

# Sociolinguistic Evidence of a Possible Case of Syntactic Convergence in Ontarian French<sup>1</sup>

Edouard Beniak  
Raymond Mougeon  
Daniel Valois

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

## 1. Introduction

Let us begin by following the example of Mackey (1970) and defining some key terms used in this paper in order to dispel any possible ambiguity. It is especially important that we do so in view of the opinion expressed by Poplack (1983)--and which we share--that many key words in the literature on bilingualism are used to mean different things by different researchers. Convergence, in the sense in which this term is intended here, refers to the gradual elimination over time of forms of a language as a result of contact with another language in which corresponding forms are not attested. If pursued to completion, convergence results in the loss of the non-congruent forms. An example of convergence taken from the well-known Gumperz and Wilson (1971) study is the loss of the accusative postposition (but retention of its dative variant) in a local variety of Kannada due to long-term contact with two other local language varieties neither of which have an accusative postposition (but both of which have a dative postposition). However, many of the changes described by Gumperz and Wilson under the heading of convergence are really in our terminology cases of interference, which we define as the reverse process, namely the introduction of new forms or rules in a language as a result of contact with another language in which they already exist. An example of interference in contact varieties of Canadian French such as that spoken in Ontario is the semantic generalization that the preposition sur has undergone, on the model of the English preposition on, to contexts indicating location on the broadcasting media, in which the preposition à is normally used, e.g., sur la télévision 'on television', sur la radio 'on the radio', etc. (Colpron 1973:19; Beniak, Mougeon and Valois 1981). When the new forms introduced in the contact language are words rather than simply meanings, we speak of borrowing instead of interference. Canadian French, to continue with this example, has borrowed many words from North American English, e.g., hot dog, fun, toaster, etc. (Colpron 1973). Though we draw the above distinctions, one should not lose sight of the fact that convergence, interference and borrowing all produce the same end result: a rapprochement

between the grammars of the languages in contact. And as Weinreich (1968:8) aptly put it, such a rapprochement is to the bilingual "a reduction of his linguistic burden".

Convergence, as defined, is probably one of the least well documented effects of language contact, undoubtedly because it is so difficult to prove (Poplack 1983). Linguists have traditionally gone about searching for already completed convergent changes (Gumperz and Wilson 1971). It is said that convergence has been isolated when the loss of a form cannot be imputed to internal causes but only to contact with another language in which no equivalent form is attested. It can be appreciated, then, that in the historical approach the only possible evidence for convergence rests on structural linguistic arguments. In this study, however, we take a synchronic approach to the problem and try to prove a case of convergence that is still in progress. Unlike interference or borrowing, convergence, when still in progress, does not entail a qualitative deviation from the monolingual norm, only a statistical one, i.e., it is manifested by the decline of a form which has no counterpart in the superordinate language. Therefore quantitative sociolinguistic methodology is required in order to be able to show that the language under investigation is (or is not) drawing closer to the other language with which it is in contact. More concretely, with quantitative sociolinguistic methodology one can examine the frequency of the form with no counterpart in the superordinate language as a function of subgroups within the speech community. The expectation is that speakers of the contact language who know the superordinate language well or even better, should be the instigators of convergence and therefore be further along the convergence path than speakers who remain dominant in the contact language. Nonetheless it should be borne in mind that quantitative sociolinguistic methodology does not allow one to go beyond the mere isolation of potential cases of convergence. The burden of proof, as in the historical approach, still rests on the linguist who must argue that the candidates for convergence cannot be explained away as internal changes.

In this paper we describe a variable area of the prepositional system of Ontario French (a variety of Canadian French that is in intensive contact with English) which is such as to possibly 'attract' convergence. We then go on to see whether there is any quantitative sociolinguistic evidence that Ontarian French might indeed be drawing nearer English in the particular structural area in question. Finally we ask ourselves whether the quantitative sociolinguistic evidence that we do find might not just as well

be used to support an internal change. Beforehand, however, we should briefly familiarize the reader with Ontario's French-speaking community.

