenges the common belief that HF is prescriptively superior to QF and suggests that the internal grammar constraining subjunctive use in both varieties was inherited from a common source.

References

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