

AFLS Bursary Report

Sociolinguistic variation in the Paris suburbs.

Research outline

This variationist research project, which is part of a PhD in progress at the University of Kent at Canterbury, is the first quantitative study of the phonology of what Goudaillier (2001) calls *le français contemporain des cités*. For over a decade, linguistic studies of the French spoken in the *banlieues* have focused like Goudaillier on vocabulary, with rather few exceptions (Gadet 1998, Conein and Gadet 2000, Armstrong and Jamin 2002).

However, in their sketches, French comedians such as Smaïl, Les Inconnus and more recently Jamel portray this variety of French with a stereotypical accent, which suggests that this accent is increasingly recognizable by French speakers of all social backgrounds, including those ‘mainstream’ speakers living outside the *banlieues* (Lepoutre 1997: 22). In this study, I attempt to link this distinctive pronunciation, in a precise and accountable way, to the young working-class population living in the *banlieues défavorisées*. I also show paradoxical patterns of variation which seem to be linked to the emergence of a street culture and to young *beurs* (c.f. below Jamin 2003 forthcoming). Indeed, innovative phonological features such as the affrication of dental stops and the glottalisation of / Σ / seem to be emerging and could be signs of change in progress in French.

Progress since Summer 2001

Since the last progress report (c.f. AFLS Cahiers, Summer 2001, 7.2, 33-5), a book chapter co-authored with Dr. Nigel Armstrong and a forthcoming article have emerged from the research project. References and abstracts of these two publications are given below:

1) Armstrong, N. and Jamin, M. (2002). Le français des banlieues: uniformity and discontinuity in the French of the Hexagon. In Sahli, K. (ed.). *French in and out of France: language policies, intercultural antagonisms and dialogues*. Bern: Peter Lang. 107-36.

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 paper focuses on the French spoken by the working class youth of the Paris *banlieues* (the population sample was recorded in La Courneuve in 1998) and gives a succinct description of its major phonological features. It also provides preliminary quantitative results, which

show clear-cut patterns of sociolinguistic variation. Indeed, the affrication of dental stops (the pronunciation which gives *tchu dji* for *tu dis*) seems to be emerging and a clear age-grading pattern could be the sign of a change in progress in French. The hypothesis of the paper is that this innovative variant (e.g. the affrication of dental plosives) is more likely to be adopted than others (e.g. the glottalisation of /R/) 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) Jamin, M. (forthcoming 2003). *Beurs and Accent des Cités: A Case Study of Linguistic Diffusion in la Courneuve*. In *Sites*, the Journal of 20th Century/Contemporary French Studies. University of Connecticut. Vol.7: 2.

In this article I show through a case study of a sample of speakers recorded in La Courneuve in 1998, that a distinctive accent feature of *accent des cités* (affrication, see above) is closely associated with the young *beur* generation. I show further that this pronunciation feature seems to be spreading to the whole young population of La Courneuve, regardless of speakers' ethnic origin. I subsequently attempt to relate this linguistic diffusion to the development of a street culture within the *cités* and show, using a street-culture index, that the adoption of pronunciation forms in the *cités* co-varies with a strong integration into the groups, values and culture of the street – a subculture which is created and maintained by the very infrastructure of *banlieues défavorisées*.

3) It is hoped that a forthcoming paper to be given on 26th April 2003 at the Camling Conference in Cambridge will feature in the Camlig proceedings. Although the paper's abstract has been accepted, it is not yet clear whether every paper will be published. The paper focuses on the glottalisation of /Σ / in the data collected in La Courneuve.

More importantly, I expect to finish the thesis itself by the autumn of 2003.

References

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- Conein, B. and Gadet, F. (2000). Français populaire? Français des banlieues? *Interface Bradford Studies in Language, Culture and Society*, 5.
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- Goudaillier, J. P. 3rd ed (2001). *Comment tu tchatches! Dictionnaire du français contemporain des cités*. Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose.
- Kroch, A. S. (1978). Towards a theory of social dialect variation. *Language in society*. 7: 17-36.
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