

RETENTION OF REGIONAL FRENCH VOCABULARY: THE EXAMPLE OF SOUTHEASTERN FRENCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the development of mass media and compulsory state education, standard French has extended its scope, at the detriment of regional languages and dialects. In this study, I investigate the extent to which regional vocabulary is retained in Briançon, a town in the southeast of France. To discuss the loss and retention of regional vocabulary, it is important to briefly situate this town. Briançon is the second largest town in the administrative unit of Hautes-Alpes with 10,737 inhabitants according to the 1999 *Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques* census. Briançon boasts of being the highest town in Europe at 1326 meters above sea level. Needless to say, the landscape is mountainous and the few roads leading in and out of this town are high in elevation, winding, and often challenging in the winter. This explains why this region has remained quite isolated for a long time. I refer the reader to Routier (1997) for additional detail on the history of the town. Let us simply say that the area around Briançon remained independent from larger political powers (both France and Italy) for many centuries, until the French Revolution. The idea of being away from everything and everywhere is deeply entrenched in the minds of the inhabitants. In fact, one of the buzzwords of the last 10–15 years has been *désenclavement* (roughly translated as ‘de-isolation’).

After providing a short explanation of regional languages in France and of regional French, I will explain the methodology. This will be followed by the analysis of the retention or loss of regional vocabulary according to linguistic criteria.

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

2.1. Regional language vs. regional French

The expression “regional languages” refers to regional varieties that are different from French and not mutually intelligible, such as Basque or Alsatian. The regional language used in the area of Briançon is *provençal alpin*, which is practically extinct in the area under study. In fact, none of my informants claim to be able to speak the traditional dialect and only speakers above 50 say that they could understand it. It seems that their parents did not speak the local dialect with their children

because they had been punished or humiliated for using it in school. This kind of story is well documented in diglossic areas where one language is viewed as inferior and as needing to be eradicated, as reported by Walter (1999:16) and by Carles (1977) in the Hautes-Alpes.

In this context, since the regional language was not transmitted to the younger generations, one could think that everyone would speak standard French. As described here, even if the entire language was not transmitted, some words were retained and “borrowed” into French. According to Germe and Lucci (1987:18), such regionalisms:

remplissent la plupart du temps une fonction linguistique non négligeable, lorsque par exemple la norme nationale ne possède pas d'équivalent (...) Il s'agit bien souvent de termes très fortement connotés qui ont été acquis dans des situations bien particulières (dans l'entourage familial et étroitement local, généralement) et qui sont entourés d'un halo affectif intraduisible.

The inclusion of such regionalisms into French is one of the elements defining regional French.

2.2. Previous studies on language in the Hautes-Alpes

Numerous studies have been published in variation, especially phonetic, in the southeast of France in general. I will here only cite Chaurand (1972) and Walter (1982). But far less has been done on Briançon, probably due to its remote location. Some studies have been published on the regional language, such as Garnier (2003) and Pons (1982), but these cover a larger area than just around the town of Briançon. Additionally, Germe and Lucci (1987) and Germe (1996) study the vocabulary used in other areas in the Hautes-Alpes at least 70 miles away from Briançon. They present more a listing of all words known and their etymology than their frequency of use. Only the earlier of the two studies does so, because of the use of a questionnaire.

3. METHODOLOGY

To analyze the characteristics of the local vocabulary, I designed a questionnaire containing 247 words, partly based on Germe and Lucci (1987) and Germe (1996). From their selection, only words that were considered frequent or common were retained and all words having to do with agricultural life and farming were excluded, as the main source of income in the Briançon area has shifted from farming to services, especially linked to tourism. There was, in the 1999 INSEE census, not a single respondent identifying his/her profession as farmer whereas there were 8 of them in 1990 and 24 in 1982. To the basic word list, I added words that I had heard while growing up in this area. This, along with a few local literary works, was the method used by both researchers to establish their list.

Each word in the questionnaire is first presented in isolation, then in a carrier sentence: for instance *andrône, ils l'ont trouvé dans une andrône* ‘narrow street,

they found it in a narrow street.' To minimize guessing, the sentence was chosen so that it would not give the meaning of a word by providing a context. Informants were asked if they had heard this word before and if they used the word. Finally, if an informant indicated that he/she had heard the word, the meaning was asked. The present results are based on whether a word and its meaning are known to the informants, hence reflecting passive knowledge rather than actual usage.

The results presented here are based on a sample of 27 informants. Most of the informants were born in Briançon or in the surrounding area, except for one young female who moved there at the age of 6 months. Among the 27 informants, there are 16 females and 11 males, between the ages of 16 and 82.