## 2. Ontario's French-speaking community

Ontario's francophone population is the product of the immigration of various groups of Francophones from other Canadian provinces as well as from outside Canada, among which Quebeckers have unquestionably been the major contributors. According to the 1981 national census there were that year 475,605 people of French mother tongue in the province of Ontario out of a total population of 8,625,105. Though Franco-Ontarians are numerically the largest of Canada's French-speaking minorities, it can be calculated from the above figures that they represent only 5.5% of the provincial population. At a local level, however, the ratio of Francophones to Anglophones varies considerably from lows that come close to 0% to highs that reach 80% or 90% of the population. Special analysis of the previous decennial census returns has also revealed that Francophones are not as well off as Anglophones in Ontario. The inferior demographic and socioeconomic position of Ontario's Francophones are two of the factors that explain why out of the nearly half million who reported French as their mother tongue, only 307,290 also reported French as the principal home language. These figures indicate that a substantial proportion (34%) of Ontario's French mother tongue population has shifted to English at home. But just as the ratio of Francophones to Anglophones varies locally, so does the proportion of French households having shifted to English.

Another factor which undoubtedly contributed to the linguistic assimilation of the Franco-Ontarian population is the fact that French was not legalized as a language of instruction in Ontario's public schools until 1968. This much belated measure brought about the foundation of public French language high schools which together with the primary schools already in place provided schooling in French from Kindergarten to Grade 13 in most Ontario localities where non-negligible numbers of Francophones reside. At the time this measure was taken it was hoped that it would slow down if not stop the process of shift to English at home. For the time being, however, Ontario's French language schools still include students who come from homes where English is spoken as often as or more often than French. Some of the pedagogical problems posed by the presence of such students in Ontario's

French language schools are addressed in Mougeon, Heller, Beniak and Canale (1984).

### 3. A possible locus of convergence

The prepositional phrases chez + personal pronoun and à la maison are interchangeable ways of expressing the idea of location at or direction to a person's home in standard as well as dialectal varieties of French. To convince ourselves that these two prepositional phrases are genuinely in variation as far as Ontarian French is concerned, we need only compare examples (1a) and (1b), (2a) and (2b), or (3a) and (3b), all of which are almost minimal pairs drawn from our corpus (see next section):

- (1) a. J'ai resté chez moi.  
       'I stayed home'
- b. J'reste à la maison.  
       'I stay home'
- (2) a. Chez eux i' parlent l'anglais.  
       'At home they speak English'
- b. A la maison i' parlent toujours en anglais.  
       'At home they always speak in English'
- (3) a. Tout le monde vient chez nous.  
       'Everyone comes to our house'
- b. I' viennent à la maison.  
       'They come to our house'

Chez + personal pronoun enjoys a wider linguistic distribution than à la maison. The latter is a variant of the former only when the personal pronoun is anaphoric with an intrasentential antecedent (practically always the subject as in examples 1a and 2a) or with the speaker (as in examples 1a again and 3a). Inalienable possession is very often not overtly marked in French,

which explains why maison is preceded by a definite article instead of a possessive adjective in the above examples.

When the coreference relations between the personal pronoun and its antecedent do not hold, there is no alternative to chez + personal pronoun in Ontarian or standard French. Thus example (4a) is obviously not paraphrasable by (4b), but nor is it by (4c), albeit a logical possibility.

(4) a. Je suis allé chez lui.

'I went to his house'

b. \*Je suis allé à la maison.

'I went to his house'

c. \*Je suis allé à sa maison.

'I went to his house'

Similarly, when chez introduces a noun rather than a pronoun as in example (5)(a), Ontario and standard French do not allow the logical option illustrated in (5b):<sup>2</sup>

(5) a. Je suis allé chez mon ami.

'I went to my friend's house'

b. \*Je suis allé à la maison de mon ami.

