

## CHAPTER FIVE

### MORPHOLOGY AND SYNTAX

Since the French language in Quebec was the standard French of the eighteenth century, the morphology and syntax of Quebecois have remained largely standardized; almost all the variations from standard forms are those that are found elsewhere in *le français populaire*. In other words most of the deviations from standard forms that are heard in Quebec are also heard in France in *le français populaire*, and we have already noted that the norms of usage in the New World are much more relaxed than in the Old World. This means that a reasonably standard speaker of Quebecois will use forms that would only be heard in popular and colloquial speech in France. English Canadians, on hearing these forms, mistakenly take them for distinctive Canadian usage, when in fact they are found universally in French in the popular levels of usage.

In order to avoid making such misjudgments, students of Canadian French should make themselves familiar with what is to be found in *le français populaire*. There is an original and masterly survey by Henri Bauche, entitled *Le langage populaire*, published in Paris in 1920, and a later, more easily accessible popularization by Pierre Guiraud, *Le français populaire*, published in 1965 in the *Que Sais-je* series.

We give here a brief list of popular forms that have been traditional usage in Quebec with the warning that this situation is volatile: there is intense pressure today to standardize, so that what applies today may no longer apply in a few years time. Radio, television, and films have an enormously standardizing influence everywhere in the world, and in the late twentieth century travel between Montreal and Paris takes only a few hours by plane, so that usage is tending to become much more standardized with each passing generation.

#### **Popular forms in current Canadian usage**

1. The use of *cuirs* (i.e. false liaisons) in such forms as *Donnez-moi-z-en* for “Give me some”.

2. The use of postposed pronouns in both the imperative and the imperative negative: *Ne parlez-moi-z-en pas*. In the standard language the pronouns are placed before the verb in the imperative negative: *Ne m'en parlez pas*.

3. The use of a plural with nouns such as *un pantalon*, which is singular in the standard language. This is sometimes popularly described as an anglicism, which of course it is not: *\*a trousers* is not normal English usage. As we shall see when we come to deal with the question of anglicisms, many things are attributed to the influence of English which have nothing whatever to do with English: *des pantalons* is popular usage brought from France by the original *colons*.

4. There are forms such as *asteur*, now, which are heard wherever French is spoken. This particular word, which is an abbreviated form of *à cette heure*, reduced to *à c't heure*, should have been a part of the standard language, but never got into any of the standard dictionaries because the French Academy could not agree on how to spell it, could not agree, in short, whether it was a word or a phrase.

5. The expansion of conjunctions such as *quand* into *quand que* is heard in the popular speech of Quebecois, and is also a well known feature of *français populaire*. This also leads to forms such as *Quelle heure qu'il est?* where the standard language would require *Quelle heure est-il?*

6. The assignment of feminine gender to nouns that begin with a vowel. Since the liaison that takes place before these vowels produces feminine-like forms in such standard pronunciations as *un bel escalier*, *un certain âge*, *le Divin Enfant*, *un vieil air*, it is natural for such nouns to drift into the feminine gender, a noted feature of *le français populaire*. Consequently, one hears such comments as *Oh monsieur, la bel argent!* as an expression of scandal at the prodigal throwing around of money.

7. The addition of a stem final consonant before verbal inflections in those verbs that do not have one. Verbs such as *jouer* and *lier* thereby become *jouser* and *liser*, with plural forms *nous jousons*, *vous jousez*, etc. French verbs regularly have a *consonne axiale* (see Guillaume 1973:75): *finir*, for example, has /s/ before the verbal inflections (-ons, -ez, -ais, etc) *vendre* has /d/, *écrire* has /v/ and so on. Most first declension verbs have an "axial consonant" all the way through the paradigm (*aimer* has /m/, for example, so that this addition of /z/ to *jouer*, *lier*, *suer*, *échouer*, etc, and /s/ to *diminuer*, *étudier*, *se marier*, etc, is an analogical regularization, following a now common pattern of the French verb conjugations (see also Hewson 1988:81). In both Canada and Europe it is still a non-standard feature, however.

8. Regularization of irregular verbs such as *mourir*, to give *je mours*, *il mourt*, with *il a mouru*, he died, contrasting with *il est mort*, he is dead. In the case of *il tient* this leads to *nous tiendons* and an infinitive *tiendre*, and even to

an infinitive *tientbondre* as a reinterpretation of *je tiens bon, tu tiens bon, il tient bon*, etc. This again is a feature of popular usage, not of the standard language.

9. Archaisms such as the use of *grand* as a feminine adjective. Since Latin *grandis* was a third conjugation adjective, the masculine and feminine forms were identical, and the modern feminine form *grande* is an analogical reshaping. Archaic remnants are to be found in the standard language: *ma grand-mère, la grand-rue* (main street), *la grand-terre* (mainland), *la grand-messe* (high mass), *grand-chose, à grand-peine*, so that it is not surprising to hear other, now non-standard survivals: *une grand porte, la grand maison, une belle grand fille, une grand langue*.

