Paris: a sociolinguistic comparative perspective

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ABSTRACT

This article assesses the sociolinguistic impact and importance of the other articles in this special issue on Paris, considering three main themes that are evoked. First, the contribution of the articles here to the development of work on language variation and change on Hexagonal French within the variationist paradigm. Second, I address what I see as the important contribution made to our understanding of the 'city' as a sociolinguistic site. Finally, I focus on ethnicity as a social construct in recent variationist work in cities and consider what the articles here, and in comparison with cities elsewhere, add to our understanding of the impact of immigration on local manifestations of language variability. In each case, I attempt to show how these articles foreground or even problematize these three issues, and provide a prospectus for further research that can address unresolved questions.

INTRODUCTION

The preceding suite of articles represents the most concerted effort to date to assess, using variationist sociolinguistic techniques and with a comparative context, contemporary linguistic change from the phonetic and prosodic to the discourse-pragmatic, from language use and language perception, of a French city.[1] Here I attempt – rather than simply recapping what has been accomplished in the volume – to draw out three more general themes/debates/problems which I believe these articles foreground and which I believe help us to see the relevance of this work beyond Paris, and beyond French. These are the following: the development of French variationism, the city as a unit of enquiry, and the contemporary focus on ethnicity as a social parameter shaping and being shaped by linguistic variation. The work presented in this volume – based on empirical studies of Paris (and, comparatively, Strasbourg) – sheds important light on these issues and raises many questions, some tricky, of importance to the study of language variation more generally.

VARIATIONISM IN PARIS

For me, one of the most refreshing aspects of this suite of articles is to see a concerted effort to engage in a substantial, sophisticated, sensitive, fine-tuned, variationist

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analysis of the French of France. The articles presented above all demonstrate how insightful such an analysis can be: we learn a great deal here about the structured heterogeneity of contemporary Parisian French, about its 'grammar' – not just the often novel constructions used, but also the robust linguistic constraints that operate on this relatively under-researched set of variables. Only with such fine-grained analysis is comparative sociolinguistic analysis truly possible. As a result of this Parisian project, then, scholars will be able to investigate the same variables in other sites, and directly compare not just superficial frequencies of use of certain variants, but, more importantly to the variationist, their linguistic embedding in the spoken grammar.

It has not always been thus. Gadet (2003, see also 2004), in an interesting retrospective on the reception of Labovian sociolinguistics in France, points to a number of reasons why his approach did not find as fertile ground as it did in many other places – that some aspects of the Labovian agenda were already being addressed, but in different ways, by local scholars, the peripheral status of sociolinguistics generally in the highly philologically oriented French university system, the lack in the French tradition of a penchant for fieldwork, and an unconducive political environment in which heterogeneity was not celebrated. "On balance, then", Gadet (2003:27) argues, "the situation is one of ambivalence" to Labovian variationism. This also helps explain why, on the other hand, variationism found a very fertile home in the early years in Quebec, where these factors were weak or did not apply at all. For a long period, the most prominent examples of variationism on Hexagonal French or other languages of France were conducted by scholars outside of the country, such as Auger, Eckert, Hornsby, Armstrong, Coveney (but see, of course, the work of Chevrot). Variationist work on French today appears to be undergoing a relative growth spurt, however, with interest coming from a range of different quarters and with impetus from the application of new technologies. Avanzi (2017), for example, is an eye catching atlas of European French variation based on an internet survey with over 50,000 respondents.

PARIS AS 'CITY'

One of the strengths of this suite of articles is the comparative sociolinguistic analysis that is made possible by similar approaches to data collection, data analysis and data interpretation being applied by allied researchers in two (or more) different sites. Cheshire's participation in both the Parisian Urban Vernacular project described here, and the earlier Multicultural London English projects ensure that both methodological and analytical comparability on the one hand, and theoretical underpinning on the other could be shared across the projects in the two sites, and direct comparisons with London made.