'I went to my friend's house'

As the glosses of examples (1b), (2b) and (3b) reveal, à la maison bears a strong lexical and syntactic resemblance to the corresponding English constructions (at) home and at/to X's house.<sup>3</sup> This case of prepositional variation is therefore exactly of the kind that could 'invite' convergence. Indeed, Ontario French could be converging with English by selectively favoring à la maison, the variant which happens to coincide with English usage, to the detriment of chez + personal pronoun. Below we describe our speech corpus and show how it offers the possibility of putting the convergence hypothesis to the test.

#### 4. Methodology

In the late 70's the Centre for Franco-Ontarian Studies was contracted by the Ontario Ministry of Education to conduct a study of francophone students' language use patterns and to relate these patterns to their competence in spoken French. The corpus on which our sociolinguistic research is based is drawn from that earlier survey (Mougeon, Brent-Palmer, Bélanger and Cichocki 1982). It consists of samples of spoken French obtained via tape-recorded interviews with 117 Franco-Ontarian adolescents attending French language high schools in their town or city. The interviews lasted roughly between 30 minutes and one hour and aimed at tapping an unreflecting style of speech approaching the students' vernacular. Sociological data were gathered via questionnaire prior to the interviews and comprise information on the interviewee's sex, socioeconomic background, frequency of use of French vs. English depending on interlocutor and domain, and locality of residence. Sex and socioeconomic background were originally controlled since both are traditional social parameters in sociolinguistic research. Frequency of use of French was originally controlled given the obvious disparities between the students (see section 2) and under the assumption that below a certain threshold frequency there would begin to appear signs of interference from English and internal simplification in the students' spoken French, all the more so the lower the frequency of use of French. The various studies we have carried out to date clearly confirm this assumption (see e.g., Mougeon and Beniak 1981 on internal simplification and Beniak, Mougeon and Valois 1981 on interference) and are consonant with the findings of other studies on the linguistic attributes of language attrition (see Andersen 1982 for a general overview). A priori, then, we also expect frequency of use of French to be a good predictor of convergence since convergence, like interference, is the result of interlingual influence (see Poplack 1980 for a similar prediction regarding the possibilities of convergence in the variety of Spanish spoken by New York's Puerto Rican community). To get a measure of frequency of use of French, information on the students' language use patterns was gathered in a variety of situations and with a variety of interlocutors: with their parents, siblings and peers at home, with their siblings and peers outside the home, and with their peers at school in the classroom and corridors. We also gathered information on the parents' frequency of use of French with each other and with our subjects. All of this information was compiled to arrive at individual indices of frequency of use of French for interpersonal communication with one's family

or group of friends at home, in the community and at school. The indices thus obtained range from 1 or exclusive use of French to near 0 (the lowest was .05) or almost exclusive use of English.<sup>4</sup> The reader should bear in mind that a low index, while it does mean less than native fluency in French, does not signify poor fluency since it must be remembered that all of our subjects have been schooled in French. Conversely, the reader should also bear in mind that a high index does not indicate poor fluency in English, at least not for those speakers who live in towns or cities where Anglophones form the majority and where therefore ample opportunities to be exposed to, learn, and use English outside one's family and circle of friends present themselves on a daily basis. In fact most of our students come from such localities as we see next.

Since the speakers were selected in four different towns or cities, we decided to control locality of residence as well, with a view to possibly capturing geographical variation (see Mougeon, Beniak and Côté 1981). A speaker was deemed to be representative of the speech of his locality if he had resided there at least since the age of eight or not more than midway through what may be considered the "formative period for a native speaker" (Labov 1972:304-5). The localities in which our speakers reside, along with their population and francophone concentration, are the following: Hawkesbury (9,877 inhabitants of which 8,355 or 85% are Francophones), Cornwall (46,144 inhabitants of which 15,965 or 35% are Francophones), North Bay (51,268 inhabitants of which 8,545 or 17% are Francophones) and Pembroke (14,026 inhabitants of which only 1,185 or 8% are Francophones).<sup>5</sup> If our earlier assumption that convergence should manifest itself in the speech of the students using French below a threshold frequency is true, then by implication convergence should manifest itself in localities where such speakers are most likely to be found, that is, in localities where Francophones are in the minority and where therefore linguistic assimilation is underway (Mougeon et al. 1982).

