

# FRANCITAN VS. STANDARD FRENCH PRONUNCIATION IN SOUTHEASTERN FRANCE

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a survey on French pronunciation in the Nice (France) area, which attempts to determine whether southern pronunciation is being lost in that region and, if so, to what extent, on which features of the system and according to what stylistic and sociolinguistic modalities. To this end, a corpus of readings and spontaneous speech recordings was gathered through the interview of 25 subjects belonging to five families, which all spanned at least three generations and in which the oldest members were all manual workers with obvious southern accents. A Labovian-style analysis was then conducted on three typically Francitan phonetic features: mute "e", nasal vowels and mid- and low vowels.

Results show a shift from the vernacular variants to the standard French equivalents, with negligible gender and stylistic variation. This change can be explained in terms of convergence or opposition between the internal and external factors of evolution. To the extent that a study of 25 subjects in "dynamic synchrony" can be considered representative of the actual phonetic evolution of the local dialect, our survey illustrates the gradual disappearance of southern French pronunciation in the Nice area.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous présentons les résultats d'une enquête portant sur la prononciation du français dans la région niçoise (France), qui tente de déterminer si l'accent méridional se perd dans cette région et, si oui, dans quelle mesure, sur quels points du système et selon quelles modalités stylistiques et sociolinguistiques.

À cette fin, nous avons rassemblé un corpus de parole spontanée et de lecture, obtenu à partir de l'interview de 25 sujets appartenant à cinq familles couvrant toutes un minimum de trois générations, et dans lesquelles les sujets les plus âgés étaient des travailleurs manuels caractérisés par un fort accent méridional. Une analyse de type labovien a permis ensuite d'observer l'évolution de trois variables typiques de la prononciation méridionale, à savoir le "e" muet, les voyelles nasales et les voyelles à double timbre.

Les résultats témoignent, en général, d'un mouvement vers le français standard, avec des variations négligeables pour les variables 'sexe' et 'degré de

formalité'. Ce mouvement s'explique en termes de congruence — ou d'opposition — entre les facteurs internes et externes de l'évolution. Dans la mesure où l'étude de 25 sujets en 'synchronie dynamique' est représentative de la véritable évolution phonétique du dialecte local, notre enquête illustre la disparition graduelle des variantes phonétiques méridionales dans la région de Nice.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Occitan, the Romance language that once prevailed in southern France, has been declining rapidly in recent history. Not only is it used less and less in daily interaction, especially among the young, but the traces it has left in the French superstratum are also disappearing, as a result of pressures mostly exerted by the omnipresence of standard French (SF) in the area. Since dialectology has only recently turned its attention to contemporary varieties of spoken French, little is known about current differences between SF and its regional variants, notably "francitan" (southern French) and especially in the southeastern part of the country.

It is partly to bridge this gap that we have gathered a corpus of spoken French in that region, where several generations of speakers are represented. It was thus possible to observe, in "dynamic synchrony" (Martinet 1975: 9), the evolution of the main features of southeastern French (SEF) pronunciation. Clearly dynamic synchrony cannot quite replace real time diachrony, since it assumes that a speaker's pronunciation does not change much after adolescence, and that is not always true. But it is the only means available to take a snapshot of a long evolution. It has therefore been used in this study, as by Martinet. A sociolinguistic analysis of this corpus was then undertaken to determine if the southern variants — mute "e", nasal vowels and mid- and low vowels — were being lost in the Nice area and, if so, at what speed and according to which stylistic and sociolinguistic criteria.

