

Examining ‘opposing’ processes in Quebec French mid vowels

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INTRODUCTION

The mid vowels in French are reportedly subject to the *loi de position*, a long-proclaimed tendency to be pronounced as mid-high when in open final syllables and as mid-low when in closed final syllables, thereby losing their contrast (Walker, 1984). This study examines this claim in Quebec French, which is notably cited for its apparent counterexample to the process: an “opposite” alternation causing [ɛ] in open syllables to lower to [æ] rather than to raise to [e], as would be predicted by the *loi de position* (Morin, 1988). Although the dialect figures prominently in the debate as a result of this apparent exception, empirical and quantitative analysis of the two processes have not been conducted in tandem and are sparse individually.

METHOD

This study exploits the Laurentian sub-corpus (Côté, 2012) of the *Phonologie du français contemporain* corpus (Durand et al., 2002, 2009) to examine data from twenty-three speakers, chosen such that there were two speakers for each combination of age class (young or old), gender (male or female) and region (Chicoutimi, eastern Quebec and western Quebec) except for young males from eastern Quebec due to data availability. The recordings were aligned using Milne’s (2011) forced aligner and then the final-syllable mid vowels were extracted using a Praat script, which notably measures the first formant and stress correlates (pitch and intensity), in addition to coding for the surrounding segments and syllable type. As this pilot study uses GoldVarb (Sankoff, Tagliamonte and Smith, 2005), the vowels’ distributions were used to generate discrete allophone categories for the statistical analyses.

RESULTS

In total, 18 340 tokens were analysed. Regarding contexts refused by the *loi de position*, younger speakers produced mid-low vowels in open syllables 11% of the time (718 of 6244 tokens), compared to older speakers’ 16% of the time (1220 of 7531 tokens), and the younger speakers produced mid-high vowels in closed syllables 48% of the time (922 of 1939 tokens) as compared to older speakers’ 43% (1171 of 2716 tokens). Stress correlates were found to be more significant than syllable structure (more significant for younger speakers for raising and lowering, but not longer significant for mid-low variant selection) in the case of underlying mid-low vowels. For underlying mid-high vowels, syllable structure was not selected as significant, but the stress correlates showed an important contribution that increases in apparent time.

DISCUSSION

This pilot study suggests that the *loi de position* may be gaining influence in Quebec French. However, the significance of stress correlates has greater implications. This pilot study firstly lends credence to claims of a developing weight-sensitive stress pattern in Quebec French, whereas Standard French is traditionally analysed as having strictly word-final (or purely prosodic) stress (Armstrong, 1999). Secondly, it also suggests that the *loi de position* may more importantly describe a conspiracy against mid-low vowels in open syllables and against mid-high vowels in closed syllables not finally, but in stressed syllables.

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