We turn now to the examination of our prediction and its corollary, keeping in mind that, should they be borne out, we would have necessary but still not sufficient proof of convergence. It would remain to argue that the suspected case of convergence is not an internal simplification brought about by attrition in the frequency of use of French at the individual or community level since internal simplification, as our previous research

and that of others has shown, is also a linguistic consequence of language attrition.

## 5. Results

A variable-rule analysis of the variation between chez + personal pronoun and à la maison was performed by means of the VARBRUL 2S program (Sankoff 1979). This program does a step-wise regression analysis of the coded data, yielding an ordered selection of the factor groups (e.g., sex) which are significant predictors of variant selection. It also provides the effects of each one of the significant groups' factors (e.g., male, female) on variant choice. The effects vary between 0 and 1, effects greater than .5 favoring rule application (i.e., choice of one variant over the other) and effects lesser than .5 inhibiting it. The results of the VARBRUL 2S analysis of chez + personal pronoun vs. à la maison appear in Table 1. Not all of the factor groups included in the variable-rule analysis are germane to the issue of whether convergence is taking place and so we will not discuss the results pertaining to them (i.e., verb, social class and sex). Nevertheless these factor groups had to be included in the analysis as a safe-guard against confounding or overlapping effects, which the VARBRUL 2S program can detect since it examines all factor groups simultaneously.

Table 1 reveals that the factor group 'frequency of use of French' was not selected as a significant predictor of variant choice. Nevertheless, it can be seen that the speakers who reported a low or medium frequency of use of French have substantially higher percentages of use of à la maison, the variant resembling English usage, than do the speakers who reported a high frequency of use of French. In other words, the configuration of the results would seem to support the idea of a frequency threshold (i.e., high) below which the use of English-like variant increases noticeably.

The reason for the lack of significance of the results, it turns out, is a purely technical one, namely that locality of residence is a confounding factor when it comes to assessing the effect of frequency of use of French. As mentioned in the preceding section, Hawkesbury is a town which has a very strong francophone majority and so, not surprisingly, all of the students (save one) we interviewed there reported a high frequency of

use of French. As Table 1 shows, they used à la maison only 16% of the time and it is none other than this low frequency of use which explains why à la maison was not used more often than 24% of the time by all of the speakers who reported a high frequency of use of French taken together. Were we to disregard the occurrences of the variable that were produced by the Hawkesbury speakers, the frequency of use of à la maison by the speakers residing in the francophone minority localities who reported a high frequency of use of French would climb to 35% and would then no longer be appreciably lower than the percentages of the low and mid level users of French.<sup>6</sup>

Under the convergence hypothesis, the fact that the high level users of French who live in the predominantly French-speaking locality of Hawkesbury use à la maison far less often than their counterparts in the localities where Francophones are in the minority, would be ascribable to the fact that the Hawkesbury speakers are not just very frequent users of French in the situations on the basis of which our index was calculated, but are high level users of French in probably all situations given the dominant francophone identity of this locality. The same cannot be said for the high level users of French who reside in the other localities, where daily contact with and use of English is a way of life in view of the dominant English character of these localities. In this regard, many of the minority locality speakers who reported a high level of use of French (especially those residing in Pembroke and North Bay, where francophone concentration is weakest) nonetheless also reported speaking English well, sometimes as well as or even better than French! This is in stark contrast to the Hawkesbury speakers, practically all of whom reported knowing English only poorly. In other words, the latter probably do not know English well enough in order to converge, while many of the former obviously do. In turn this would explain why the high level users of French residing in the minority localities use à la maison about as frequently as the low and mid level users of French living in the same localities.