## 2. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

### 2.1. Subjects

To better grasp the diachronic dimension of the research and to eliminate as many secondary factors as possible in the discussion of the results, we interviewed five families, in which at least three successive generations were represented. As in Pézenas (Durand et al. 1987) and Aix-en-Provence (Taylor 1996), these families were not selected with the use of random-sampling methods, but simply through personal contacts with speakers who met the research criteria and agreed to be interviewed. Only families where a phonetic evolution seemed possible were studied, i.e. those where southern features were very much in evidence among their oldest speakers. It did not seem useful to select informants who had already lost (or never had) these features, since their reappearance among the younger generations was highly improbable. Our intention was therefore, not to describe the current state of pronunciation in the Nice region, which would require a large-scale study well beyond our means, but to follow the evolution of regional phonetic features among

**TABLE 1**  
Subject distribution and characteristics

| Group     | Age                 | Nice     |          |          | Grasse      | Tourrette |
|-----------|---------------------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|-----------|
|           |                     | S family | B family | R family | I family    | C family  |
| 4         | 82- <u>83.3</u> -85 |          | F        |          | ... F       | F         |
|           |                     |          | ↓        |          | ↓ ↓         | ↓         |
| 3         | 60- <u>63.6</u> -69 | F M      |          | F M      | F           | F... M    |
|           |                     | ↓        |          | ↓        |             | ↓         |
| 2         | 35- <u>40.9</u> -46 | F        | F M      | F M      | M           | F         |
|           |                     | ↓        | ↓        | ↓        | ↓           | ↓         |
| 1         | 16- <u>20.4</u> -27 | M        | M        | M        | F... M... M | F... M    |
| Total: 25 |                     | 4        | 4        | 5        | 6           | 6         |

**Notes:** Underlined figures indicate group averages.

Arrows show parent/child relationships.

Dots indicate siblings.

the offspring of speakers who still display them.

The Nice "region" is reduced here to three very different localities, all within 30 km of the coast and of each other: the city of Nice, the town of Grasse and the village of Tourrette/Loup. Ten elderly speakers were interviewed in these localities, as well as those of their children and grandchildren who had been raised in the region and who were available at the time of the study. This yielded 25 subjects belonging to four distinct age groups: 16-27, 35-46, 60-69 and 82-85. Both genders are almost equally represented (13 F, 12 M) and the group includes four husband/wife and three brother/sister pairs, as can be seen in Table 1.

In terms of socioeconomic status, 13 informants — the two older generations and the entire C family — were or had been manual workers. The other 12 belonged to the educational field (teachers or students). The C family was almost ideal from a research point of view since it included four women, representing four successive generations, all born and raised in the same village and all working in the production of violets. Any speech difference between them could therefore be confidently attributed to age, their only obvious distinguishing social feature.

## 2.2. Data elicitation and process

Each subject was interviewed at home for about half an hour, individually or in couples, using questions of general interest. The interviewer, although not of southern origin, was well known by the subjects or introduced to them by a trusted friend or family member. After the interview, participants read several made-up sentences and a "light" article from the local press (see Appendix), which added a stylistic dimension to the research and facilitated inter-subject comparisons. While the reading part was not always welcome because of its artificial school-like character,

the interviews were recorded in a very relaxed atmosphere and can be considered therefore to be a fair representation of the subjects' "spontaneous" speech.

Interviews were transcribed orthographically and occurrences of the variables were highlighted on the transcriptions and on the reading passages. By listening repeatedly to the corpus, it was possible to note the presence or absence of the local variants under study and to calculate percentages of realization for each style, each subject and each group considered here. These results, which represent a kind of individual degree of "southern-ness", were then used for inter-group comparisons. Finally, because of the small number of subjects in each of the sub-groups, a threshold of significance was set at 10% for all group differences, in lieu of a full statistical analysis. The results below are therefore presented tentatively and primarily to illustrate prevailing evolutionary tendencies.

### 2.3. Variables and contexts

The variables chosen for this study are the most typical of southern French pronunciation: mute "e", nasal vowels and mid- and low vowels.

#### 2.3.1. Schwa

Mute "e" (/ə/) was examined only in contexts where it is normally dropped in SF, but maintained in SEF, i.e. when following a VC sequence:

- V#C\_#C (in group-internal monosyllables: *et le reste*)
- VC\_C (internally: *seule ment*)
- VC\_#C (word-final: *il rate son bus*)
- VC\_## (group-final: *il fumé*)

All contexts where /ə/ behaves similarly in the two dialects were excluded from the analysis because of their inability to elicit reliable SF/SEF differences. These include cases of automatic elision (pre- or post-vocalic /ə/) or maintenance (when stressed, preceded by two consonants, or found in special VC\_ contexts favourable to maintenance, such as *recevoir*, *atelier* or successive monosyllables). Finally, nasal vowels with an epenthetic consonantal ending (see Ñ, below) were also excluded, because they were in fact adding an extra consonant to the sequence, thereby inhibiting /ə/ elision.

