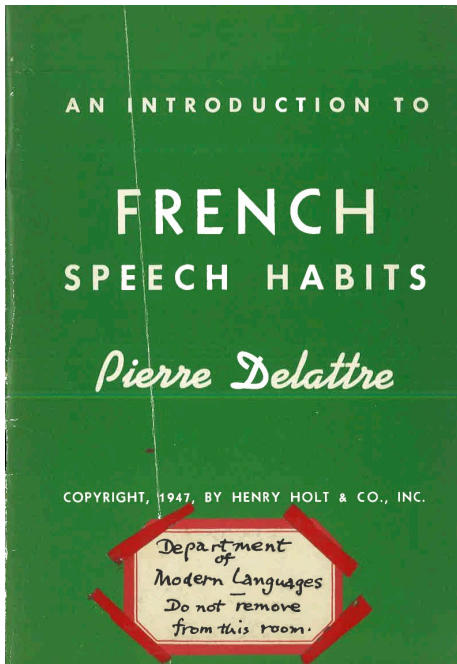Elyse Ritchey
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"Teaching French listening comprehension and cultural awareness through regional variation"

Abstract

At the university level, French language curricula in the US traditionally include a course on phonetics and pronunciation. The major aim of such courses is to improve students' speaking and listening competence, typically undertaken through an emphasis on speaking 'correctly' by using standardized, metropolitan French. The development of listening comprehension skills also tends to be dependent on normative models. In this project, I propose targeting students' listening comprehension skills by focusing on the diversity of modern spoken French as evinced by regional variation. My project also invites students to consider French beyond the metropole, including its contact with other languages, and thus builds the capacity to understand diverse speakers' language and culture.

Teaching French listening comprehension and cultural awareness through regional variation

Introduction and impetus for the project

The genesis of this project is my experience as an instructor of "Practical Phonetics and Listening Comprehension" (French 35). For most students, French 35 is the first opportunity to explore the sound system of the language and to reflect on their own listening and speaking skills using metalinguistic discourse. It remedies a lacuna in the lower division curriculum at Berkeley and at many other institutions. Researchers have already suggested that lower division language textbooks tend not to explicitly articulate objectives and techniques relating to listening and speaking skills: "Given the prevalence of orthography-based grammar presentations, it seems that textbooks generally assume that oral comprehension and production abilities follow as an automatic by-product of classroom presentations and discourse" (Arteaga et al. 2003: 65). French 35 is strong when it comes to phonetic study of the normative sound system of modern French. However, when it comes to sensitizing students to sociolinguistic variability in the spoken language, the course is currently inadequate. The curriculum that I propose here is intended to

enhance French 35 students' listening comprehension skills and awareness of cultural and linguistic diversity in French might be enhanced through the study of dialectal variation.[1]

Since French 35 traditionally incorporates some discussion of regional differences in the spoken language, when I taught the course in Summer 2015 I availed myself of both online and print resources on regional accents and geographic variation. Using these materials, I introduced a number of macro-dialects to the course, covering the Hexagon, Canada, the Antilles, and Africa. In their end-of-semester evaluations, students suggested that materials on regional variation be presented as homework, rather than as an in-class activity. This feedback indicates that my goals in presenting the topic were not well articulated. Students saw regional varieties as non-normative and peripheral to the goal of speaking French "the right way." To remedy these misunderstandings, in this project I hold from the outset that sociolinguistic variability, including regional variation, is just as systematic as the normative model that French phonetics and pronunciation courses are usually built upon. The major objectives of this project are twofold. First, I will provide appropriate social, cultural, and historical context for the varieties in question. Second, I will guide phonetic study of these varieties in such a way that students come to understand the range of dialectal forms that a certain phoneme might take on.

