The expression of future temporal reference in Picardie French

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The expression of future temporal reference (FTR) has been widely studied across Romance languages (e.g. Poplack & Malvar 2007; Aaron 2010), including spoken French varieties. For centuries, French grammarians (Maupas 1607, Antonini 1753) described the choice between two main variants—the periphrastic future (ça va être cette année ‘it’s going to be this year’) and the inflected future (ça sera au mois d’octobre ‘it’ll in October’)—as influenced by temporal distance; specifically, periphrasis was argued to express a proximate future (i.e. le futur proche).

However, results from different varieties of French display surprising heterogeneity with respect to this linguistic variable. For instance, studies of Laurentian (Poplack & Turpin 1999, Wagner & Sankoff 2011) and Continental French (Roberts 2012) have challenged grammarians’ descriptions by showing that the temporal distance constraint is weak or inoperative. In these varieties, the strongest predictor of variant choice is sentential polarity: negative clauses strongly favour the inflected future. In contrast, conservative varieties of Acadian (King & Nadasdi 2003) and Martinique French (Roberts 2013) show a lack of polarity effect: in these varieties, temporal distance is the strongest constraint on variant choice, a finding that supports grammarians’ description. Thus, varieties of spoken French appear to be divided between two types of systems with respect to future temporal reference.

To contribute to these lines of research, we examine FTR in a recent corpus of 24 French interviews collected in a rural area of northwestern France where Picard, a Gallo-Romance language in which the inflected future is strongly preferred, still enjoys a relative vitality. By analyzing this contact variety, we also tap into the role that Picard may have played on the development of FTR variation in the area. To determine the factors that condition variant choice, we analyze spoken French data from Picard–French bilinguals and French monolinguals and consider a number of social (sex, age, class, bilingualism status) and linguistic (temporal distance, sentential polarity, subject type, etc.) factors proposed in the literature.

Our results show that the inflected future is used at a rate of 38% in Picardie French, much higher than in Laurentian varieties. Bilingualism status was also found to play no role on this variable. Instead, socioeconomic class was the only social statistically significant factor: upper-class speakers had higher rates of the inflected future variant (54%, N=66) than middle- and lower- class speakers (33%, N=125 and 30%, N=76). Linguistic conditioning also differed not only from Laurentian but also from other Continental French varieties: preliminary results from multivariate analyses reveal that polarity, despite its strong effect in most varieties of French studied to date, does not constrain variant choice in Picardie French. Instead, temporal distance highly constrains variant choice, with proximate events (within the hour or sooner) strongly favouring periphrasis. This finding, while a contrast to other studies, mirrors closely the patterns reported for Acadian and Martinique French.
Our study contributes to our understanding of this variable in French by showing that varieties of Continental French, like their Canadian counterparts, can fall along either type of systems with respect to future temporal reference.

References