#### 2.3.2. Nasal vowels

Nasal vowels were examined to see whether or not they were followed by an epenthetic consonantal segment, typical of SEF but lost in SF. Historically, French nasal vowels were caused by the premature lowering of the palate in the articulation of syllable-final nasal consonants. Both the consonant and the preceding vowel were thus nasalized, until the consonant itself was dropped, leaving the preceding vowel as the only support for nasality. For instance, *tombé* was successively pronounced [tombe], [tõmbe] and [tõbe]. SEF is at the second stage of that evolution

and it is the maintenance of this double nasality (henceforth noted  $\tilde{N}$ ) that is measured here. This regional marker is particularly relevant to our study since it is considered the most outstanding phonetic feature of SEF (Taylor 1996: 66) and the hardest for speakers to eradicate (Le Douaron 1985: 275).

### 2.3.3. Mid- and low vowels

Finally, the following oppositions were used in the study of mid-vowels /E/, /OE/ and /O/: [e ~ ε], [ø ~ œ], [o ~ ɔ]. In SEF, each pair of variants is in complementary distribution, since the higher vowel is found in open syllables and the lower variant in closed ones, as in *ballet* ~ *galère*, *veut* ~ *veulent*, *peau* ~ *porte*. This pattern prevails in SF as well, but with several exceptions, notably in final /E/, as in *ballet* ([bale]) or before [z], as in *affreuse* ([afRøz]) or *arrose* ([aRoz]). The opposition between the two variants of low vowel /A/ ([a ~ ɑ]) was also included in the study because, like mid-vowels, it is treated differently in SF and SEF. While SF uses back [ɑ] in certain contexts, particularly as a result of [s] deletion in Middle French ([pastə] > [pɑ:t]), SEF maintains front [a] in all cases. It is the maintenance of systematic southern variants ([bale], [afRœz], [aRɔz] and [pat] in the above examples) that is measured here, in an attempt to determine to what extent SF exceptions have penetrated the southeastern region. All such exceptions have thus been examined, i.e. all cases where SF deviates from the complementary distribution rule, or from [a] in the case of low vowels.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Overview and contextual variation

#### 3.1.1. Schwa

TABLE 2

Phonological conditioning of /ə/ maintenance

| Context    | Spont. Speech |    | Reading |    |
|------------|---------------|----|---------|----|
|            | N             | %  | N       | %  |
| V#C_#C     | 971           | 54 | 285     | 91 |
| VC_C       | 390           | 35 | 342     | 56 |
| VC_#C      | 1924          | 32 | 1227    | 46 |
| VC_##      | 826           | 36 | 544     | 32 |
| Total/Ave. | 4111          | 39 | 2398    | 56 |

We can see from Table 2 that it is the monosyllables that best retain their schwas, as already noted by Lucci (1983) and Walter (1982) for SF. In all cases, it seems to be an unconscious effort to preserve the identity of very short words, which is threatened by the loss of one of its components. It is for this same reason that the final consonant is pronounced in *sac*, *Christ*, or *chef*, but not in *estomac*, *Jésus-Christ* or *chef d'oeuvre*. In the other contexts, the juncture favours loss of schwa,

as already noted by Lucci (1983) for SF. Contextual differences largely confirm, therefore, previous observations about SF.

But do they confirm previous findings on SEF? Apart from the difference between monosyllabic and other contexts, already noted in Aix (86% and 43% maintenance, according to Taylor [1996]), our data confirm the observations made by Durand et al. (1987) and by Léon (1979), who treat final /ə/ weakening as one of the main factors of change in SEF. Here again, then, there is a certain concordance between our results and those of our predecessors.

