Sociolinguistic Investigations into Dialect Syntax: Negative Concord in Montréal French

This paper presents a new study of sociolinguistically conditioned variation in negative concord and the interpretation of n-words (ex. *personne* 'no one/anyone', *rien* 'nothing/anything', *jamais* 'never/ever', *aucun* `no/any' etc.) in Montréal French (MF). In this dialect, like in Spoken European French (EF), these expressions can appear bare in post-verbal position and contribute a semantic negation to the sentence (i.e. *J'ai vu personne.* 'I saw no one.'). Furthermore, when MF n-words appear within the scope of the propositional negation *pas*, unlike in the European dialect where such sentences obligatorily have a double negation interpretation, the only interpretation of a sentence like *J'ai pas vu personne* is a single (i.e. negative concord) one: 'I saw no one'.

Proposals aiming to capture the cross-linguistic behaviour of n-words abound in the theoretical literature. However, we argue that testing the fine predictions of these theories for non-standard dialects such as Montréal French through traditional 'native speaker judgment' methods is problematic. Firstly, the theoretical literature on negative concord in MF (which is based on speaker judgments) exhibits disagreements concerning the grammaticality of core sentences. For example, according to Léard (1995), negative concord with *pas* is possible only with *personne* and *rien*; whereas, according to Déprez (2002) and Déprez & Martineau (2004), concord with *pas* is possible with all and only constituents that have a determiner phrase (DP) structure. Moreover, Déprez's 'DPs only' generalization constitutes the main motivation behind her syntactic analysis in which MF n-words are analyzed as grammatical hybrids between Spoken EF n-words and the corresponding items in French-based Creoles. Secondly, within the context of a survey of 9 native speakers of this dialect, we observe that speakers of Montréal French are themselves often unsure about the acceptability of a subset of the concord sentences such as (1), which are not part of the spoken standard dialect.

(1) a. ?? Je suis **pas** jamais allé en France.   b. ??J'ai **pas** aucun ami.
          Intended: 'I have never been to France.'   **Intended:** 'I have no friends.'

To respond to these methodological challenges, we present a study of the distribution and interpretation of the 2790 n-words in the *Montréal 84* spoken corpus (Thibault et al. 1990). We observe that, contrary to previous claims in the literature, concord with *pas* is possible with the entire class of n-words, including *jamais* `(n)ever' and *aucun* `no/any' (2), although the rates of concord with these elements are very low (1% (16/1259) and 10% (16/162), respectively).

(2) a. mes frères ont **pas** jamais été tu-vois dans le hockey   b. je mangeais **pas** aucun legume
          'My brothers were never into hockey, you see' (54:149) 'I didn't eat any vegetables.' (4:1526)

Furthermore, we observe a categorical preverbal/postverbal asymmetry in the data with respect to co-occurrence with *pas:* while the rate of concord with n-words in monoclausal postverbal position (*J'ai **pas** vu personne*) is 15% (328/2183), we find no occurrences (0/78) of concord with n-words in monoclausal preverbal position (**Personne est **pas** venu*). Such an asymmetry is not characteristic of n-words in either Spoken EF or French-based creoles (Degraff, 1993), and so is unexpected under Déprez's analysis. However, this pattern is seen in other Romance languages such as Spanish (Laka, 1990). We therefore propose that the MF system should be instead characterized as showing variation between a Spoken EF-style system and a Spanish-style system, and, using variable rule analysis, we show that this variation is conditioned by a combination social factors (education and profession) and linguistic factors (syntactic position, embedding, complement-taking). Our paper thus highlights the contributions that corpus-based sociolinguistic research can make to theoretical dialect syntax.

References. 1. Déprez, V. (2002). Concordance négative, syntaxe des mots-N et variation dialectale. Cahiers de linguistique française, 25:97–117. **2.** Degraff, M. (1993). A riddle on negation in Haitian. *Probus.* 5:63093. **3.** Déprez, V. & F. Martineau. (2004). Pour une analyse micro-paramétrique de la concordance négative. *Indéfinis et prédications.* Paris-Sorbonne. 4**.** Laka, I. *Negation in Syntax*. PhD, MIT. **5.** Léard, J. (1995). *Grammaire québécoise d'aujourd'hui.* Guérin. **6.** Thibault, P., Vincent, D., & Audet, G. (1990). *Un corpus de français parlé: Montréal 84*. Université Laval, Québec.