

Stuck in the past? Change, stability and contact in Québec English

Gerard Van Herk
York University

What accounts for variation in Canadian English: participation in worldwide changes in progress, contact with French, or other processes? The past temporal reference system of the English of Montreal and Quebec City is an ideal venue to investigate these issues. Past temporal reference is implicated in described mainstream change processes, such as the growth of the progressive (1) and variation in the present perfect (2), as well as being a potential locus of French influences, such as levelling of the present perfect and the preterite (3), or expansion of the progressive into contexts usually expressed by preterites or habitual markers (4, 5).

- (1) Sometimes our school beat Saint Pat's at whatever the game they **were playing** at the time. (Québec City 013)
- (2) I've **gone** shopping in Paris and I've **had** no trouble at all. (Québec City 005)
- (3) So he **showed** up at school and he had decorated the whole car with balloons. (Québec City 021)
- (4) We **would go** over and lyke, steal their underwear and stuff. (Montréal 023)
- (5) As a kid I **used to work** in Ogilvy's. (Montréal 006)

To test who participates in which changes, we stratified 48 sociolinguistic interviews selected from the Quebec English Corpus (Poplack & Walker 2002) according to both city of origin (reflecting both degree of contact with French and participation in mainstream English) and informant age (reflecting apparent time differences and, again, French contact). From these, 6399 past-referring tensed verb tokens were extracted and coded for linguistic factors often claimed to determine verb form (subject type, aspect, adverbial, temporal relation, and temporal distance).

Findings shed substantial light on the relative roles of contact and participation in wider change in these communities. Present perfects show no sign of contact-induced levelling, despite a low overall rate of use (common to sociolinguistic interview corpora everywhere). The constraints on the use of the perfect remain identical to those described for other varieties of English, with the more isolated Quebec City community patterning not unlike 19th-century English. Habitual markers, such as *would* and *used to*, likewise continue to pattern as in English elsewhere. A remarkably high rate of use of *would* also resembles 19th-century English, while temporal relation constraints encourage further investigation of discourse factors (Torres Cacoullos & Walker 2004).

Perhaps most interesting is the behaviour of the past progressive. In Montreal, younger informants have begun to use the progressive as a habitual marker, superficially analogous to the behaviour of the corresponding French form, the *imparfait*. Does this reflect contact-induced change, or the world-wide expansion of the progressive into new contexts? The answer is suggested by the absence of such a finding in Quebec City, more isolated from mainstream change while also in greater contact with French: the change among Montreal anglophones probably reflects changes in mainstream English.

Taken together, and in concert with recent phonetic work (Boberg 2004), these findings suggest that Quebec English (especially Quebec City English) can best be described as a conservative variety of Canadian English, participating variably in mainstream changes in English, rather than a variety undergoing contact-induced change.

References

- Boberg, C. 2004. Region and gender in the phonetics of Canadian English: A first look. NWAVE 33, University of Michigan, MI.
- Poplack, S., & Walker, J. A. 2002. An English "Like No Other"? Language Contact and Change in Quebec. *New Ways of Analyzing Variation* (NWAVE) 31, Stanford University, CA.