

## Linguistic convergence/divergence or degree of bilingualism?

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(Received June 2015; revised September 2015)

In their article, Mougeon, Hallion, Bigot, and Papen attempt to explain the similarities and differences among four varieties of Canadian French spoken outside Quebec (and New Brunswick) in the use of the restriction forms *rien que*, *juste*, *seulement (que)*, and *ne . . . que*. Mougeon and colleagues focused on the French varieties spoken in Welland (Ontario), Saint-Boniface (Manitoba), Saint-Laurent (i.e., Michif French, Manitoba) and Bonnyville (Alberta) (see also Nadasdi & Keppie 2004). Using a variationist sociolinguistic framework, they examined the effect of linguistic and extralinguistic factors on speakers' use of the aforementioned restriction forms, and compared their results to those reported in previous studies of the French varieties spoken in Montreal (Quebec) (Massicotte 1984, 1986; Thibault & Daveluy 1989) and in Hawkesbury, Cornwall, Northbay, and Pembroke (Ontario) (Rehner & Mougeon 1998). Based on their results, Mougeon and colleagues made hypotheses regarding linguistic convergence/divergence and raise relevant questions for future research. In this commentary, I briefly assess some of the contributions made by this research from a psycholinguistic perspective. In doing so, I raise additional questions concerning the source of the effects reported in the study.

The task that Mougeon et al. tackled in their research is particularly difficult, because the effects of two of the extralinguistic factors they investigated (age and social class) can potentially be explained by the degree of French-English bilingualism and possibly language dominance of the French speakers they examined, at least for some of the restriction forms (e.g., *juste*); yet, in this study, degree of bilingualism was not documented for the speakers in the four corpora. With more information about the speakers' degree of bilingualism, it would be possible to determine whether the effects that the researchers reported are attributable to linguistic convergence/divergence or to the different degrees of bilingualism of the different speakers. It could be ascertained here, for instance, whether the observed effects are systemic (i.e., they reflect the language spoken in the community, irrespective of the degree of bilingualism of the speakers) or spontaneous (i.e., they reflect the degree of bilingualism of the speakers) (for discussion, see Cacoulios & Travis, to appear; Poplack 1993).

In communities where the home language is a minority language, younger speakers tend to reach higher proficiency in the majority language as compared to older speakers. It is therefore relevant to independently assess the speakers' degree of bilingualism and language dominance in case a particular effect could be attributed to degree of bilingualism instead of systemic linguistic convergence.

In all four corpora they examined, Mougeon and colleagues show that younger speakers make greater use of *juste* than older speakers. This effect is rather robust given that it surfaces in all four varieties examined. It would be important to specify whether this difference can be attributed to (large-scale) linguistic convergence with English or to an increasing degree of English proficiency among younger speakers as compared to older speakers (the more proficient French speakers are in English, the greater the likelihood of English influencing their French productions).

If (large-scale) linguistic convergence were taking place in these French communities, we might expect younger speakers to use *juste* more than older speakers even in a comparison where degree of bilingualism is held constant between the two groups. In the community as a whole, younger speakers are likely to differ from older speakers in their degree of bilingualism, but by matching a subset of each group in degree of bilingualism, one could determine whether the language spoken by the community is also changing aside from (or in addition to) the speakers' degree of bilingualism and possibly language dominance. Such a comparison could also be attempted in Mougeon et al.'s work with information on degree of bilingualism incorporated in their study. The age effect shown by the French speakers in the Saint-Laurent corpus is more likely to provide evidence of linguistic convergence since these speakers were more isolated and thus had less contact with English, but again, firm conclusions can only be drawn with documentation of these speakers' degree of bilingualism.

Another effect of extralinguistic factor reported in the article is that of social class, assumed to stem from education, with more educated French speakers making lesser use of forms considered to be borrowed from English (e.g., *juste*) and greater use of prescriptive French forms (e.g., *seulement*) than less educated speakers. This effect was found in the Welland corpus and to some degree in the Saint-Boniface corpus (speakers with university education vs. speakers with grade-12 education), and it was also attested in the Hawkesbury, Cornwall, North Bay, and Pembroke corpora. For speakers in the Saint-Boniface corpus, compounded to this effect was the fact that the data were elicited by a French speaker from France rather than by a local French speaker, thus potentially leading the interviewees to avoid English-like forms and use more prescriptive French forms.

Although French education can lead to greater knowledge of prescriptive French grammar rules, university-level education (especially graduate education) may also result in greater contact with English. If this contact with English is substantial, awareness of prescriptive French grammar rules may not be sufficient to mask the influence of English. On the one hand, the speakers in Saint-Boniface may have filtered their French speech with the use of prescriptive grammar rules, thus masking the possible influence of English *within their community*. Across the four French corpora, however, the speakers in the Saint-Boniface corpus, who were by far the most educated, made the greatest use of *juste* in all four syntactic contexts, suggesting an overall greater influence of English despite their attempt to mask it.

If higher levels of education indeed leads to higher degrees of bilingualism, such results would suggest that the French speakers in the Saint-Boniface corpus were

influenced by opposing forces – the desire to use prescriptive French grammar rules and the influence of English contact – each of which manifested itself differently in the data. With documentation of these speakers' degree of bilingualism, we could gain a better understanding of the interplay between these two potentially opposing forces. Ultimately, however, when sample size tends to be small like in Mougeon et al.'s study, we are unavoidably left with the same question: Do the observed effects of social class provide evidence of linguistic convergence/divergence, or should they instead be attributed to the different degrees of bilingualism and/or to the different language dominance of the individual speakers who were compared?

In corpus research, where data have already been collected and speakers are no longer accessible, it may not be possible to document the speakers' degree of bilingualism. Some of the implications of this study for research on bilingualism, however, could provide great incentive for researchers interested in the questions of linguistic convergence/divergence to assess speakers' degree of bilingualism at the time when the corpus is created. In their study of the French spoken in Hawkesbury, Cornwall, North Bay, and Pembroke, for example, Rehner and Mougeon (1998) documented the frequency with which the speakers used French, and found that it indeed inversely predicted the speakers' production of the restriction form *juste*. Such studies could pave the way for more informed social and psycholinguistic studies of linguistic convergence/divergence in the future.

Establishing the degree of bilingualism and language dominance of bilingual speakers goes beyond documenting speakers' use of languages, however. A variety of factors have been shown to influence speech and sentence production in bilingual speakers, including age of acquisition of each language, percent daily exposure to and use of each language (i.e., amount of input and output), context of exposure to and use of each language (i.e., type of input and output), and degree of literacy in each language (for discussion of some of these factors, see Birdsong 2014; Flege, MacKay, Piske 2002; Hulstijn 2012). Successful measures of degree of bilingualism and language dominance are those that take all or most of these factors into consideration (e.g., Dunn & Tree 2009; Marian, Blumfeld, & Kaushanskaya 2007). It is clear that the four French corpora examined by Mougeon and colleagues differ in these four variables, with the Saint-Boniface speakers perhaps being at one end of the continuum and the Saint-Laurent speakers at the other end of the continuum.

All in all, further research on the use of restriction forms in Canadian French would have much to gain by providing a thorough assessment of the degree of bilingualism and language dominance of French speakers alongside any investigation of extralinguistic factors.

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