Global comparisons with other Occitan regions are subject to caution because of significant methodological diversity between the various studies available. Still, our results remain well below tendencies noted elsewhere in southern France. Final /ə/ reaches 65% maintenance in Béarn (Diller 1978), 61% in the Aude youth (Armstrong and Unsworth 1999), 83% among the elderly and 43% among the young of Pézenas (Durand et al. 1987), and 72% (elderly) and 36% (young) in Perpignan (Pickles 2001). For /ə/ in general, maintenance figures reach 85% in Bouches-du-Rhône (Le Douaron 1985) and over 70% in Languedoc and central Pyrénées (Walter 1982). These comparisons suggest a deeper SF penetration on the French Riviera, a region that is particularly open to tourism and to the influences of the outside world, in general.

### 3.1.2. Nasal vowels

TABLE 3

Phonological conditioning of Ñ maintenance

| Context     | Spont. Speech |    | Reading |    |
|-------------|---------------|----|---------|----|
|             | N             | %  | N       | %  |
| _C (dental) | 2509          | 21 | 1637    | 20 |
| _C (labial) | 1227          | 19 | 628     | 18 |
| _C (velar)  | 618           | 22 | 415     | 24 |
| _##         | 1436          | 19 | 363     | 16 |
| Total/Ave.  | 5790          | 22 | 3043    | 20 |

Given that all individual results deviate from the mean by less than 4% (Table 3), it is clear that the place of articulation of the following segment has little effect on Ñ maintenance. In terms of global results, the 20–22% level observed in the Nice area is well below tendencies observed elsewhere in the south, where maintenance still prevails (62% in Aix, according to Taylor (1996), and 58% in the whole of southern France, according to Martinet, 1945). Also, there is no appreciable difference between word-final and other contexts, unlike in Aix, where the former is stigmatized (Taylor 1996).

## 3.1.3. Mid- and low vowels

Numbers and percentages in Table 4 refer to cases where a mid- or low vowel was realized ('→') as a southern variant. It measures therefore the extent to which subjects have kept their local phonetic habits, despite pervasive SF influence. Parentheses point to possibly unreliable data, because of the scarcity of [-øz] endings in the spontaneous corpus (an average of one per subject). It is precisely because of this anticipated difficulty that five words in *-euse* were incorporated into the reading passages. Finally, the contextual information in the left column refers to distinctions made in the /E/ ending and is provided here to detect eventual lexical or grammatical influences on the phonetic patterns under study.

TABLE 4  
Realization of southern mid- and low vowels

| Variants      | Context      | Spont. Speech |       | Reading |    |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|-------|---------|----|
|               |              | N             | %     | N       | %  |
| /A/ → [a]     | -â/-as       | 648           | 99    | 90      | 99 |
| /E/ → [e]     | -ès/-êt      | 174           | 91    | 136     | 97 |
|               | -ais/-ait    | 724           | 98    | 143     | 98 |
|               | [imp./cond.] | 859           | 96    | 255     | 97 |
|               | Subtotal     | 1757          | 96    | 534     | 97 |
| /OE/ → [œ]    | -euse        | (24)          | (72)? | 123     | 59 |
| /O/ → [ɔ]     | -ose/-ause   | 235           | 77    | 482     | 72 |
| Total/Average |              | 2664          | 95    | 1229    | 84 |

In general, Table 4 shows that southern phonetic habits are well preserved, like in Aix (Taylor 1996) and St-Rémy-de-Provence (Hilt 1986), especially for /A/ and /E/, where exceptions are rare. These are precisely the two cases where SF, particularly in Paris, displays much hesitation between the two possible variants ([gRa] or [gRa] for *gras*; [pRe] or [pRɛ] for *prêt*). The exceptional variants [a] and [ɛ], already weak on home ground, are therefore unlikely to penetrate hostile territory. [ø] and [ɔ], on the other hand, are firmly entrenched in SF words ending in [-z], and they come with maximum strength to challenge the typical southern variants [œ] and [ɔ], which might explain the lower percentages of southern realizations in these contexts. Finally, the lexical and grammatical distinctions made within the /E/ group seem to have no influence on results. Clearly, the variation studied here is of a strictly phonetic nature.