10. Reshaping of the adjective conjugations to give distinctive feminine forms, as follows: *pourri-te, cru-te, pointu-se, poilu-se, barbu-se, bossu-se, fourchu-se*. In Acadian usage, since the /r/ in *léger* is pronounced, the feminine form becomes *légearte* by analogy with *vert, varte*, where the vowel becomes opened before the cluster /-rC/.

11. There are also archaic forms that result from archaic pronunciations from pre-revolutionary times, such as the loss of final /r/, and the resulting pronunciation /we/ of final *-oir*. These changes affect all the infinitives that end in *-oir*, and likewise nouns indicating instruments such as *rasoir, couloir*, etc. The ancient infinitive *querir*, to look for, may also be heard as *qu'ri*: *Va qu'ri mes pantoufles*. Loss of /-r/ also affects all those nouns indicating agents or actors, such as *chanteur, acteur*, etc. The forms without /-r/ may be used by standard speakers with a pejorative sense: to describe a singer as un *chanteu*' is derogatory.

### Regional forms in Quebecois

Because such a large number of the original settlers in Quebec came from the North East of France, there are inevitably some regional traits that were brought into Quebecois usage by the original settlers. The most noticeable of these is probably the persistence of final -t, which has been lost in the standard language, with very rare exceptions (e.g. *net*). In Quebecois, therefore, the final -t may be heard in words such as *août, bout, but*, and is universally pronounced in surnames (e.g. Huot, Chabot, Maillet, Ouellet). It is this usage, typical of Normandy, that explains the form *icit*, here (instead of standard *ici*); this word had a -t in Old French which continued to be pronounced in North Eastern France and in Canada, but which became lost in the standard language (along with other final consonants) and subsequently no longer written in the standard spelling. The correct historical spelling is *icit*, however, and the final -t is still pronounced in the folk speech of North Eastern France, and in Quebecois,

although the usage is frowned upon, and Quebecois parents teach their children to say *ici*, not *icit*.

A final -d which had been historically devoiced to final -t was also preserved in the pronunciations *fret*, *dret*, for *froid* and *droit*. Originally pronounced [frwʔt, drwʔt], the postconsonantal [w] (always an unstable phenomenon) was lost in these words as it was occasionally lost elsewhere (*étoit* pronounced [etwʔt] in Old French had become *était* [ete] by the eighteenth century, and the original spelling may be seen in older texts). Such forms as *Allez tout dret*, keep going straight ahead, and *Il fait fret*, it is chilly, are recognized as regional pronunciations that have a genuine Canadian flavour.

### Regional forms in Acadian

Since Acadian speakers came more from the Easterly, rather than the North Easterly, provinces of France, their regional usage is quite different from Quebecois. The fact that they lived a long way from the main centre of government in Quebec City may also explain why Acadian usage is much less standard in terms of its morphology than is Quebecois. The *passé simple* has also survived in Acadia: Ryan reports that its usage is slightly more frequent than the usage of the *passé composé* among his informants (1989:206).

This usage of the *passé simple* also reflects the common usage in France before the *passé simple* began to disappear about 150 years ago. The regular paradigms were reduced to one, so that one said *je parlis, je finis, je rendis*, as was the common usage in France, although the standard language still preserved *je parlai*. Dauzat noted (1935:202) that it was only in the Nineteenth Century that the *passé simple* of the *parlis* type disappeared from popular usage in Paris. This levelling of paradigms also affects anglicisms in the Cape Breton usage, so that Gaston Dulong (p.c.) recorded *je me clippis* for *je me suis rasé*, and *le car startit* for *l'auto a démarré*.

Acadian usage also has significant differences from standard usage in other verbal paradigms. The pronoun *nous*, for example, is used as a disjunctive pronoun, and as a direct object or reflexive pronoun, but is replaced by *je* as a subject pronoun, so that one hears *J' parlons français, nous aut'es* (where the standard language would have *nous parlons*), and *je nous assoyons* for *nous nous asseyons*. This is no innovation: it is found in many dialects in France; the Glossaire (p.407) reports it as found in Anjou, Berry, Bourgogne, Maine, Nivernais, Normandie, Picardie (see also Charpentier 1988: 176). Since the *passé composé* uses only the auxiliary *avoir* in the Acadian dialects, *être* not being used even with reflexive verbs, the *passé composé* of the above would be *je nous avons assis*.

There are also other distinctive pronominal forms: the disjunctive pronouns *eux* and *elle* are heard as *ieusses* and *ielle* in Acadian. That the *x* of *eux* should be pronounced as an *s* is to be expected, but the diphthongization of the vowels is unusual.