The city has become rather fetishized as a site in contemporary sociolinguistics. This dates back to the dawn of sociolinguistics when in (Anglo-American) dialectology, our focus, our geographical lens switched from the (deep) countryside

to the Big City. NORMs (Non-Mobile Old Rural Men) were dispensed with in favour of a demographically broader sample. One of the main goals of early variationism was to highlight the orderly heterogeneity of language change in the speech community and so seeking order in the hustle and bustle, the bright lights, and the apparent *dis*order of the big city was always going to make for a more convincing demonstration of the power of this new sociolinguistic approach. Our perceptions of urban areas as 'where it's all happening' (and of rural areas as a 'quiet tranquil even backward place where nothing interesting happens' (Woods, 2011: 35)), as sites of conflict, complexity, and, in today's sociolinguistic terminology, 'superdiversity', have no doubt helped to drive the fascination with the city in sociolinguistics. I have argued elsewhere that this fascination is understandable in the empirical sense that these are especially rich sites for investigating variation, but it is not understandable epistemologically, since the divide between city and country is a theoretically problematic one, with the distinction being described by human geographers as 'fruitless' (Pahl, 1966: 302), 'a matter of convenience' (Newby, 1986: 209) and 'a category of thought' (Woods, 2011: 9) (see further Britain, 2009, 2012, 2017). One sociolinguistic ideology has been that rural areas are much less complex than urban ones. But complexity can readily be found in such areas, as Labov himself demonstrated in his first two major pieces of work. In his preamble to the *Social Stratification of English in New York City* −THE key empirical text of early variationism − Labov (1966/2006) contrasted his earlier work on largely rural Martha's Vineyard (Labov, 1963) with the 1966 research on the Lower East Side of New York City (NYC), claiming that the latter represented 'a much more complex society' (Labov, 1966/2006: 3). In fact, however, the 'complexity' of New York City was distilled down to the variables of age, class, ethnicity and gender. These factors were some (but not all) of the key pivots of social diversity in Martha's Vineyard. There, in this largely rural community, residents of Portuguese, Native American and other ethnic groups made up more than half of the population (Labov, 1972: 6), there was a small resident population coming originally from the mainland and large numbers of tourists flocking to the island each summer. These populations are unevenly spread across the island, and engaged in a range of economic activities. Not surprisingly, the community showed considerable sociolinguistic diversity with respect to age, location, occupation, ethnicity, orientation towards the island and desire to stay or leave (1972: 22, 25, 26, 30, 32, 39). So, in terms of social and linguistic structure, Martha's Vineyard is hardly the stereotypical rural area, as Labov himself so skilfully showed. Contrasting a highly rural area with a highly urban one, Labov demonstrated that there are large-scale social(-linguistic) processes, which are perhaps most obviously and vividly expressed in cities, but are not confined politically, sociologically or epistemologically to an urban context (Britain, 2009, 2012, 2017). Despite this, social dialectology and sociolinguistics more generally have remained largely in the city.

In French and French-inspired (e.g. Maghrebain) sociolinguistics, the city has seen itself put on an even higher pedestal. The most forceful arguments, made by

the French sociolinguists Louis-Jean Calvet and Thierry Bulot, and the Moroccan linguist Leila Messaoudi (see Calvet, 1994; Bulot & Tsekos; 1999, Bulot, 2002; Messaoudi, 2001) argue for a 'sociolinguistics of the city', reiterating on a number of occasions the need to highlight what is specific and special about the urban: 'la sociolinguistique urbaine ne peut pas se contenter d'étudier des situations urbaines, elle doit dégager ce que ces situations ont de spécifique, et donc construire une approche spécifique de ces situations' (Calvet, 1994: 15) and 'la ville produit aussi des formes linguistiques spécifiques, des parlers urbains' (Calvet, 1994: 13). In the end what is presented as characteristic of the city is what we have come to appreciate as a typical outcome of language/dialect contact: levelling of morphological and grammatical redundancy, semantic transparency and so on – outcomes typical of high contact cities, but also of high contact scenarios *anywhere*, including some of the most remote and sparsely populated rural areas (Trudgill, 1986; Britain, 1997; Sudbury, 2000; Schreier, 2003).

