

Schwa Behaviour in Four North American French Communities

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This study examines the variable realisation of the French schwa vowel, also called *e caduc* or *e muet* (the vowel in *je* 'I' [ʒə]). Drawing on data from four research points in the international Phonology of Contemporary French project (*le projet Phonologie du français contemporain [PFC]*, Durand, Laks & Lyche 2002, 2009), the analysis seeks to reveal the interplay of linguistic and sociolinguistic factors that condition schwa realisation across communities with varying levels of contact with English.

Schwa behaviour is highly complex and variable (Morin 1988; Côté 2000). In principle, the schwa in the French subject pronoun *je* ('I') is pronounced before a consonant-initial word (*je suis* 'I am'), and deletes before a vowel-initial word (*j'ai* 'I have'). In practice, schwa deletion before a consonant (*j'suis*) varies according to sociolinguistic factors such as sex (Armstrong & Unsworth 1999), formality (Andreassen & Lyche 2009), age, and speech community (Auger & Villeneuve 2007); and linguistic factors such as the number of following syllables (Léon 1966), preceding and following segments (Andreassen 2011), and word identity (Racine 2007; Racine & Grosjean 2002).

The study focuses on the Francophone communities of Windsor, Ontario; Trois-Rivières, Québec; Tracadie, New Brunswick; and Golden Meadow, Louisiana. Differences along lines of majority language status, dialect subgroup, and literacy justify the comparison of these four locales. In Windsor and Golden Meadow, French speakers are in a minority situation compared to English (Poiré 2009; Blainey 2013); in contrast, nearly all residents of Trois-Rivières and Tracadie speak French (Côté 2012; Cichocki 2014). In terms of linguistic similarity, Windsor and Trois-Rivières are Laurentian French varieties, Acadian French is spoken in Tracadie, and Louisiana French is spoken in Golden Meadow. In terms of literacy, the Canadian speakers can read and write in French, while in Louisiana, speakers have little to no knowledge of written French. Data come from twelve speakers from each research point, evenly divided by sex and generation, speaking under two conditions: a reading or translation task, and free conversation with a familiar interlocutor. The PFC's standardized numeric coding system flags all environments where schwa may appear (Durand & Lyche 2003). Approximately 12 hours of speech (an average of 15 minutes per speaker) furnishes 17,721 schwa tokens for analysis.

Logistic regressions include the linguistic factors of preceding segment class, following segment class, number of syllables in the word, and position in the word. The regressions also include the sociolinguistic factors of age, sex, community, and speaking task. In terms of the overall distribution of variable schwa realisation, logistic regression analyses show that phonological factors are the strongest predictors; Golden Meadow speakers (who do not read or write in French) do not exhibit a style-based difference; and the Laurentian French varieties (Windsor and Trois-Rivières) resemble each other most closely. When monosyllabic words are examined in isolation, logistic regressions reveal that phonological factors remain the strongest predictors; that the minority speech communities (Windsor and Golden Meadow) show a negative correlation between age and schwa realisation rate (in keeping with Poiré, Kaminskaïa & Tremblay [2010]); and that the majority speech communities show a spike in schwa use among speakers in the workforce. Results suggest that some style-based contrasts in schwa behaviour are learned through the orthographic system, and that for variable schwa realization environments, such as in monosyllabic words, behaviour is partially conditioned by the majority or minority status of the Francophone community in comparison with the Anglophone community.

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