

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE PARAMETERS OF LINGUISTIC VARIATION

In Chapter One we discussed the kind of variation that occurs regionally, variation that is geographic, that leads to what we call dialects, that is to say variations in space. There is also variation through time, as we are well aware from looking at Shakespeare's usage, or at the English of the King James Bible, which was published in 1611.

As well as variation in time and in space, there is also a third parameter of linguistic variation, which is variation through society: different societal groups have quite different usage: phonologically, lexically and grammatically. Those belonging to the underprivileged classes, who have sometimes had limited access to education and travel, often use the so-called popular forms of speech that those who have access to education are indoctrinated not to use, especially in formal situations. This results in a spectrum of usage, depending mostly on the education of the speaker, that varies all the way from the popular to the elitist, as far as different strata of society are concerned. There is also a spectrum of *registers*, from the informal and colloquial on the one hand, to the highly formal, on the other hand, that recognizes the existence of what are sometimes artificial societal standards. Some individuals have complete control of only one register, others are able to switch back and forth between different registers, using popular forms in informal and colloquial usage, and switching to more standard forms as the requirements of formality increase.

There are therefore three different parameters of linguistic variation: variation in time that is studied by historical linguists, variation in space that is studied by dialectologists, and social variation that is the subject matter of sociolinguistics.

These distinctions were not well understood by many of the early French dialectologists, who did not have the kind of information about other forms of French that is available to us today, especially through radio, television, films, and travel by plane. Consequently, when they composed their own regional vocabularies and lexicons, they wrote down everything they heard that was not to be found in the standard dictionaries of the day, unaware that much of what they heard was not regional at all, but *français populaire*, which, of course, was not in the standard dictionaries. There was, consequently, immense confusion

between the data of regional variation and the data of social variation. This can be seen very clearly in the citations of the *Glossaire*, where the attempt is made to name all the different provinces of France where a given expression is also recorded. Where the expression is truly regional in France, there are normally only two or three provinces cited in the *Glossaire*. When the usage is recorded in six or more provinces (and the number can run sometimes to a dozen or more) there is always the suspicion that what is being recorded is social, not regional variation.

But the distinction is by no means cut and dried. We have already seen, for example, that the form *icit* comes from Old French, and that therefore the *ici/icit* variation is essentially historical, the *icit* form being an archaism. But the form *icit* is also regional: it is found only in the Northwestern dialects of France and in Canadian usage. Being regional in this way, it is also of course non-standard, so that educated speakers from these regions would never use it in any formal discourse, and normally insist that their children use the standard form *ici* around the home. The children still, naturally, use *icit* on the street, in purely informal usage that reinforces the regional identity. Defining a usage is therefore fraught with problems, and the facts of usage vary from generation to generation.

In trying to evaluate usage, the student must start with a reasonable knowledge of what is *français populaire*. Such knowledge may be acquired from the comprehensive Bache 1920, or from Henri Frei's *Grammaire des fautes*, which suggests that popular usage is in fact *le français avancé*, the French of tomorrow, of the twenty first century. An easily accessible and very readable text is Guiraud's 1965 paperback *Le français populaire*, wherein the student will find many items that are often considered by the casual observer to be unique to Canadian French: the use of *al* and *a'* for the subject pronoun *elle*, as in *a' m'a dit* (1965:111), for example.

When researching the usage of French terms, to determine whether they are regional (i.e. dialectal), historical (i.e. archaisms), or social (i.e. *français populaire*), one has to be able to sort through the information offered by the dictionaries, and to know which dictionaries are likely to give the information sought. The *Robert*, for example, generally gives more information on popular usage than other dictionaries do. More recent dictionaries, such as the *Lexis*, also include much more regional usage than is to be found in the older dictionaries.