In this context, the studies from Paris presented in this volume are important in a number of respects. They make it clear, because of the distinct contrast with London, that linguistic change in cities does not necessarily follow the same path everywhere, despite having what might superficially be seen as rather similar histories of immigration. While it is evident that at least for some linguistic features a multiethnolect has emerged in London, this is much harder to discern for Paris. The reasons for this are undoubtedly complex. In a very elegant discussion of some of the underlying reasons behind patterns of contemporary French variation, Hornsby and Jones track the way that city planners had, for many years, and to a much greater extent than in, for example, Britain, constructed cities to separate the workers from the middle classes. They cite Sowerine, who argues 'la bourgeoisie anglo-américaine fuyait les villes dans la mesure où les transports le permettaient; l'Etat français a déindustrialisé les villes et en a chassé les ouvriers pour rendre les villes à la bourgeoisie' (Sowerine, 1998: 25). This, they argue, has continued to the present day with large housing developments for, especially, immigrant working class families being sited well beyond the centre of the city and with poor infrastructure and public transportation connections to that centre. Consequently, these housing estates became rather isolated from other parts of the city, in part because of the poor socio-economic well-being of the populations in them, and partly because structural forces kept them remote. Contact with other parts of the city is limited and the linguistic impact therefore of the varieties of the banlieues relatively limited. Despite relative propinquity – physical proximity – there appears to be relatively little intensive contact with central Parisian French. Watts (2006), in an investigation of both Wilmslow, a very prosperous satellite town of Manchester in Northern England, and Colshaw, the working class housing estate built on the side of it in the 1970s, shows very ably how, despite being only a kilometre apart, the residents of the town and the estate only come into intensive contact during their secondary school years, and it is at this period, and this period only, when there is evidence of linguistic accommodation between residents of the two sites. Proximity, evidently, doesn't mean contact.

Another question is the role that immigrant languages continue to play in the host city for intra-community communication. It is plausible, for example, that the maintenance of, say, Arabic as a lingua franca in the cités of Paris among migrants of North African and Middle Eastern descent will hinder or slow down the emergence of a pan-ethnic variety of French. These factors – determined by colonial history, resettlement and housing policies and community preferences are again unique to each place. Cities then are not the same – they are not populated in the same way, they have unique social histories and they were not built or planned or created in the same way. Subsequently, the linguistic outcomes of this difference show commonalities, yes, but also local differences. Agnès Marchessou's article on Strasbourg highlights this by demonstrating how the local urban vernacular is a combination of local features, regional features, as well as features from the largely immigrant banlieue there. But since these factors can ultimately shape *social contact* within the city, it is hardly surprising that different types of outcome can ensue. And these factors that shape cities, shape *all* places, large or small. Now that we have a systematic analysis of Paris, therefore, more research is called for, not only on other French cities, taking into careful consideration the specific social history in each, but also on the impact of language and dialect variation and contact on smaller French communities, communities which have tended, as elsewhere, to have been forgotten in Western sociolinguistics in the rush to the city.

PARIS AND ETHNICITY

The sociolinguistics of ethnicity, both in variationist research and sociolinguistics more generally, appears to have been at the forefront of our empirical and theoretical attention over the past two decades. The twenty-first century brought a range of studies of ethnolects of different kinds; fused multiethnolects of Northern and Western European languages (e.g. Quist, 2000; Cheshire et al., 2011) as well as a range of different heritage varieties, for example in some North American cities (Hoffman & Walker, 2010). Much of the retheorization of dialect, as a repertoire of linguistic resources from which speakers draw in light of the indexical meanings attached to each, stems from research with ethnicity as its focus (e.g. Benor, 2010; Sharma, 2011). It is ethnicity that has been at the centre of recent work on so-called superdiversity. One of the early insights from this work was the mechanisms by which non-local, immigrant variants can enter the local phonological and grammatical system (Fox, 2015, for example). This was important because it problematized the long-standing methodological sampling principle of excluding non-locals (see further Britain, 2016) by showing that such speakers can have an impact on the local system, in the right circumstances – when social network ties across ethnic divisions are sufficiently strong for features to be transmitted from one to the other. Studies on ethnolects have also provided empirical evidence of the emergence of new dialects and new dialect variants, and as we see from the comparison of London and Paris, enabled us to consider why fused ethnolects arise in and spread from some communities and not others.

