

AN INNOVATIVE METHOD IN METHODS? EXPERIMENTAL TASKS IN REGIONAL VARIATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

Labov (1972a, 1972b) criticized Chomsky's (1965) notions that variation is an "error" and that speech communities are homogeneous. He maintained that variation is not random but rather systematic and rule-governed, and that in order to describe language used by members of a speech community it is necessary to study the vernacular, which provides the most "systematic data". He further maintained that "the only way to obtain sufficient good data on the speech of any one person is through an individual, tape-recorded interview" (1972b:181). Since then, the sociolinguistic interview has been the preferred source of data in sociolinguistic research (Milroy 1987; Coulmas 1997; Feagin 2001). Yet Labov also acknowledged that there are a number of problems associated with studying spontaneous speech, including the "rarity" of certain forms (1972a:188). Moreover, an enormous amount of work is involved in data collection, transcription and coding (Milroy 1987; Feagin 2001).

In this paper I present results of a research project which employed two paper-and-pencil tasks, a controlled-production task and an acceptability judgment task, to study auxiliary use and its correlates in Acadian French. These tasks made it possible to collect data from a large number of subjects while ensuring that the linguistic contexts were consistent across subjects; it was also possible to study linguistic phenomena which are rare or non-existent in oral speech.

2. VARIABLES

Normative French prescribes that auxiliary *être* be used in compound tenses with verbs of inherently directed motion (henceforth IDM verbs), as shown in (1a) and (1b).

- (1) a. Marie *est* sortie.
- b. Jean *est* tombé à terre.

In many varieties of North American French use of *être* in compound tenses with IDM verbs is variable, conditioned by linguistic and social factors (Canale, Mougeon and Bélanger 1978; Sankoff and Thibault 1980; Willis 2000). However, studies have shown that in Acadian French subjects never use *être* in compound tenses with IDM verbs, as shown in (2a) and (2b).

- (2) a. *Alle a sorti, alle a été trouver le capitaine.* (Péronnet 1991:89, ex. (2a))
 b. *Ils avont tombé à l'eau.* (King and Nadasdi 2001:63, ex. (3c))

Yet as King and Nadasdi (2001) pointed out, with the exception of their own corpus, which was stratified by age, sex and socio-economic factors, studies had a small number of informants who were older, rural and mostly male. One goal of the current study was therefore to investigate auxiliary use by a large number of young, educated speakers of New Brunswick Acadian French.

A second goal of this study was to investigate the proposal that certain syntactic structures in French are associated with conjugation with *être*, namely past participles in Determiner Phrases (DP) as in (3a) (Borgonovo and Cummins 1999) and impersonal constructions such as (4a) (Labelle 1992, for example). These structures are ungrammatical with verbs conjugated with *avoir*, as shown in (3b) and (4b).

- (3) a. [_{DP}Les participants [*partis* après 4 heures]] étaient fatigués.
 b. * [_{DP}Les enfants [*joués* pendant deux heures]] étaient fatigués.
 (4) a. Il est arrivé hier soir trois femmes de Montréal.
 b. *Il a ri plusieurs hommes.

Both past participles in DP and impersonal constructions are rare (if not non-existent) in oral corpora.

3. METHOD

The production task was a narrative with 44 blanks to be filled with a form of the verb in parentheses, containing a variety of verbs including IDM verbs. An excerpt is given in (5).

- (5) La fumée ____ (monter) autour des édifices et ____ (dispenser) dans le ciel. Le feu ____ (descendre) à la rue Duckworth, et ensuite à la rue Water. (based on Harvey 1981)

The judgment task consisted of 44 sentences with some of the same IDM verbs as the production task. Each verb occurred in a sentence conjugated with *avoir* (6a), with *être* (6b), as a past participle in DP (6c), and in an impersonal construction (6d). Subjects were asked to indicate whether the sentences were “grammatical” or “ungrammatical” and to correct those they judged ungrammatical.

- (6) a. *Marie a arrivé à la gare avant le départ de son train.
 b. Jean est arrivé en même temps que plusieurs autres personnes.
 c. Les élèves arrivés avant 9h00 recevront un bonbon.
 d. Il est arrivé hier soir trois hommes de la Nouvelle-Écosse.

Subjects were 80 speakers of New Brunswick Acadian French who were students at a Francophone university: 50 females and 30 males, with a mean age of 21.3 years.

4. RESULTS

Figure 1 gives the percentage of occurrences of *être* and *avoir* with the IDM verbs *arriver*, *monter* and *tomber* in the production task (P) as well as the percentage of “grammatical” judgments with the two auxiliaries on the judgment task (J).