To analyze the data, two linguistic factors, lexical category and regionalism category, were considered here. Additional elements will briefly be mentioned in the conclusion. For regional category, each word was assigned to one of three possible regionalism categories based on their form. Category 1 contains words that exist in French but have an additional meaning in the region. For example, the word *autant* means 'as much as' in French, but in the Briançon region, in an absolute construction, especially at the beginning of a sentence, it means 'maybe'. Category 2 encompasses words that follow the phonotactic constraints of French but are not found in dictionaries, such as *afortir* 'to claim' or *patareau* 'rag'. To distinguish between these two categories of regionalisms, all words were searched in the *Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé*. Finally, the third category is formed of words that do not follow the phonotactic constraints of French. This category is further subdivided into three subcategories, according to what particular non-French element the target word contains. The first subcategory contains words with the affricate [tʃ], as *chabrabouc* [tʃabʁabuk] 'a masculine-looking woman,' or the diphthong [ɔj] as in *voï* [vɔj] 'energy'. These two elements, the affricate [tʃ] and the diphthong [ɔj], are grouped together because of the similarities in their lexical distribution: neither sound exists for native French words, but they exist in borrowed words. The second subcategory of words that do not follow French phonotactics are words with a diphthong other than [ɔj]. In particular, several words contain the diphthong [aw] such as *biaou* [bjaw] 'small canal', or [ew] as in *capéou* [kapew] 'hat.' These other diphthongs are unknown and unparalleled in French. The final subcategory of words in category 3 is words that are stressed on the penultimate syllable instead of the final syllable as in *novis* ['novi] 'newly weds.'

4. RESULTS

General results show that 58% of words are unknown and only 42% are known. The results of the statistical analysis (using GoldVarb) are presented in Table 1 and discussed below. In this table, a weight below 0.5 indicates that the variable under consideration promotes the loss of vocabulary whereas a weight above 0.5 indicates that a variable promotes retention and the farther from 0.5, the greater the force of the variable on promoting loss or retention.

TABLE 1
Results of GoldVarb analysis

| | Weight | Number known/total |
|------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Lexical category: | | |
| Interjections | 0.973 | 76/81 |
| Adverbs | 0.588 | 200/405 |
| Verbs | 0.500 | 885/2160 |
| Nouns | 0.477 | 1355/3375 |
| Adjectives | 0.443 | 214/540 |
| Regionalism category: | | |
| Cat. 3 with [tʃ] or [ɔj] | 0.804 | 72/108 |
| Cat. 1 | 0.583 | 593/1215 |
| Cat. 2 | 0.476 | 1989/4968 |
| Cat. 3 with other diphthongs | 0.471 | 64/162 |
| Cat. 3 with penult stress | 0.436 | 69/216 |

4.1. Lexical category

As seen in Table 1, there is a very strong tendency toward the retention of interjections (weight of 0.973) and a moderately strong tendency toward the retention of adverbs (weight of 0.588). This may be linked with the fact that elements in these two lexical categories may be seen as supplementary, not core, in transmitting the message, as adding additional optional pragmatic information. They may, therefore, reflect a more subjective intervention of the subjects in their speech. This tendency to be retained could then be linked to the affective nature of regionalisms as described by Germe and Lucci (1987:18) when they talk about the "untranslatable affective halo". On the other hand, more informationally loaded words such as nouns and adjectives tend not to be retained because they may, for some speakers, contain too much of this affective side and weaken the message. This is reflected in the weights of 0.477 and 0.443, respectively.

4.2. Regionalism category

Table 1 indicates that two categories of regional words tend to be lost: words that follow the phonotactic constraints of French but are not listed in dictionaries or listed as regional (Category 2, weight of 0.476), and words that do not follow French phonotactics and whose non-French elements are not accepted in borrowings (Category 3, 0.471 for words with a diphthong other than [ɔj] and 0.436 for words with penultimate stress). As mentioned in section 3, these two sub-categories of Category 3 are the most remote from French and are probably not reinforced by the national norm. On the other hand, they are probably not seen as a badge of identity because they are too close to the normative French pattern. They may, therefore, be felt as being not French, but not regional enough to warrant keeping them. It is,

then, not surprising that, in front of the leveling power of normative French, these words would be the most likely to be lost.

The retention of words that exist in French but have an additional meaning (Category 1) is not surprising. As such words are established in national-level French, they are not threatened. The local meaning of the word is what is being retained here. The fact that these words (not their local meaning) are used at the national and international level actually often made the informants unaware that the additional meaning they carry in the region is not found elsewhere. Finally, the group of words that do not follow the phonotactics of French but have an element found in borrowings (Category 3 with [tʃ] or [ɔʃ]) is the strongest of all regionalism categories with a weight of 0.804. For these words, retention may be explained by the fact that these two sounds are accepted in borrowings. Even though they are foreign to French, the fact that the national language has accepted these sounds in borrowings may reinforce the local words that contain them. In other words, local words with [tʃ] or [ɔʃ] could now be seen as borrowed, on the same level and maybe with the same prestige as other words borrowed by the national variety.

5. CONCLUSION

Two factors are analyzed here to study the retention of regional vocabulary in a remote and isolated area of France, the town of Briançon. Both lexical categories and regionalism categories point to the unique nature of regionalisms: they are more likely to be retained if they convey non-essential information (as adverbs and interjections do) and if they are not distant from French. Due to space constraints, other factors that were studied could not be included. Such factors include the regional distribution of regionalisms, their etymological origin, and social factors such as age and gender. Additionally, further research is needed on other factors that may contribute to retention, such as identity or origin of parents, along with a larger sample.

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