If a word turns up in Canadian usage, and also in Swiss, but is not found regionally in France, it does not mean that either borrowed it from the other, or that both created the same neologism. What has normally happened in such cases is that the term goes back to Latin or Gallo Romance, but has been lost, has died out in French regional usage. To verify the facts in situations like this

scholars use the massive *Französisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* of von Wartburg, which attempts to give the etymology of every known term of the language. If a term that is found only in Switzerland and Canada has an etymology in the *FEW*, as is usually referred to, then we know that it is an archaism that has survived regionally, but died out in the standard language.

Using as a basis what has been learned to date, it is now possible for the student to read and digest much of the 1979 article by Claude Poirier (see bibliography below) on the usage of French throughout the centuries, throughout the world, and in all classes of society, and to admire the breadth of his scope as he moves easily back and forth from one parameter of variation to another.

Further Reading

Bauche, Henri. 1920. *Le langage populaire*. Paris: Payot.

Frei, Henri. 1929. *La grammaire des fautes*. Genève: Bellegarde.

Guiraud, Pierre. 1965. *Le français populaire*. Collection Que sais-je?, No. 1172. Presses Universitaires de France.

Poirier, Claude. 1979. "Créoles à base française, français régionaux et français québécois: éclairages réciproques", *Revue de Linguistique Romane* 43:400–425.

EXERCISES**Sagouine 9–16**

Ça c'est de quoi que Gapi a jamais pu comprendre. Asteur pouvez-vous me dire, qu'i' dit, quoi c'est qu'une parsoune peut ben voulouère aller qu'ri' au loin quand c'est qu'elle a toute chus eux? Quand c'est que tu manges tes trois repas assis à table; pis que tu dors tes nuits longues sus un matelas à ressorts; pis que chaque autoune tu changes tes changes de dessous d'été pour tes changes de dessous d'hiver; pis que t'as une galerie en avant de ta maison, avec une chaise-barceuse qui barce assez loin par en airrière que t'es capable de toute ouère autour de toi, pis loin devant toi, sus la baie, pis... Ah! Gapi, ça y en prend grand pour être content, lui.

Ben de fois j'y dis: Peut-être ben qu'une parsoune qu'a tout ça, pis qu'a vu si loin devant yelle, peut pus s'empêcher sus ses vieux jours de charcher encore à en ouère plusse et à ouère pus loin. Ça fait là, a' s' enrôle dans l'âge d'or, a' se greye d'un traileux, pis a' prend le chemin.

Moi j'sais pas, mais i' me r'semble que ça doit pas être si déplaisant de partir coume ça pour les vieux pays, un bon matin, juste pour aller ouère, pour lever le nez par là, sans que tu seyis obligé à rien. Me r'semble que ça doit être plaisant d'aller ouère de quoi que t'as jamais vu, coume les chutes de Niagara Falls, ou ben le soldar en jupe carottée qui joue de la veuze en Nova Scotia. Me r'semble que j'aimerais ben d'aller ouère ça, un bon jour, pour rien, rien que pour ouère.

Et pis tant qu'à partir au loin, j'aimerais ben ça de m'en retourner au pays de mes aïeux, sus l'Ile-du-Prince-Edouard, ouère si ça ben changé dans cent ans. Ah! point pour rester, ni pour m'établir, justement pour regarder le pays, pis le monde, pis ouère si c'est vrai que leux jardinages poussont pus vite que par icitte. Pis asseyer de déniger ta parenté qu'a resté par là après le Dérangement. Apparence que dans les vieux pays une parsoune a point besoin de se noumer: que tu recounais les Thibodeau à leux yeux; pis les Leblanc à leu nez; pis les Bourgeois à leu trou dans le menton; pis les Goguen à leu façon de grasseyer leux r coume si ils aviont une orange d'enfarmée dans le gorgoton.

Oui, de la parenté des genses de par icitte qui se trouve par là. Ça ferait tant bénaise de pouère se ramasser toute ensemble une bonne journée; pis se recounaître; pis taper sus l'épaule d'un vieux en le noumant par son petit nom; pis saluer un descendant de ton aïeu Pit à Boy à Thomas Picoté; pis déniger au loin une parsoune qui te ressemble, pis qui parle dans ta langue; pis qui fait ton ouvrage, pis qui lèverait point le nez sus toi qu'es rien qu'une forbisseuse de place qu'a jamais rien fait ni jamais rien vu...