The focus on ethnolect formation has brought into relief a number of issues. First, it has demonstrated the consistent role of social network structure in transmitting, or not, features from one group to another. Fox (2015) was able to show through her ethnographic analysis of a London youth club, how phonological, morphophonological and prosodic variants spread from Bangladeshi boys in the club to White boys and eventually to the White girls in the club. In the articles in this volume, it is clear that one of the reasons for the lack of a multiethnolect in Paris is the lack of the necessary inter-ethnic social network ties.

Second, this focus forces us to think critically about the operationalization of 'ethnicity' in our research. The existence of a multiethnolect is an empirical question – it can be demonstrated whether or not a set of linguistic resources (dialect features!) is used regardless of ethnic background (= multiethnolect) or not (= not a multiethnolect). Papazachariou (1998) demonstrated this, for example, in his research on what we might now call Multicultural Goumenissan Greek (though it wasn't called that in his work), a variety spoken by young people of different local, immigrant and nomadic ethnicities resident in the town of Goumenissa in Northern Greece. There, ethnic background was *not* a significant factor in shaping variability in the intonation variables he analysed. In London, furthermore, it was found that the degree to which individual ethnic identity retained an influence on variation depended on the linguistic variable under investigation. While some variables were insensitive to individual ethnic background, others, like the form of the past tense of 'to be' did show patterns dependent on individual ethnic group (Cheshire & Fox, 2009). On the whole, however, the earlier research on multiethnolects compares the speech of the local White population with that of a bundle of non-White immigrant ethnicities (e.g. 'Non-Anglo' in the London research), rather than teasing ethnic identity apart.

In future, however, there is a need for research that is rather more nuanced and fine-grained in how it empirically implements 'ethnicity'. What the research presented in the articles in this volume, as well as previous research (e.g. Fox, 2015), shows is that 'inter-ethnic' fused dialects emerge when their speakers routinely interact, share close-knit social network ties, belong to the same communities of practice. Central to the crystallization of the 'multiethnolect' then is social network membership and not ethnicity per se. Some members of an ethnic group may not be part of that network (and so may adopt features from the multiethnolect late or not at all). Some networks might form, which, because of the demographics of the neighbourhood, housing policy, migration history and so on, bring people together with a varied but nevertheless restricted set of ethnic backgrounds. Given the extremely diverse ethnic geography of London (Baker & Eversley, 2000), for example, it is possible, perhaps likely, that there are city-internal 'sub-multiethnolects'. Hornsby and Jones (2017) propose rather a long list of potential phonological variables emerging from the cités of the French banlieues, which they argue probably, for reasons outlined above, spread to the local French population in the rest of the city, but which could nevertheless be seen as 'multiethnolectal' because they are adopted across all non-Hexagone-origin speakers.

Third, there is a need for greater sensitivity to the intersectionality of language variation – variants are almost certainly not going to merely or even mainly index ethnicity per se, but potentially a localized, gendered, classed, age-constrained identity. Perhaps ethnicity functions in a similar way to 'the city' – both are stereotypically sites of significant or contrastful diversity, which more obviously foreground the dramatic and innovative consequences of language and dialect contact than some other social parameters, such as age or gender or social class. We don't talk about 'multi-ageolects' or 'multi-classolects', though we could, since the social contexts for inter-generational and inter-class contact readily exist. Most of the multi-ethnic urban vernaculars studied to date in the variationist paradigm have been from within (lower) working class or marginalized communities and this social-economic thread doubtlessly imbues the indexical fields of the ostensibly 'multiethnic' variants emerging in Western cities. Indeed, one wonders whether these variants don't actually *primarily* serve to index some form of 'class' (or gender, for example). It is possible even that they may come to not index ethnicity at all, the logical outcome since individual ethnic origin is, by definition for a multiethnolect, levelled away. A focus on intersectionality also highlights the need for research on middle and even upper class immigrants, let's say, in London or Paris. For example, the possibility of a cosmopolitan expatriate multiethnolect emerging in the International Schools frequented by the children of the jet set (e.g. Scheurer's research on girls in a Swiss International School, 2016).

