

# MID AND LOW VOWELS IN SOUTHEASTERN FRENCH

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we present the partial results of a survey of French pronunciation in southeastern France, where the local variants are more and more threatened by standard French (SF). In order to document this process, we have gathered a corpus of French spoken in the Nice area; several generations of speakers are represented. It was thus possible to observe, in apparent time, the evolution of certain features of southeastern French (SEF) pronunciation, particularly mid and low vowels, which are the focus of this article. A Labovian analysis was undertaken to determine if the southeastern pronunciation features mentioned above are being lost and, if so, at what speed and according to which stylistic and sociolinguistic criteria.

## 2. RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Since our intention was not to describe Nice pronunciation synchronically but to do a diachronic study of the main regional phonetic features, we interviewed five families, in which at least three successive generations were represented and where the oldest members had a definite southern pronunciation. In terms of socioeconomic status, all older informants and a few others were or had been manual workers. Most other subjects worked in the educational field (teachers or students). Each subject was interviewed at home for about half-an-hour on questions of general interest. After the interview, participants read several sentences and a "light" article from the local press, which added a stylistic dimension to the research and facilitated inter-subject comparisons. By listening repeatedly to the corpus, it was possible to note the presence or absence of the local variants on an orthographic transcription of the text, 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. Because of the small number of subjects in each of the sub-groups, it was decided not to do a detailed statistical analysis of their performance, but to set at 10% the threshold of significance for all group differences. The results are therefore tentative and illustrate prevailing evolutionary tendencies.

The following oppositions were used in the study of the /E/, /OE/ and /O/ mid vowels: [e ~ ε], [ø ~ œ], [o ~ ɔ]. In SEF, each pair of variants is in complementary distribution, since the higher realization is found in open syllables and the lower variant in closed ones. This pattern prevails in SF as well, but with several exceptions, notably in final /E/, as in *ballet*, or before [z], as in *affreuse* or *arrose*. /A/ was also included in the study because, like mid vowels, it is treated differently in SF and SEF. Whereas 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) which is measured here, in an attempt to determine to what extent SF exceptions have penetrated the region.

### 3. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Overview and contextual variation

The percentages in Table 1 show the frequency of the southeastern variants and, 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 1 per subject). It is precisely because of this anticipated difficulty that five words in *-euse* were incorporated into the reading passages. Finally the “context” information in the left column refers to distinctions made in the /E/ ending for the detection of eventual lexical or grammatical influences on phonetic patterns observed here.

TABLE 1  
Southern realizations of mid and low vowels

Variants			Spontaneous		Reading	
SF	SEF	Context	N	%	N	%
[a]	→ [a]		648	99	90	99
[ε]	→ [ε]	-èsl-êt	174	91	136	97
		-aisl-ait	724	98	143	98
		[imp./cond.]	859	96	255	97
		Total	1757	96	534	97
[ø]	→ [œ]		(24)	(72)?	123	59
[o]	→ [ɔ]		235	77	482	72
Total/Average			2604	95	1229	84

In general, southeastern phonetic habits are well preserved, 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 [pRε] for *prêt*). The exceptional variants [ɑ] and

[ɛ], already weak on home ground, are therefore unlikely to penetrate hostile territory. [ø] and [o], 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. Sociolinguistic variation

#### 3.2.1. Age

Results obtained for each generation of speakers are presented in the last two columns of Table 2. Because extreme 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/. For comparison purposes, their presentation is preceded by a summary of a previous study of schwa in the same corpus (see details in Thomas 1992).