In standard French there are only four verbs that form their third person plural forms of the present tense in *-ont*: *ont*, *sont*, *font*, *vont*. In Acadian, however, this is the regular pattern: *ils parlont*, *ils finissent*, *ils rendont*, and also in the imperfect: *ils parliont*, *ils aviont*, *ils étiont*, and so forth. Again this is no innovation: the peasants in Molière's plays use these forms, which were brought to Canada by the settlers from Western France. The irregular verbs are also regularized as follows: *ils avont*, *ils font*, *ils allont*. This means that the first and third plural forms in all verbs are always phonetically identical (*avons/faisons/allons* are indistinguishable from *avont/faisont/allont*). As a result the irregular *nous sommes* of standard French has been replaced by *je sons*, which keeps the pattern with *ils sont*. The question might even be raised as to whether these two forms should be spelled the same, but the traditional spellings in *-ons* and *-ont* have been maintained.

As mentioned above, the auxiliary *avoir* is used exclusively for the *passé composé* in Acadian. Consequently one hears not only *il a parti*, *il a sorti*, *il a venu back* (with the English verbal particle *back* borrowed), for *il est revenu*.

### Further Reading

- Barbeau, Victor. 1963. *Le Français du Canada*. Québec: Garneau. 2e édition 1970. (See pp.239ff).
- Gesner, B.Edward. 1985. *Description de la morphologie verbale du parler acadien de Pubnico (Nouvelle Ecosse)*. Québec: CIRB/ICRB.
- Poirier, Pascal. 1928. *Le parler franco-acadien et ses origines*. Québec: Imprimerie Franciscaine Missionnaire.

## EXERCISES

**La Sagouine: Le Métier**

J'ai peut-être ben la face nouère pis la peau craquée, ben j'ai les mains blanches. Monsieur! J'ai les mains blanches parce que j'ai eu les mains dans l'eau toute ma vie. J'ai passé ma vie à forbir. Je suis pas moins guénillose pour ça...j'ai forbi sus les autres. Je pouvons ben passer pour crasseux: je passons notre vie à décrasser les autres. Frotte, pis gratte, pis décolle des tchas d'encens..ils pouvont ben aouère leux maisons propres. Nous autres, parsoune s'en vient frotter chus nous.

Parsoune s'en vient non plus laver nos hardes. Ni coudre, ni racommoder. Ils pouvont ben nous trouver guéniloux: je portons les capots usés qu'ils nous avont baillés pour l'amour de Jésus-Christ. Par chance qu'ils avont de la religion: ils pensont des fois à nous douner par charité leux vieilles affaires. Leux vieilles affaires et leux vieilles hardes qu'étaient neuves un jour que ça nous faisait rêver d'en aouère des pareilles. Je finissons par les receouère pour nous payer nos journées d'ouvrage, mais quand c'est que j'en avont pu envie. Quand c'est que t'as vu dix ans de temps un chapeau de velours sus la tête d'une femme, au coumencement tu le trouves ben beau et tu voudrais ben l'aouère. Pis il coumence à cobir pis finit pas ressembler une crêpe de boquite. C'est dans ce temps-là qui te le dounont. Ils te dounont des châles itou quand c'est qu'ils se portont pus, et des bottines quand c'est la mode des souliers. Ça arrive même qu'ils te dounont deux claques du même pied, ou ben un manteau trop petit où c'est qu'ils avont louté les boutons. Ils pouvont ben trouver que je sons mal attiffés.

1. From the first two paragraphs find the following:
  - (a) 3 instances of the original French pronunciation of the spelling *oi*.
  - (b) 2 instances of opening of vowels before *r*.
  - (c) 1 instance of a vowel assimilating the lip rounding of a preceding consonant.
  - (d) 2 examples of the loss of final /r/.
  - (e) 2 examples of the loss of /v/ before [w].
  - (f) 5 examples of typical Acadian closing of /<sup>o</sup>/ → /u/.

2. From the evidence of these two paragraphs draw up a paradigm of the present of *être* in Acadian folk speech, filling in with regular forms where evidence is lacking.
3. For the following words (a) give the meaning, and (b) indicate whether or not they are used regionally in France, and if so where.

- |           |            |        |               |
|-----------|------------|--------|---------------|
| a. pus    | b. icitte  | c. ben | d. attifés    |
| e. itou   | f. sus     | g. pis | h. guénilloux |
| i. capots | j. bailler |        |               |

4. The Europeans adopted from the Indians the habit of chewing resinous gum from various conifers. In Newfoundland English such gum is called *frankum*. From this word and its derivatives explain what La Sagouine is scraping off the floor in §1. (tchas = tas).
5. Check various Canadian and Standard dictionaries to establish the status of the following words and expressions in Canadian French.

- |                 |                    |                   |
|-----------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| a. s'en venir   | b. quand c'est que | c. par chance que |
| d. où c'est que | e. cobir           | f. louter         |
| g. claque       |                    |                   |

For each item (a) give the meaning, and (b) indicate whether or not it is used in France, and if so where, and (c) indicate, where possible, whether the item is a borrowing, an archaism, dialectal, or popular.

6. How would you explain *qui* in "C'est dans ce temps-là qui te le dounont"? Is this usage found elsewhere?
7. Given that *boquuite* = *sarrasin* in SF; what is the etymology of *boquuite*?