French pronunciation courses and oral language skills

Through my discussions with the BLC group, I was reminded that the pronunciation courses available in French departments are an outlier; most language departments do not offer them. The continuing presence of such courses can fairly be attributed to both practical and ideological motivations. On the practical side, French orthography is not transparently representative of the sound system. The orthographic depth hypothesis proposed by Frost 2012 may justify the need for French pronunciation courses. This hypothesis "holds that reading in languages such as English or French, whose grapheme–phoneme relationships are opaque, requires more morphological (semantic) processing, while reading in languages such as German or Spanish, whose grapheme–phoneme relationships are transparent, requires more phonological

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[1] In this report, I adopt the simple, generous definition of dialect proposed by Francis (1983): "varieties of a language used by groups smaller than the total community of speakers." I use "dialect" and "regional variety" interchangeably, understanding both as referring to language varieties proper to a particular geographic area.

processing" (Tschirner 2016: 205). Moreover, Tschirner also cites the work of Goodwin, August, and Calderon (2015), who found that:

> Students learning languages with shallow orthographies such as Spanish may be able to relate words learned visually and aurally more readily, and they may even be able to transfer words learned in one modality to the other, whereas students learning languages with deep orthographies such as French may not be able to transfer what they have learned visually to listening. (Tschirner 2016: 205).

Thus, the ability to decode written language is more useful in building the ability to decode spoken language in Spanish (the study of which does not typically include a pronunciation course) than in French. Therefore, spending extra time discussing the relationship between orthography and speech seems warranted. However, when one considers the rarity of pronunciation classes across languages, even logographic languages, the orthographic depth hypothesis appears insufficient.

The second factor accounting for the persistence of French pronunciation is the status of the standard language. There is no consensus on one definition of what a standard language, or indeed whether standardization is a teleological process or rather an ideology, as Milroy and Milroy posited when they spoke of "a standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent" (Lodge 1993: 25). The ideology of the standard in the French-speaking world, where the center of gravity is France and more specifically Paris, exerts a strong influence. The strength of this language hegemony manifests itself in efforts to ensure that second language learners learn to speak "correctly" according to established norms.

Conflicts between written and spoken codes again move to the fore considering that the standardized pronunciation targets presented in most classroom materials are based on the perceived supremacy of the written code over the oral one.

> Models for 'correct' speech tend to be provided by prestige groups in society, but these models cannot be relied upon to be stable or homogenous. This has given rise to the tendency to regard the more stable written language as the ultimate model for speech, and hence to the widespread belief that writing is a superior form of language to speaking. (Lodge 1993: 24)

In the case of French 35, focus is shifting from normative pronunciation to study of the spoken language. Thus, the listening comprehension aspect has gained more prominence, if not always more real estate on the syllabus.

Finally, another challenge is that the topic of variation in the spoken language is largely absent from French language textbooks, even ones on pronunciation and phonetics. I attribute this avoidance to fears that the students will find the notion of linguistic variation to be overwhelming. There is an ideological facet to the issue as well: the prestige assigned to standard French permeates the outlook of many textbook authors. Despite the present dearth of pedagogical materials that explore it, I argue that regional variation is intrinsic to the comprehensive study of the sound system of contemporary French, and that such study can be manageable. Variation tends to affect a small portion of sounds in relatively predictable ways. For example, the /r/, the schwa, vowel harmony, and nasal vowels are all especially subject to geographic variation. I propose that the study of the variation in these sounds and their various articulations will in fact deepen students' understanding of the sound system, not hinder it.

Listening comprehension in the classroom

With this project, I aim to aid students as they become more flexible listeners. Our students are most often exposed to the neutral, standardized version of French that is proper to overseas academic environments. Students who are not exposed to diverse models of second language use may be at a disadvantage when they spend time abroad. For example, Levis cites a 2005 study by Deterding, who found that "Singapore English speakers who are used to RP found Estuary English speech, which they are more likely to encounter in England, to be often unintelligible" (Levis 2005: 372). Such a finding suggests that "pedagogical reliance on prestige models is counterproductive for learners' ability to understand normal speech" (ibid.).