### 3.2. Sociophonetic variation

#### 3.2.1. Place of residence

Although all subjects reside in the south of the Alpes-Maritimes *département*, those from Nice live in an area, the former *Comté de Nice*, which only joined France in 1860, i.e. roughly four centuries later than Provence, where Grasse and Tourrette are located. This gap suggests the hypothesis of a possible correlation between phonetic variation and historical differences. A quick comparative analysis, however, reveals no such variation, which shows that the north-south historical boundary (the lower Var valley) has largely been replaced — at least phonetically speaking — by the east-west ties which bind the modern French Riviera.

Likewise, the hypothesis of a distinction between rural and urban speakers was rejected after a comparison of the rural C family (Tourrette) with the other families, which all operate in an urban context. It will be clear from Table 5 that, while old Tourrettans are more conservative, their children and grandchildren are more innovative than their urban contemporaries. This can be attributed to very different formative years (rare vs. constant contact with city life) and to a different conception of southern heritage, as expressed during the interviews. The older generations tend to be proud of their village and of the local culture, whereas the younger ones seem to cultivate violets only to make a living and they rush down to the coast at every opportunity for their leisure activities.

For all practical purposes, then, it is the degree of participation in coastal life — rather than geographical distinctions (urban/rural, *Provence/Comté de Nice*) — that define youth identity in the region.

#### 3.2.2. Age

TABLE 5

Maintenance of southern variables as a function of age (25 subjects)

| Age        | /ə/ |    |    |    | Ñ   |    |    |    | /OE/              |    |    |     | /O/  |     |     |     |
|------------|-----|----|----|----|-----|----|----|----|-------------------|----|----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|
|            | 4   | 3  | 2  | 1  | 4   | 3  | 2  | 1  | 4                 | 3  | 2  | 1   | 4    | 3   | 2   | 1   |
| % Spont.   | 75  | 58 | 45 | 12 | 38  | 35 | 16 | 4  | Insufficient data |    |    |     | 83   | 72  | 52  | 74  |
| (C family) | (90 | 87 | 28 | 5) | (52 | 52 | 2  | 1) | Insufficient data |    |    |     | (75  | 80  | 100 | 50) |
| % Reading  | 84  | 74 | 50 | 36 | 36  | 35 | 13 | 5  | 85                | 60 | 71 | 39  | 80   | 71  | 63  | 65  |
| (C family) | (94 | 82 | 38 | 0) | (62 | 38 | 2  | 0) | (80               | 71 | 63 | 65) | (100 | 100 | 67  | 71) |

Because extremely high percentages, such as those observed for /A/ and /E/, are unlikely to show any sociolinguistic variation, mid-vowels have been limited here to /OE/ and /O/.

In general, /ə/ and Ñ maintenance decreases rapidly from one generation to the next, to the point of complete disappearance in some cases (Table 5). This decline is not specific to Nice since it has already been noted in Perpignan, Aix and Pézenas (see section 3.1.1). It is particularly strong for the C rural family, whose results are



shown in parentheses. The near-complete loss of local variants in a few generations is a rare occurrence that surely deserved to be examined. It seems to occur in two phases, with a large gap between generations 2 and 3. Information obtained during the interviews suggests that this rupture likely corresponds to the opening of isolated Tourrette to the outside world — particularly French Riviera tourism and the spoken media — after World War II. Such a rapid change, without social promotion in the family (the young still grow violets, like their elders), shows that social factors play a negligible role in the evolution observed here. This contrasts with previous observations made elsewhere in the south and correlating loss of /ə/ with education and higher social status (Chauvin 1981, for Martingues; Diller 1978, for Béarn; and Taylor 1996, for Aix). It is likely the speed of the observed changes that is responsible for the obliteration of social distinctions in our corpus.