...Non, jamais rien vu d'autre que la place des autres que je m'en viens forbir tous les jours que le Bon Djeu amène. Leux places de bois franc ou de préart fleuri où c'est que tu t'agenouilles dessus coume pour dire tes prières. Pis tu frottes. Tu frottes et ramasses leu crasse que tu rapportes le souère dans ton siau. Toute la crasse des autres dans le fond de ton siau... Hé oui!...

...V'là la place la plus crasseuse que j'ai jamais forbie... Jusqu'à des tchas d'encens sus du beau préart de même, si ça du bon sens asteur! Sainte-Mère de Jésus-Christ, faut que du monde ait pas grand élément... Baillez-y un préart neu' à la Sagouine, pis je vous dis qu'a mettra ses tchas de gomme dans sa spitoune. Sa gomme pis son tabac. Chaque affaire à sa place, que je vous dis, et une place pour chaque affaire. Ben icitte, y a pas de spitoune...ils prétendent que c'est pus la mode. Ça fait qu'ils mettent leux tchas de gomme dans la place, pis leu cendre partout. Partout sus les tables, les bras de fauteuil, les tapis, ou dans des petits cenderiers grous comme mon nombourri et éparpillés à grandeur de maison. Une bonne grouse spitoune en plein mitan de la place vous sauverait toute c'te misère de ramasser la cendre et décoller la gomme partout.

Ils croyont que ça fait moins de déchet parce qu'ils fumont du bout des babines, coume ça... Ils voulont pas entendre parler de chiquer, ça leu fait lever le coeur. Chiquer ça faisait peut-être plusse de crache, mais ben moins de boucane. Et c'est pas la crache qui dérange, c'est la boucane. Parce que la boucane, tu peux pas mettre ça dans une spitoune. Moi ça me fait lever le coeur de penser que chaque fois que tu prends ta respire, t'envales la boucane de tout le monde.

1. From this text find the following elements:

- (a) three words where normally silent final consonants are pronounced.
What consonants are involved?
- (b) two words showing syllabification of liquid consonant after a plosive.

- (c) a relative pronoun used as a subject: what is its form?
 - (d) an instance of palatalization of /d/ before yod.
 - (e) a word showing palatal onglide before /o/. Where in France is this pronunciation typical?
 - (f) the two obvious anglicisms (common nouns).
 - (g) an infinitive lacking the normal final /r/.
 - (h) a feminine singular personal pronoun (disjunctive).
 - (i) a feminine singular personal pronoun (subject).
 - (j) a subjunctive form of *être*.
2. Research the following words that occur in this text to determine whether they are regional, historical, or social variants. Give the evidence you find, listing for example the provinces in France where such usage is found, and naming the dictionaries in which you find indications such as (*pop*). Many words, of course, belong to more than one category.
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|---------------|--------------|------------|
| a. asteur | b. se gréyer | c. change |
| d. soldar | e. gorgoton | f. mitan |
| g. babines | h. crache | i. boucane |
| j. la respire | | |
3. What is a “jupe carottée”? Where does the word “carotté” come from? (Examine p.175 of the *Glossaire* carefully). What is a “veuze”? See if you find anything on this word. Give, if you can, the probable etymology.
4. What are the normal Canadian French names for (a) Nova Scotia, and (b) “les chutes de Niagara Falls”? What is the European name for (b)? What is the probable reason for the difference of European and Canadian usage in this case?
5. The pronoun *on* is not normally heard in Acadian and in popular Québécois it tends to be used for first person plural reference. What pronoun is used to replace it in the popular levels of speech? From the text give examples of (a) the normal subject form (with its verb), (b) the reduced subject form (with its verb), (c) the related possessive adjective forms (m.sing., f.sing., and pl.) with their nouns, (d) the disjunctive form (with its preposition) and (e) the clitic pronoun (direct or ind. object) with its verb.