The challenges of teaching listening comprehension skills in academic environments are not limited to the classroom. In his summary of a number of studies on SL proficiency, Tschirner notes that, after L2 study in higher education and / or study abroad settings, "proficiency levels in the interpretive modalities [i.e. reading and listening] generally appear to be lower than in the productive ones [i.e. writing and speaking] and are lowest for listening ability, especially in instructed foreign language learning" (2016: 204). Given the aforementioned challenges of acquiring interpretive skills in languages with opaque grapheme–phoneme relationships such as

French, it was important to ensure that students' engagement with the materials I developed would be both meaningful and instructive.

The first strategy fostering such engagement that I adopted was to minimize pitfalls of over-exposure to novel input. In their discussion of listening comprehension, Nagle and Sanders (1986) caution that:

> While attention to language input may have desirable effects...it may also result in a breakdown of the comprehension process when there is (a) too much attention given to details, (b) system overload, or (c) anxiety about failure to understand or being accountable for a response. (21)

In the curriculum, students are continually supported as they receive new auditory input in order to avoid such anxiety. In the case of my project, I strive to avoid breakdown by scaffolding with transcriptions, by focusing on specific features, and by giving explicit instructions.

The second strategy that I use is maximizing students' recognition of particular forms. In keeping with intelligibility principle, which states that "different features have different effects on understanding" (Levis 2005) instructors can focus on those that truly differentiate regional varieties. In this way, students acquire familiarity with the variation of particular phonemes without memorizing every detail of each variety.

Cultural awareness in the classroom

French 35 is often students' first exposure to linguistic discussion; they acquire a vocabulary and the capacity to use International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) notation. The course also offers opportunities to forge connections between disciplines. For example, Diane Dansereau's classroom text *Savoir Dire* uses canonical literary texts to facilitate the study of French phonology. In order to foster intercultural competence in the lower division curriculum, instructors strive to present a variety of materials from across the Francophone world and from a variety of genres. That is the case in my project as well. The lesson plans in this project center on Francophone cultural products, everyday life across the Francophone world, and speakers' reflections about the role of language in their lives.

Although my curriculum does problematize the ideology of the standard and the traditional insistence on normative usage, both in the French-speaking world and in American

higher education, I contend that to neglect normative usage would be counterproductive. One of my objectives is to teach about the cohesiveness of varieties on their various levels, be it the local French of Ville Platte, Louisiana, the regional French of southern France, or the supra-national French of sub-Saharan Africa. However, once armed with the ability to produce the normative system, a student who moves to Belgium for work will be able to not only understand the variety but also to modify their own idiolect as desired to fit in to the community.[2] As Levis contends, such "[d]ecisions about adjusting accent are not value free because accents are intimately tied to speaker identity and group membership" (2005). I argue that, for learners of French at an American university, the "neutral," normative accent with the inflection of their own backgrounds, is part of that identity.

Shape of the project

The curriculum comprises two foundational modules on the ideology of the standard and sociolinguistic variation in French. Five more modules offer information on and exposure to regional varieties through real speech in the following regions: Paris, Southern France, sub-Saharan Africa, Canada, and Louisiana. Each module consists of three phases: *Pre-class reading, In-class activities*, and *Evaluation and assessment*. The modules target particular phonological features and sociolinguistic topics. They are meant to be integrated into the French 35 curriculum at intervals based on the phonological features being studied. For example, the lesson on the French of southern France focuses on nasal vowels and the schwa; it would thus be best introduced after and as a complement to the general study of these sounds. This module's sociolinguistic theme is covert prestige and self-perception as a dialect speaker, which allows students to explore this aspect of language-in-culture. For each module, I propose a variety of media to better spark the full range of students' interests, such as literature, film, song, oral storytelling, advertisements, interviews, and sociolinguistic interviews.

The first phase, *Pre-class reading*, consists of a short reading on the history of the French language's presence in the target geographical region. It is designed to give students a background knowledge on historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of the French language's presence in the region. Short-answer questions follow the reading and focus on

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[2] Naturally, L2 French instruction in regions that have their own variety would focus more on acquiring that one

phenomena around language contact: how did French arrive in the area? what other languages coexist with it? what is its role in contemporary society? At home, students will also listen to a clip of a speaker of the target variety. Using their knowledge of French phonetics, they will note lexical items or phrases that seem salient.