Finally, we need to be able to step back from the focus on ethnicity and see what it is we are actually investigating typologically. In essence, what we have is language/dialect contact, in the case of London and Paris the mixture of local varieties with L2 and nativizing/nativized L1 varieties of English and French respectively. How would we typologically classify the end results? Koines? Repertoires? Possibly both depending on the person/network/community? Stripping research like this back to its fundamentals in language contact enables us better to see synergies across the wider literature, and in work which perhaps has not been conceptualised in terms of ethnicity.

There is, I believe, however, an understandable degree of strategic essentialism (in the sense of Bucholtz, 2003) behind the focus on working-class immigrant groups. While one could critique the approach for focusing on a group which perhaps more closely conforms to society's ideological perception of the authentic immigrant – working class, relatively settled, geographically circumscribed and immobile in the host country, non-Western, non-L1 host language – a number of advantages stem from this choice of sample: a more diverse range of linguistic variants is brought to the feature pool; the outcomes of contact with the local population are more dramatic; the role of mobility and of 'outsiders' in shaping local dialect practices is more apparent; and the newsworthiness of the results more likely triggers public debate and metalinguistic commentary. In London, indeed, the extensive media attention on the emergence of Multicultural London English (MLE) has led to its rapid naming as 'Jafaican'. One possible downside of this is that, as a result of naming, it is now a 'thing' and the somewhat more nuanced

and nebulous repertoire status of MLE becomes rather lost (cf. the emergence of 'Estuary English' as the label for the regionally levelling supralocal dialect of the English south-east). It is incumbent upon us in light of this research to comparatively explore the impacts of other manifestations of immigration and ethnic diversity, now that the significance of investigating the linguistic consequences of contact among these particular ethnic groups from these social backgrounds in these places has been so amply demonstrated (see also Britain, 2017).

In the French context, then, what is called for again are empirical studies that consider inter-ethnic network ties in a more ethnographic way across a range of sites, both urban and rural, to enable us to understand what, in specific localities, engenders or prevents the emergence of multiethnolects. We must not assume that the same immigrant mix will result in the same outcome everywhere, since local social conditions may differ from site to site, and we must, par contre, be sensitive to local differences in the origins of migrants in different places (cf Britain, 2017). This should also sensitise us to the different ways in which different local ethnic varieties are perceived and enregistered by their wider communities, the role of mediatization in the dissemination of ideologies about ethnic varieties. As Wacquand (2008: 2) has argued, urban marginality in the banlieues 'become[s] fully intelligible once one takes caution to embed them in the historical matrix of class, state and space characteristic of each society at a given epoch. It follows that we must work to develop more complex and differentiated pictures of the "wretched of the city" if we wish accurately to capture their social predicament and elucidate their collective fate in different national contexts'. France has the potential to inform sociolinguistics about alternative manifestations of ethnic linguistic diversity, if Wacquand's words are heeded.

CONCLUDING WORDS

Any journal article should speak to the general as well as the particular, reach out to an audience beyond that of one language, one community, one country. What I have attempted to do here is tease out what I think are three important debates that these article speak to, which transcend Paris, and transcend French, but which are of importance to studies of language variation and change more generally. This collection opens up the potential for rich comparative work (of which a good deal has already been conducted in Northern Europe on multicultural cities), not only within France itself, but also beyond. As is clear from this collection, bringing France into the equation foregrounds the socio-structural diversity of Western cities, the important but differentiated role of immigration and ethnicity in understanding the evolution of language variation, and the very significant contribution that robust, sensitive analyses of French can make to global sociolinguistic scholarship.

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