The evolution of mid- and low vowels is less clear, but it is certainly much slower than that of /ə/ and Ñ̃, which drastically lose their southern-ness as the age of the subjects decreases. This is particularly true of the C family of violet growers, where the youngest speaker sounds like a Parisian for /ə/ and Ñ̃, but maintains a southern pronunciation for mid-vowels. Some figures even point to a possible reversal of the trend toward SF among the younger generation. A larger study would be needed to determine whether this anomaly reflects an unconscious display of regional identity, which is lost almost everywhere else in the local pronunciation, or the generalization of the complementary distribution pattern already observed in /E/.

### 3.2.3. Gender

TABLE 6

Maintenance of southern variables as a function of gender (6 subjects)

|               | /ə/ |    | Ñ̃ |    | /OE/ |    | /O/ |    |
|---------------|-----|----|----|----|------|----|-----|----|
|               | F   | M  | F  | M  | F    | M  | F   | M  |
| % Spontaneous | 38  | 34 | 19 | 21 | —    | —  | 79  | 75 |
| % Reading     | 55  | 53 | 18 | 19 | 63   | 47 | 85  | 52 |

Since the absence of men in the oldest age group (cf. Table 1) would have biased the results in favour of women in an overall gender comparison, the analysis was limited to same-generation contrasts. Furthermore, because spouses often come from widely different language backgrounds, this subgroup was further reduced to the few M/F siblings available. The mini-corpus of six subjects (3 M/3 F) thus assembled, although weak on quantity, has at least the merit of quality, since siblings share many linguistic influences during their formative years.

Results show significant M/F differences when southern variants are the majority (mid-vowels) and similarities when they are in the minority (/ə/ and Ñ̃). Far from being contradictory, this observation confirms the different status of the variables

under study. /ə/ and Ñ are characteristic of a change in progress, with obliteration of social distinctions because of the rapidity of the shift (see section 3.2.2), while mid-vowels display the maintenance of traditional southern variants with their social stratification, including a higher use of the dominant variants by women, who are known to be linguistically more conservative.

### 3.3. Stylistic variation

The inclusion of a reading test in our research procedure had three major advantages. First, it allowed us to obtain data — albeit artificially — for useful contexts that were under-represented in spontaneous speech, such as words in *-euse*. It also supplied a common base for inter-subject comparisons. Finally, by providing a sample of “formal” speech, it allowed for a stylistic comparison with the “familiar” variety dominant in the interviews, which could help detect eventual cases of hypercorrection.

At first glance, Tables 2 to 4 yield contradictory results, with reading reinforcing SEF variants of /ə/, but not of Ñ and even less of the mid-vowels. A closer look, however, can easily dispel such a hierarchy.

Looking at the global results presented at the bottom of Table 4, it must first be noted that the difference between 84% (reading) and 95% (spontaneous speech) is just a statistical distortion caused by the high number of words in *-euse* and *-ose* included in the reading corpus. Since these endings are characterized by a much lower maintenance of southern variants than /E/ or /A/, they artificially lower the global averages obtained in reading. But if one excludes this artifact from the calculations, one finds that both styles yield comparable figures, as was already noted by Hilt (1986) in St-Rémy-de-Provence.

Results for /ə/ are equally artificial, but for other reasons. Its strength in reading, also noted in Carcassonne (Armstrong and Unsworth 1999), must be interpreted within the framework of an institutional context. Reading aloud is generally a school exercise, where high levels of /ə/ maintenance are tolerated, if not encouraged (for instance, in poetry). It is therefore tempting for subjects to add artificial schwas everywhere, just to read “better”, especially in monosyllables like *le* or *de*, where *e* stands out in the text. Also, the proposed article and sentences, although easy to read, were unknown to the subjects. This may well have slowed them down, thereby increasing the likelihood of pronounced schwas. Higher results in reading, therefore, have little to do with southern-ness. In any case, they would not constitute proof of hypercorrection since the attraction of SF would bring fewer, not more, schwas to their reading performance.