Factor groups	N of <u>à la maison</u>	Total	% of <u>à la maison</u>	Effect
<u>Frequency of use of French</u>				
High	18	74	24%	
Mid	33	75	44%	not sign.
Low	18	46	39%	
<u>Locality of residence</u>				
North Bay	25	49	51%	.658
Pembroke	20	49	41%	.634
Cornwall	17	54	31%	.468
Hawkesbury	7	43	16%	.255
<u>Social Class</u>				
Middle	11	33	33%	
Lower-middle	39	94	41%	not sign.
Working	19	68	38%	
<u>Sex</u>				
Male	37	93	40%	
Female	32	102	31%	not sign.
<u>Verb</u>				
Motion	11	61	18%	.331
Static	58	134	43%	.669
Total	69	195	35%	input= .265

Table 1. Effect of factor groups on probability of use of à la maison

In retrospect, the assumption that convergence should correlate with frequency of use of French could not be verified because our index was not sufficiently discriminating. However, the factor group locality of residence acted somewhat as a corrective since the greater discrimination which a more sensitive index based on a broader set of communicative situations would have achieved came through in the guise of the selection of locality of residence as a significant factor group. As shown in Table 1, the propensity to select à la maison instead of chez + personal pronoun increases in a regular fashion as one moves from the majority francophone locality of Hawkesbury (.255) to the strongest of the minority francophone localities (Cornwall .468) and from there to the weak minority francophone localities of Pembroke (.634) and North Bay (.658). In other words, the more French is in intensive contact with English at the local level, and therefore the more bilingual speakers there are, the greater the likelihood that à la maison, the variant resembling English usage, will be used in the local variety of French.

In the final analysis, then, the minority locality speakers' greater inclination toward à la maison constitutes necessary empirical evidence in support of the convergence hypothesis. We can now take this hypothesis one step further and see whether there is not a plausible explanation of an internal nature for the observed difference in linguistic preference between the minority and majority locality speakers.

## 6. Simplification?

The reader will recall that our original motivation for controlling frequency of use of French was not only the expectation that speakers using French below a certain threshold frequency would experience interference from English in their speech, but that they would also simplify the language (where it presents less than optimal structure, e.g., irregularities, infrequent forms, etc.). For example, we discovered a significant tendency on the part of the low and mid frequency users of French to level the third person plural forms of verbs via an overgeneralization of the unmarked third person singular forms, e.g., ils savent > ils sait 'they knows', elles veulent > elles veut 'they wants', etc. (Mougeon and Beniak 1981). Returning to the case at hand, could the minority locality speakers' greater proclivity to use à la maison not also be the reflection of a move in the direction of simpler structure?

There are certainly grounds to argue that à la maison is more transparent in meaning than chez + personal pronoun. For one, à is the general locative and directional preposition in French; moreover, maison denotes the notion of 'dwelling'. In contrast, chez is a highly specialized preposition of location and direction, not to mention that its pronominal counterpart obviously does not designate a person's home. Assuming for the sake of argument that this difference in semantic transparency is real, then all else being equal, in cases of restricted exposure to and use of French one might expect the bilingual's speech to show a higher than normal frequency of use of à la maison in comparison to the less transparent and hence less simple chez + personal pronoun. Our assumption is analogous to Andersen's (1982:99) hypothesis regarding syntactic reduction in the speech of learners undergoing language attrition (LAs): "The LA will preserve and overuse syntactic constructions that more transparently reflect the underlying semantic and syntactic relations".

This internal scenario, however, is in contradiction with the fact that the degree of overuse of à la maison by the minority locality speakers is almost as pronounced for the high level users of French (35% as pointed out above) as it is for the mid and low level users of French (i.e., those who in previous research of ours have been shown to be the ones who speak a simplified form of French). Thus simplification brought about by restricted use of French cannot be the explanation of the minority locality speakers' comparative overuse of à la maison, seeing that such overuse is as pronounced no matter how restricted French language use happens to be. This may be due to the fact that, in reality, not all else is equal between the two prepositional variants. Though à la maison may certainly be more transparent, chez enjoys (a) a much wider linguistic distribution (see section 3) and (b) is much more frequent in the specific context of a following personal pronoun (almost twice as frequent, in fact, judging by the totals at the bottom of Table 1). Thus it would seem that Andersen's prediction regarding the overuse of transparent constructions as a result of language restriction (or 'attrition' in his terminology) may not hold in the situation where the alternative construction possesses properties which militate in favor of its maintenance.