**TABLE 2**  
Maintenance of southern variables as a function of age

Variable	[ə]				[ø] → [œ]				[o] → [ɔ]			
	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1	4	3	2	1
% Spont. (C family)	75 (90)	58 (87)	45 (28)	12 (5)	Insufficient data				83 (75)	72 (80)	52 (100)	74 (50)
% Reading (C family)	84 (94)	74 (82)	50 (38)	36 (0)	85 (80)	60 (71)	71 (63)	39 (65)	80 (100)	71 (100)	63 (67)	65 (71)

**Key:** 4 = 80+ years of age    2 = 35 to 46  
3 = 60 to 70                    1 = 16 to 27

It is immediately clear that mid vowels retain their southern characteristics much better than [ə], which drastically loses its southern-ness as the age of the subjects decreases. This is particularly true of one of the families interviewed, the C family of violet growers – of special interest because of the similarity of its members, other than the age factor – where the youngest speaker sounds like a Parisian for [ə] 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/.

## 3.2.2. Gender

Since the absence of men in the oldest age group would have biased the results in favour of women in an overall gender comparison and because of the possibility of wide language background differences between spouses, it was decided to limit the analysis to sibling contrasts. The mini-corpus of six subjects (3M/3F) thus assembled (Table 3), although weak on quantity, has at least the merit of quality, since siblings share many linguistic influences during their formative years.

TABLE 3

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

Variable	[ə]		[ø] → [œ]		[o] → [ɔ]	
	F	M	F	M	F	M
% Spont.	38	34	—	—	79	75
% Reading	55	53	63	47	85	52

Results show significant male/female differences when southern variants are the majority (mid vowels) and similarities when they are in the minority ([ə]). Far from being contradictory, this observation confirms the different status of the variables under study. [ə] is characteristic of a change in progress, with obliteration of social distinctions because of the rapidity of the shift (see the “age” section above), while mid vowels display the maintenance of traditional southern variants, with their social stratification, including a higher use of the dominant variants by women.

## 3.3. Stylistic variation

Looking at the global results presented at the bottom of Table 1, 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. However, if one excludes this artefact from the calculations, one finds that both styles yield comparable figures. This suggests the absence of phonetic hypercorrection in the Nice area. It also confirms the few brief discussions we had on this question during the interviews. No one remembered having been reprimanded for their southern accent, in school or elsewhere, and some subjects were even proud of it, to the point of criticizing those who “speak Parisian”. Whatever their cause, the changes documented here are not the result of stigmatization, which is normally accompanied by stylistic distinctions.

## 4. CONCLUSION

What are the causes of this evolution? A possible answer to this question might be found in the striking difference between our results for [ə] and those for mid and

low vowels in spontaneous speech. Results from reading were not considered here because of their artificial constraints, as explained above for /OE/ and in Thomas (1992) for schwa. While the maintenance of [ə] reaches only 39% (average calculated from Table 2), the maintenance of mid and low vowels remains very high, averaging 95%. Even /OE/, the most vulnerable of the mid vowels studied here, is much better preserved than [ə]. The question arises then as to which characteristic of schwa, that is less obvious in or absent from mid and low vowels, might explain the difference?

One possible explanation is the fact that the full deletion of schwa allows for segment economy, which is not possible with the other variables. Going from one mid vowel to another, or from one variant of /A/ to another, represents no economy at all and is therefore less desirable — unconsciously at least — than the deletion of [ə]. This explanation is consistent with the numerous phonetic reductions found in the evolution of French and of the Romance languages in general. SEF seems to be following SF in its weakening of schwa, albeit at a slower pace, but it remains resistant to the adoption of SF variants that create exceptions to its complementary distribution rule and that present no particular advantage from the point of view of phonetic economy. An analysis of other SEF variables, such as epenthetic nasal vowels, would have to be undertaken to verify the above hypothesis. But, in the meantime, we are already assured that the pressure exerted by SF is not uniform throughout SEF pronunciation and that it is sufficiently strong to illustrate, once again, the tendency of modern French “to standardize through the progressive weakening of regional variants” (Léon, 1979, our translation).

#### REFERENCES

- Léon, P.R. 1979. Standardisation vs. diversification dans la prononciation du français contemporain. *Current Issues in the Phonetic Sciences* 9:541–549.
- Thomas, A. 1992. Évolution de E muet en français niçois. *Mélanges Léon*, ed. P. Martin, 501–516. Toronto: Éditions Mélodie.