In contrast to these two variables, Ñ has no particular school connotation, visibility in the text, or lack of frequency in the reading passages. If there is hypercorrection anywhere, it should be found here, but results show a great similarity between the two styles. Speakers apparently don't feel the need to “correct” their speech. This is confirmed by several statements made during the interviews. No one remembered having been reprimanded, in school or elsewhere, for sounding

**TABLE 7**  
Hierarchy of main findings of southern variables

|      | Southern-ness  |     | Segment  | Strong SF |
|------|----------------|-----|----------|-----------|
|      | Spont./Reading |     | Deletion | Variant   |
| /A/  | 99%            | 99% | —        | —         |
| /E/  | 96%            | 97% | —        | —         |
| /O/  | 77%            | 72% | —        | +         |
| /OE/ | —              | 59% | —        | +         |
| /ə/  | 39%            | 56% | +        | —         |
| Ñ    | 20%            | 22% | +        | +         |

southern, and certain subjects were actually proud of their accent — thus illustrating the “provençal pride” mentioned in Mireille Mathieu’s song on the subject (*J’ai gardé l’accent*) — to the point of criticizing those who “speak Parisian”. So, whatever their causes, the changes observed here are not the result of stigmatization, which is normally accompanied by stylistic distinctions.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

What are, then, the causes of this evolution? To answer this question, let us reproduce the main results of our investigation in Table 7. Four levels of southern-ness can thus be conveniently distinguished, each separated from the next by a difference of about 25%, and corresponding to cases where the southern variant is respectively overwhelming, strong, moderate and weak.

These divisions clearly show that minority status is associated with an internal factor of phonetic economy. The variables closest to the SF variants, /ə/ and Ñ, are those where a segment is deleted (see third column). On the other hand, going from a mid-vowel to another or from a variant of /A/ to another, represents no economy at all and is therefore less desirable. This can be understood in the wider context of the phonetic reductions typical of the evolution of all Romance languages, and particularly French, since classical Latin. SEF would then be following the same natural evolution as SF, but several centuries later.

Another useful distinction can be seen by looking at the external influence of SF (fourth column). The variant with segment deletion that is undergoing the sharpest decrease is the one that does not even exist in SF (Ñ). By contrast, schwa weakening is much slower because this phoneme is still frequent in SF, in other contexts than those considered here. Likewise, for low and mid-vowels, exceptions to the rules are very frequent in SEF where they are universal in SF (/O/ and /OE/ before final [z]). They are much less frequent where SF still hesitates (/E/) and almost non-existent where SF is already backtracking (/A/). SF and SEF seem to evolve on parallel lines here, with SEF variation a mirror image of SF, but at a lower level of standardization. SF interference appears therefore as a secondary factor, capable of strengthening or weakening the natural deletion of phonemes,

which has characterized SF and SEF from their origins.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Our analysis of several typically southern phonetic variants has confirmed the evolution of the local pronunciation towards simplification, which is achieved through the maintenance of clear distribution rules (mid-vowels) or the deletion of non-distinctive segments (/ə/ and Ñ̃). This reduction, also noted in Toulouse (Borrell 1978), further illustrates the general tendency for French to standardize through the progressive weakening of regional variants (cf. Léon 1979). It also strengthens the conclusions reached by Hornsby and Pooley (2001) on the phonetic leveling of southern French, while casting doubts on its supposed "stability" (Mazel 1978: 111) and "strong resistance" to SF (Kristol and Wüest 1985: 25).

The speed of this standardization varies considerably depending on certain internal and external factors of evolution. It is fast where the adoption of the SF model comes with segmental economy (/ə/ and Ñ̃), and much slower where it does not (mid- and low vowels). Furthermore, within this latter category, the movement almost stops if the SF model is no longer clear (/E/) or if it is itself moving in the direction of SEF (/A/). The contexts which seem to be conducive to the maintenance of distinctive southern variants, however, yield so few occurrences that any touch of southern-ness found there is quickly lost in the general rush toward the SF model, as evidenced by massive /ə/ and Ñ̃ deletion. Given the increasing importance of external factors favouring the adoption of SF features in southeastern France (school, tourism, media, internal migration), it is hard to imagine circumstances that could halt this evolution.