Discussion of the *Pre-class reading* kicks off the second phase, *In-class activities*. These involve auditory discrimination exercises, phonetic notation using the IPA, analysis of phrases (intonation, vowel harmony, sandhi effects, etc.), and more. For example, one activity asks students to begin by finding possible liaisons (between a word-final consonant and word-initial vowel) in a transcribed text. After listening to a speaker hailing from Senegal, students note where liaisons are made, and investigate whether their presence or absence conforms to normative expectations, given the register of the speech. This activity builds on students' familiarity with liaison as an index of formality: increased production of "optional" liaisons characterizes more formal speech. Furthermore, it invites students to consider the liaison as a sociolinguistic variant influenced by regional factors, not just pragmatic ones.

There are four types of *In-class activity* in the modules on regional varieties: *Phonetic exploration, Phonology to orthography, Languages in contact*, and *Synthesis and reflection*. I find that an 80-minute class period will typically accommodate two activities. Thus, instructors may choose to spend more time on certain varieties, doing each activity in the module. Conversely, depending on the nature of the course, they may choose to focus on just one or two activity types across modules. Below, I give a brief description of each activity type.

The *Phonetic exploration* activity is based on the volume *Varieties of Spoken French* (Detey et al. 2016), which features speaker data and a variety of types of elicited speech from across the Francophone world. Students analyze a focus phonological feature in the recording, chosen based on the progression of study. Targeted listening exercises enable students to analyze a salient feature or feature set in the variety.

Mindful of the orthographic depth hypothesis, I developed the *Phonology to orthography* activity. Here, students receive a written text that displays nonstandard orthography. This orthography reflects the phonology of the dialect in question. The sources are literary texts and transcriptions of sociolinguistic interviews. This activity invites students to explore how written codes might be adapted to spoken usage, not how the spoken language might better reflect the written one. Thus, the written-spoken correspondence is reinforced in a novel way.

The *Languages in contact* activity is designed to foster cultural awareness of the Francophone world. It also offers students the opportunity to examine the multiple aspects of an individual speaker's sociolinguistic identity. In this activity, students consider speakers as possessing various repertoires that they deploy depending on the communication situation. We also look at the effects of language contact and bilingualism on speakers' French. Traditional sociolinguistic variables such as age and education level may also enter into discussion. Occasionally, there are some lexical and semantic features of interest alongside the phonological ones.

Finally, the *Synthesis and reflection* activity takes up sociolinguistic themes from the in-class reading like language and identity, language policy, language insecurity or pride, etc. The presentation centers on a speaker or speakers describing their linguistic experiences.

The third phase of each module, *Evaluation and assessment,* includes assessment options for quizzes and exams as well as for a research project based on sociolinguistic inquiry. Quiz exercises are similar to the tasks that students have done in in-class activities, such as providing IPA transcriptions of words written in dialectal form. On exams, students examine a set of linguistic features and identify the variety in which they are found. An auditory discrimination exercise asks them to suggest the likely geographical origin of speakers. Essay questions ask students to respond to a brief prompt that evokes some sociolinguistic themes we have discussed. Students may choose to focus on a regional variety for their final project, using our classwork and supplementary materials on the bCourses site as a jumping-off point for further research. Such a project allows them to explore on their own the linguistic and cultural richness of the Francophone world.

Conclusion

Although the models that I have described above were designed for UC Berkeley's French 35 classroom, it is my hope that they will eventually be found useful in other contexts. For example, several of the in-class activities that do not rely on technical knowledge of French phonology could be useful in the study of cultural and linguistic variation in the French-speaking world in advanced university language courses or even in introductory linguistic courses on French. Moreover, I believe that the structure of the modules and the activity types that I propose could be adapted to the study of other languages. With its focus both on the development of listening comprehension and on sociocultural aspects of language in use, this curriculum offers a

another option for presenting material and skills that are often overlooked, both in French pronunciation courses and in lower-division French curricula at large. Exploration of regional variation in phonology has the real potential to shake up students' conceptions about diversity in the spoken language while building their confidence in their own capacity for understanding.

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