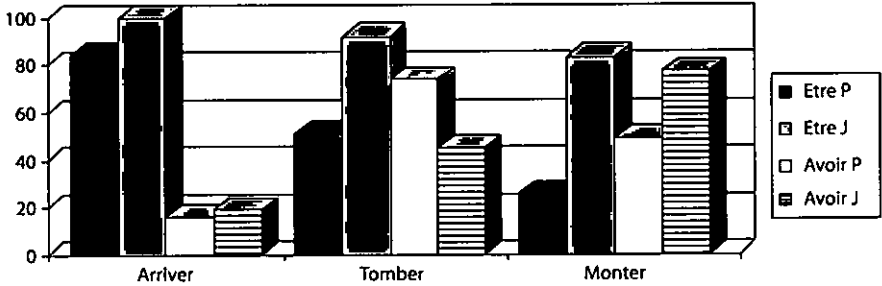


FIGURE 1

Percentage of auxiliary use and judgments by task

In the controlled-production task, use of *être* was variable, ranging from a low of 26% of total auxiliary use with *monter* to a high of 83% with *arriver*. Turning to the judgment task, subjects were quite accurate in their judgments of *être* with the three verbs, accepting them 96.5% with *arriver*, 90% with *tomber* and 82.5% with *monter*. However, the same results did not obtain with sentences with *avoir*: while only 19% of the subjects judged the sentence with **avoir arrivé* to be grammatical, they were more likely to accept **avoir tombé* (42%) and **avoir monté* (79%). In contrast to both King and Nadasdi's (2001) study of PEI Acadian French and Péronnet's (1991) study of New Brunswick Acadian French in which *arriver*, *monter* and *tomber* all occurred with *avoir* 100% of the time, the subjects' use and judgments of *avoir* with these verbs was not categorical but rather variable, like speakers of other varieties of North American French.

With the results of the judgments of *être* and *avoir* in hand, it is now possible to test the hypotheses of Borgonovo and Cummins (1999) and Labelle (1992) concerning the relationship between conjugation with *être* and occurrence in past participles in DPs and impersonal constructions. Table 1 shows that there is an implicational hierarchy: greater acceptance of auxiliary *être* with IDM verbs implies greater rejection of auxiliary *avoir* as well a greater acceptance of past participles in DPs, which in turn imply acceptance of impersonal constructions.

Arriver, which has the highest *être* use and highest number of correct judgments with *être* and *avoir*, also has the highest number of subjects who accepted past participles in DPs (24/80) and who accepted both DPs and impersonal constructions (21/80). *Tomber* was somewhat different: there were subjects who did not correct *avoir* but accepted past participles in DPs (18) and impersonal constructions (6), and only four subjects made the correct judgments for all four sentence

TABLE 1
Implicational table of auxiliary *être* and related constructions

<i>être</i>	Arriver					Tomber					Monter				
	<i>avoir</i>	PP	<i>Il</i>	N		<i>être</i>	<i>avoir</i>	PP	<i>Il</i>		N	<i>être</i>	<i>avoir</i>	PP	<i>Il</i>
-	-	-	-	2		-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	10
						-	+	-	-	1	-	+	-	-	3
						-	-	+	-	5	-	-	+	-	2
+	-	-	-	5		+	-	-	-	9	+	-	-	-	22
+	-	+	+	2		+	-	+	+	4	+	-	+	+	1
+	-	+	-	7		+	-	+	-	18	+	-	+	-	26
						+	-	-	+	2	+	-	-	+	1
+	+	-	-	15		+	+	-	-	17	+	+	-	-	6
+	+	-	+	4		+	+	-	+	3					
+	+	+	-	24		+	+	+	-	16	+	+	+	-	9
+	+	+	+	21		+	+	+	+	4	+	+	+	+	0

Notes: PP = Past participle in DP; *Il* = impersonal construction

types, compared to 21 for *arriver*. However, with both verbs it is clear that past participles in DP and impersonal constructions are related to conjugation with *être*. *Monter* gives very mixed results, which can be attributed to the fact that it has a transitive counterpart.¹ Thus, PPs in DP are grammatical. The low acceptance of impersonal constructions with *monter* is also likely due to the fact it has a causative counterpart. Most subjects changed the impersonal construction *Il est monté ...* 'There is gone up ...' to *Il a monté ...* 'He has taken up ...'.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Subjects produced and accepted *être* with IDM verbs although their performance varied depending on the verb and the task. The different results on the two tasks are likely because of the nature of tasks: the acceptability judgment tapped a more formal register than the production task and thus normative *être* was judged grammatical more frequently than it was used. Some variability may be due to uneven acquisition of a second variety, since there were no significant differences based on sex or region, and the linguistic context was the same for all subjects.

The advantages of using this methodology were that (i) tasks could be administered to a large number of subjects; (ii) the linguistic context for the verbs was constant, which minimized ambiguity between auxiliary *être* and copula (stative) *être*, which is inevitable in the analysis of oral interviews; and (iii) it was possible to study "exotic" structures which occur infrequently in speech.

The subjects were all high-school graduates of the same age who had open

¹Sankoff and Thibault (1980) attributed greater use of auxiliary *avoir* with intransitive *monter* in Montréal French to the fact that the verb has a transitive counterpart.

social networks. The results therefore support previous studies which found that use of *être* was associated with a higher level of education (Canale, Mougeon and Bélanger 1978; Sankoff and Thibault 1980; Willis 2000). The results also support the morpho-syntactic correlates of unaccusativity argued by Labelle (1992) and Borgonovo and Cummins (1999), though not definitively. Thus, as argued by King (1991) and demonstrated by Beaulieu and Balcom (2001), data from Acadian French can be used to support linguistic theory.

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