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**APPENDIX:  
INFORMANTS' READING MATERIAL**

**[Nice-Matin article] Rue de Lépante : la guerre des œufs**

**Un inconnu attaque les commerçants du quartier. Il transforme les vitrines et les trottoirs en une drôle d'omelette.**

Il pleut des œufs dans une rue de Nice ! « *Nous sommes bombardés par un mystérieux tireur* », déclarent des commerçants inquiets. Un curieux maniaque s'amuse à viser les magasins au carrefour Lépante-Paris. Les œufs (frais) s'écrasent avec des « *splashes* » terribles. Et leur contenu coule avec de belles couleurs jaunes le long des vitrines.

« L'autre jour, c'était l'enfer, » raconte Mme Denise Soisson, gérante d'un commerce de jouets en gros. « *Mon mari était en train de décharger une camionnette. En moins d'un quart d'heure, il en a reçu sept. Le tireur devait sans doute essayer de lancer ses projectiles à l'intérieur du véhicule.* »

La guérilla a commencé, sans ultimatum, il y a une quinzaine de jours. Un franc-tireur anonyme bien caché derrière une persienne, arrose la rue à sa façon. Il manie les œufs comme des grenades défensives. « *Cela se produit en fin de matinée ou en début d'après-midi. Mais pas tous les jours. Le petit malin qui fait ça prend bien soin d'espacer ses agressions. Il attaque toujours par surprise. Afin qu'on n'ait pas le temps de le repérer* », explique un fleuriste, M. Pierre Meliado (Lépante-Fleurs). Il ajoute : « *Il vise bien, le coquin. L'autre jour, j'ai eu droit à une belle omelette sur ma devanture. Ah! Il s'en passe de belles dans ce quartier.* »

**Jeu de massacre**

En voyant le trottoir inondé d'œufs brisés, Mme Soisson a téléphoné à son assureur. « *Je voulais savoir si, en cas de chute consécutive à une glissade sur un œuf devant mon magasin, je pouvais être considérée comme responsable. J'ai été rassurée. Un commerçant ne peut avoir sa responsabilité engagée que si les déchets ayant occasionné l'accident ont été répandus par lui.* »

La police, quant à elle, a été avisée. Mais le commissariat a répondu qu'il n'était pas possible évidemment de mettre en faction chaque jour un gardien de la paix.

En plein dans la mire de tir, le propriétaire de la boutique de mode "Pacific" prend les choses avec philosophie : « *C'est un gamin qui doit s'amuser à prendre la rue pour un stand de jeu de massacre. Ou alors quelqu'un d'agressif qui se défoule comme il peut. Le malheur, c'est qu'on sait que cela va recommencer. On vit dans l'attente. D'un moment à l'autre, on risque de recevoir un projectile.* »

Des passants on également essuyé des tirs. Entre autres, un monsieur qui s'appêtait à pénétrer dans un immeuble, pour se rendre à une consultation médicale, a eu la douloureuse surprise de voir son beau costume tout éclaboussé. Agaçant, mais bon pour les pressings, nombreux dans le coin ...

Serge BENEDETTI.

**[Made-up sentences]**

1. Sur le parking de la place du Congrès, en haut de la côte, j'ai vu un fox-terrier à l'air morose. La pauvre bête semblait très malheureuse et je pense que j'aurais pu facilement l'amener chez moi pour qu'il s'amuse avec les autres chiens du quartier.
2. Le samedi, quand je rentre finalement du travail, je suis généralement très fatiguée. Alors je me repose en faisant un puzzle avec les enfants ou bien je vais me promener avec ma petite chatte. Chose curieuse, c'est mon mari qui s'occupe du shopping pour le week-end et des autres choses ennuyeuses qui sont malheureusement indispensables à notre vie familiale.
3. Gérard et Rose seraient allés en vacances en Côte d'Ivoire, s'ils avaient eu le temps de se procurer un passeport et les autres documents exigés. Mais c'est très bien ainsi; ils pourront aller en Allemagne, comme chaque année, ou bien rester ici sur la Côte d'Azur et ça leur coûtera moins cher.