

Prosodic rhythm in Northeastern Ontario Francophones' French and English

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Research on variation and change in Ontario French has uncovered a range of phenomena attributable either to contact with English or to restricted use of French in local minority settings (Léon and Cichocki 1989; Mougeon and Beniak 1991; Mougeon and Nadasdi 1998, among others). As regards Ontario French prosody, while some possible contact-induced patterns have been observed in intonation (Cichocki and Lepetit 1986; Kaminskaïa and Poiré 2012), findings regarding the eventual influence of English rhythm patterns have not been conclusive (Kaminskaïa, Tennant, and Russell 2016). However, this latter study based on rhythm metrics, like other work on the speech of Franco-Ontarians, only considers data for French. This proposed paper reports on a study which delves more deeply into the contact situation by analyzing the prosodic rhythm of bilingual Franco-Ontarians' English in addition to their French.

We propose to present the results of an analysis based on a corpus gathered in two localities in Northeastern Ontario: Kapuskasing (67% of the population French mother tongue) and Timmins (44% of the population French mother tongue). Using two-minute excerpts from conversations in French and in English for 6 speakers from each locality, 3 women and 3 men of 3 generations, we analyze the following rhythm metrics: nPVI-V (Low, Grabe, and Nolan 2000), ΔV , ΔC , and %V (Ramus, Nespore, and Mehler 1999), VarcoV and VarcoC (Dellwo and Wagner 2006, White & Mattys 2007). Metrics are calculated in Correlatore (Mairano and Romano 2010) after manually checking forced alignment of segments generated using SPPAS (Bigi 2015) in Praat TextGrid annotations (Boersma and Weenink 2021).

We seek answers to the following research questions: 1) Does French spoken in Timmins (where Francophones are locally a minority) show a more stress-timed rhythm pattern (due to more intensive contact with English) than French spoken in Kapuskasing (where Francophones are locally a majority)?; 2) Do bilingual Franco-Ontarians show similar values for rhythm metrics in their two languages, thus suggesting a contact-induced convergence in prosodic rhythm?

A preliminary exploratory analysis based on two speakers from each locality (Kapuskasing: senior male; young female; Timmins: senior male, young female) did not reveal a clear pattern supporting the hypothesis implicit in the first research question. However, three of the four speakers did show a distinct prosodic rhythm difference between their French and their English, thus suggesting that prosodic rhythm as measured by rhythm metrics might not be subject to a strong influence of one language on the other. This paper addresses these research questions further using a larger corpus.

Previous studies on the speech of Franco-Ontarians have understandably focussed exclusively on their French, but in the absence of data on the English of these bilingual speakers, conclusions regarding contact effects remain tentative, particularly as regards prosody. Our aim is to contribute to addressing this gap in the research on Ontario French.

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