

Avis de Recherche

AFLS bursary 2001

Sociolinguistic variation in the Paris suburbs: a progress report

Project outline

Empirical evidence (Armstrong and Boughton 1999) tends to confirm the impressionistic opinion that *Oïl* French, the variety of French spoken north of a line crossing from La Rochelle to Lyon, (excluding Brittany in the West and Alsace in the East), shows very little geographical variation with regards to phonology. Phonological variation is mostly found in the elision of segments present in the orthography, principally schwa and the liquid consonants /l/ and /R/. It can be argued that French phonology has been standardised to a level rarely observed in other Western languages. The study, which is part of a PhD in progress at the University of Kent at Canterbury, focuses on the French spoken by the working class youth of the Paris *banlieues* (understand *inner cities*). Preliminary results (Armstrong and Jamin *forthcoming* 2001) show paradoxical patterns of variation, which seems to be linked to the emergence of a street culture. Innovative phonological features such as the affrication of dental stops and the glottalisation of /R/ seem to be emerging and could be signs of change in progress in French. Using a variationist approach, the hypothesis of the research is that some of these innovative variants are more likely to be adopted than others by French speakers who live outside the banlieues. This is because of the weakly marked nature of these variants and the lesser degree to which they are alien to the French standard phonological system.

2 Brief chronology of the research project

The study started in late September 1997, as a part-time PhD at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. It was agreed with research supervisor Dr. Nigel Armstrong that the first part of the year would essentially deal with background reading on French sociolinguistics. This was in order to get familiar with potential gaps in the field and in time, place the project within previous research carried out in the field. The second part of the year would be devoted to the preparation of fieldwork. Contacts, accommodation and fieldwork methodology were to be considered to enable the collection of data over the summer of 1998.

A brief pilot study took place in April 1998, and allowed the collection of a sample covering three areas of Paris banlieue : La Courneuve, Fontenay-sous-bois, Versailles.¹

As the vernacular of interest was felt to correlate with social class, it was felt important to investigate three towns showing different socio-economic characteristics. Versailles is traditionally seen as upper-middle class, Fontenay-sous-bois as lower-middle to upper-working class while La Courneuve has a predominantly lower-working class population. As the vernacular found in the banlieues was believed to be associated with working class youth, immigration,

¹ The author's schematic map has not been included. *Editorial note.*

and the distribution of housing in *grands ensembles* or *cités*, Paris 18 and 19èmes were also investigated, for they shared similar characteristics. The pilot study enabled the researcher to choose linguistic variables of interest and to establish strong contacts in order to plan a larger fieldwork period which took place in the summer of 1998. It was decided to focus on La Courneuve and Fontenay-sous-bois, essentially for practical reasons. Lack of space does not allow a discussion of these in detail here.

The sample collected in 1998 was controlled for age, sex, social class, style and ethnicity as it was felt that the vernacular was linked to the banlieue population having an immigration background. Three main ethnic categories were isolated: French from metropolitan origins, French from northern African origins, and French from other origins. The reason why only these three origins were distinguished was that the variables of interest were hypothesised to have been introduced by the northern African population. 64 speakers were recorded and transcriptions started in October 1998. It was decided to firstly focus the transcriptions on the palatalisation of dental and velar plosives, felt to be an innovative linguistic phenomenon. The end of the academic year was spent writing the draft of a chapter regarding data collection. The research was interrupted from September 1999 to July 2000 by the necessity for the researcher to do his national service. Although it was possible during this time to continue working on the project, its pace was considerably reduced. Nevertheless, email contacts with Dr. Nigel Armstrong allowed preliminary results on the palatalisation of dental and velar plosives to be discussed in a forthcoming article (see below for a reference).

In October 2000, as the researcher moved to Kent for familial reasons, the PhD was transferred to the university of Kent at Canterbury under the supervision of Dr. David Hornsby. Email contact has however been kept with Dr. Armstrong whose help and advice remain invaluable to the study. This academic year has essentially been devoted to the completion of transcriptions on palatalisation, but progress has been slowed down by the necessity to finance the study.

3 The AFLS bursary and the future of the study

The AFLS bursary will prove a tremendous financial relief for the research. It will allow the researcher to spend more time on the project, as the need to raise money will be lightened. The writing of a draft for a new chapter should then be possible and it is intended that by the end of the year 2001, the part of the PhD devoted to palatalisation shall be completed. Contacts have been made with Ian Watson at Oxford University to organise experimental measurements of palatalisation. Being able to undertake a larger amount of work will ensure that the academic year 2001–2 will be spent working on a second linguistic variable as well as writing new chapters. The year 2002–3 should see the design of the final draft of the thesis. It is now felt that thanks to the AFLS bursary, it will be possible to submit on time.

References

- Armstrong, N. & Z. Boughton (1999) "Identification and evaluation responses to a French accent: some results and issues of methodology" *Revue Parole* 5 (6): 27–60.
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