A Variationist Approach to Teaching French Phonetics

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Rationale

• Exposure to and direct instruction in language variation critical to developing sociolinguistic competence

• Efforts to diversify language curricula through representation of diverse speaker communities, in order to foster inclusive language teaching

• Diverse backgrounds and educational/professional goals among students, which may necessitate engagement with French-speaking communities beyond France (e.g. medicine, law, humanitarian work, etc.)

(van Compernolle & Williams 2012)

(Macedo 2019, Knisely 2020)
Rationale (cont.)

- Long history of standard ideology in French
  - Negative attitudes toward speakers of non-standard varieties
  - Linguistic prescriptivism (institutional + individual)
  - Linguistic insecurity amongst speakers of non-standard/minoritized varieties
  - Uneven (and sometimes disrespectful) representation of nonstandard varieties in L2 pedagogy

- Scarcity of research on applying sociolinguistic approaches to French pedagogy

(Doran 2007, Vigouroux 2017)
(Calabrese & Rosier 2015)
(Kuiper 2005)
(Auger 2003, Bosworth 2016)
Course Goals

1. Contribute to ongoing efforts to de-center France in French language teaching

2. Prepare students to understand and use spoken French in a range of French-speaking communities

3. Empower students to challenge hegemonic notions of what it means to ‘sound French’ and to explore their own French-speaking identities
   - Legitimize L2 varieties of French
Method

• Draws on prior applications of a sociolinguistic approach to Spanish language pedagogy

• Integration of sociolinguistic issues (particularly through the lens of variationism) to phonetics curriculum
  • Direct instruction socially meaningful variables
  • Discussions about language attitudes & ideologies

• Diversification of materials to represent French-speaking communities beyond France

(Shin and Hudgens Henderson 2017)
Course Overview: Lessons

• Weekly readings on aspects of French phonetics
  • Dansereau (2006) - simple explanations in French of aspects of the (normative) sound system
  • Lodge et al. (1997) - more in-depth explanations in English, some discussion of variability

• Synchronous & asynchronous lessons following short readings, including diversified examples of authentic speech + presentation of sociolinguistic concepts

• Lessons loosely follow Shin and Hudgens Henderson’s (2017) three-pronged approach:
  • Authentic discourse, phonetic concepts, language attitudes/ideologies (p. 198)
Course Overview: Assessed Work

- 4 Listening assignments in bCourses ("Quiz" function)
- 4 Written responses/discussions in bCourses
- 5 Comprehension quizzes
  - Testing for understanding of the phonetic phenomena + sociolinguistic concepts presented in a unit
- Final project combines sociolinguistic issues with French phonetics
  - Choice of different digital formats for presenting work (a modified 'Un-essay')

(Mark Kissel, "The UnEssay," May 2018)
Sample Activities

Introduction to the IPA + Intro to Language Attitudes
Sample Activity #1: Introduction to the IPA

- Listening + phonetic transcription exercise following introductory reading
  - **Why do we need the IPA?** Short exercise in describing pronunciation w/o the IPA to show its importance
  - **Intro to IPA symbols** using interactive website: ipachart.com
    - Explanation of how IPA charts are configured (vowel space + consonant chart)
  - **Review of French articulatory vocabulary**
  - **Identifying French sounds**
Sample Activity #1 (cont.)

• **Overview of typing IPA symbols** ([ipa.typeit.org/full](ipa.typeit.org/full))

• **Introduction to basic phonetic transcription**
  - Starting with individual sound-symbol correspondences using sounds from French systems, then transcription of monosyllabic words
  - Articulatory descriptions of symbols shown in context of French words (e.g. ho[ʁ]aire)
  - Comparison of vowels in different varieties of French

(Detey et al. 2016)
Sample Activity #1 - reflection questions

In breakout rooms:

• After comparing the vowel systems of different varieties of French, how do you think their consonant systems might differ? Have you ever heard any sounds in French that you didn’t expect to hear?

• Why do you think the IPA is important for us when describing sounds in French?
Sample Activity #2: Language Attitudes

- Part of larger introduction to major sociolinguistic concepts
- Introduces language attitudes from the perspective of Francophones in Southeastern Canada (Acadie)
  - Radio-Canada produced interview with 5 speakers of Acadian French varieties who describe reactions their speech has elicited
L’acadjonne
(St. Mary’s Bay, Novia Scotia)

Le français
(Acadian Peninsula, Northeast New Brunswick; Moncton, NB)

Le chiac
(Moncton + Shedia, Southeast New Brunswick)
Sample Activity #2 (cont.)

• Post-video, students are asked to describe language attitudes relayed by the speakers, define and/or describe other sociolinguistic concepts, and critically evaluate the notion of “le bon français” (‘good French’)

• Piloted asynchronously in French 146 (Intro French linguistics) this fall
Sample Responses
(Translated from French, emphases are mine)

On *le bon français*: What is it, according to the interviewed speakers? Does it exist at all?

- “Good French” doesn’t exist, but **it is used by a lot of francophones to refer to standard French**. It doesn’t exist because language is only a way of expressing something and making someone understand what you’re saying.

- The title ‘good French’ **refers to a certain way of speaking that’s more well-known**. For the young Acadians, ‘good French’ doesn’t exist.

- Even though I think beliefs about “good French” exist, it’s because **it’s a sort of social construct**. I say that because we hear standard French most of the time.
• On code-switching: Why do the speakers seem to suggest that speaking their varieties is a choice? Is it? What are the alternatives, if so?
  • I think they give this impression because they choose, sometimes, to not speak their specific varieties to avoid discrimination, to show their identity, etc.
  • I think they give the impression of choosing to speak their specific varieties because they know there are other ways of speaking and they can speak other ways if they want.
  • The alternative choices are to abandon their language in favor of the other more “acceptable” one. But, as Xavier said, language is really a part of one’s identity, a part that ‘dies’ if one doesn’t speak their variety.
Conclusions

• Learning outcome:
  • Understanding of range of variability in spoken French and its social meanings, including how identity is expressed through speech
  • Ability to engage with French speakers from various francophone communities

• Diversified examples in presentation of phonetics concepts
  • Speech samples from the *banlieues*, the Maghreb, Eastern Canada, etc.
  • Applications: teaching diverse French sound systems, authentic speech samples from diverse Francophone communities

*suburbs on the periphery of major French cities, notably Paris and Marseille*
Conclusions

- Learning outcome:
  - Ability to construct French-speaking identity through language use, as sociolinguistic competence develops
  - Integration of sociolinguistic issues, including teaching about language variation and generating metalinguistic awareness
    - Application: introducing language attitudes surrounding non-standard varieties, drawing attention to linguistic discrimination and the language-identity link

Larger goal: future integration of these practices into various levels of language instruction
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References