## 7. Conclusion

In light of the quantitative sociolinguistic evidence of a comparatively greater tendency to use à la maison, the English-like variant, in localities where contact with English is intensive (i.e., where there are many bilingual Francophones), and considering the implausibility of ascribing this cross-linguistic rapprochement to internal structural simplification, the conclusion seems warranted that convergence with English is the factor responsible. It would be interesting to try to ascertain whether the variation between the two prepositional phrases is stable or moving in the direction of greater use of one to the detriment of the other. If the convergence hypothesis is correct as we think, then Ontarian French should be evolving toward ever increasing use of à la maison in localities where Francophones form a minority (i.e., where bilingualism is widespread) but may be stable or evolving in the opposite direction where they form a strong majority. A cross-dialectal comparison with Quebecois French could prove illuminating in this regard.<sup>7</sup>

In closing, we would like to see other sociolinguists working in bilingual settings take an interest in the problem of convergence and of how to go about adducing convincing proof of it, especially when it is still in progress as opposed to already completed. It was demonstrated here that careful examination of the available sociolinguistic evidence makes it possible to disambiguate the origin of quantitative structural tendencies in a contact language which are such as to increase the degree of overlap with the superordinate language. As Silva-Corvalan (1983:8) has written, "the influence of one language on another may be evident only through differences in the frequency of use of a certain structure, rather than in the development of ungrammatical constructions." Therein lies the originality and interest of convergence as we hope to have shown in this paper.

### FOOTNOTES

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<sup>2</sup>It should be confessed that we actually did find examples of the type (4c) and (5b) in our speech corpus, but they were of very low frequency and were confined to the speech of the English dominant bilinguals. As such they did not constitute linguistically significant usages and so will not detain us any longer here.

<sup>3</sup>Needless to say, the existence of à la maison is not to be blamed on interference from English since it is a standard prepositional phrase (see Bélisle 1974 for Canadian French and Robert 1972 for European French) whose origin has been traced back to 16th century European French by Wartburg (1969:241 vol. 6), thus to a period when the French language had not yet come into contact with English in the New World. The word for 'house' is probably universally involved in the expression of location at or direction to a person's dwelling. Interestingly enough, the preposition chez, which comes from the Latin noun casa 'house' and is attested as far back as the 12th century (Wartburg 1940:450 vol. 2), is said to have extracted itself from just this sort of universal expression, e.g., en chies son hoste 'at his host's house' or à ches nos 'at our house' (Nyrop 1899:95 vol. 1).

<sup>4</sup>To guard against including non Francophones in our sample--there are some Anglophones attending Ontario's French language schools--each student had to have at least one parent of French mother tongue. Still, a sizeable majority of our subjects come from non-mixed marriage households.

<sup>5</sup>These are the latest figures taken from the 1981 Canada census.

<sup>6</sup>That locality of residence is a confounding factor group is also mathematically illustrated by the various steps of the regression analysis. When frequency of use of French was considered by itself in the first step of the analysis, it was significant at the .05 level. Even at the next step when it was considered in combination with the previously selected factor group (i.e., verb), it still was significant at the .05 level, though locality of residence was selected instead because of a higher level of significance ( $p < .01$ ). But when frequency of use of French was considered jointly with the two previously selected factor groups (i.e., verb and locality), it no longer contributed significantly to predicting variant choice ( $p < .80$  only).

<sup>7</sup>Because our speaker sample is monogenerational, we could not investigate these hypotheses.

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