Grammar vs usage in the study of linguistic change

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This paper confronts the evolution of the expression of future temporal reference over 450 years of French grammatical tradition with speech data spanning a century and a half. With three competing variants, the synthetic future (SF), as in (1), the periphrastic future (PF), as in (2) and the futurate present (P), as in (3), this grammatical sector has long been a major site of inherent variability.

(1) Il dit, "Je vous *dirai* (SF) ça *demain matin*, pensez à vos affaires cette nuit." (XIX/037/580)

'He said, "I *will tell* you that tomorrow morning, think about your things tonight"

(2) "*Demain matin*", il dit, "il *va manger* (PF) une volée", il dit, "il *va manger* (PF) une rince". (XIX/023/4292)

'"*Tomorrow morning*", he said, "he is *going to get* smacked", he said, "he *is going to get* a beating." '

(3) Arrive chez eux, il dit à sa femme, il dit, "Écoute", il dit, "*demain matin*, je *tue* (P) la vache." (XIX/038/2111)

'Gets home, he says to his wife, he says, " Listen", he says, "*tomorrow morning*, I *kill* the cow."'

The received wisdom is that the variant forms illustrated in (1) – (3) are selected according to distinctions in the way the speaker envisions the future eventuality or the semantic reading s/he wishes to convey. But in a large-scale study of over 3500 future temporal reference contexts in Canadian French, Poplack & Turpin (1999) found that forms were rarely selected by speakers in accordance with the values commonly attributed to them. This is because reference to future states or events is basically made by the periphrastic variant, which has ousted the synthetic future from virtually all contexts of productive usage but one.

Is this an innovation and if so, when did it take place? To address this question, we make use of two novel sources of diachronic data, which, we argue, represent complementary historical benchmarks against which the facts of contemporary usage may be assessed. One is an audio corpus of 19th-century spoken Quebec French, with a time-depth of about a century and a half. The other is a meta-analysis of normative grammatical tradition, as instantiated by the *Recueil historique des grammaires du français,* a corpus of 163 grammars of French published between 1530 and 1998. Under the assumption that forms salient enough to have incited the opprobrium of grammarians were likely widespread in the speech of the time, we demonstrate how these materials may be used to 1) infer the existence of prior variability (from citations of alternate forms in like contexts), 2) trace the evolution of normative dictates associated with the variants, and most important, 3) discern hints of prior linguistic conditioning of variant selection.

These are then operationalized as factors in a multivariate analysis and tested against the facts of usage. This method not only detects factors that are statistically significant in the prediction of variant choice, but also their magnitude and direction of effect. This information is expressed as constraint hierarchies, which may be compared with counterparts at different points in time to establish and date change.

Systematic comparison of grammatical treatments with actual speaker behaviour in apparent time shows virtually no correspondence between the motivations offered in the literature and those constraining actual variant choice. For well over four centuries, proximity of the realization of the future eventuality was offered as the predominant explanation; in contemporary spoken French this factor is not statistically significant. Instead, polarity, a factor that had not been previously acknowledged, emerged as the major determinant of variant choice. Future predications with negative polarity are overwhelmingly expressed with the synthetic variant, while their affirmative counterparts tend to co-occur with the periphrastic form, as in (4).

(4) Dire que dans quatre cents ans d'ici bien, il **va avoir** (PF) encore des Fauteux puis ils **vont** encore **parler** (PF) français! Qu'ils **parleront** (SF) *pas* l'anglais. (XX/004/3611)

'To think that in 400 years from now, there are still *going to be* Fauteux, and they're still *going to speak* French. That they *won't* speak English.'

In an effort to date this apparent change, we replicated the study on the 19th-century corpus. The synthetic future was found to be far more common (and the periphrastic future correspondingly less so) at that time, with the futurate present maintaining the same minor role. But the contemporary constraint hierarchies conditioning variant choice were already in place. In particular, negative polarity was already the strongest predictor, showing that this effect, despite being unattested, is by no means a recent innovation. Proximity, on the other hand, did have the expected effect in the 19th century, however tenuous: remote states and events tended to favor the synthetic future, while proximate ones were associated with the periphrastic variant. This constraint has since been lost. Thus, contrary to assumptions based on either the synchronic facts or the grammatical tradition alone, our method shows that any change that has taken place in the Canadian French future temporal reference sector involves loss of the proximity effect, and not innovation of the polarity effect, which turns out to be long-established. We explore why neither of these developments have been acknowledged by the grammatical tradition, and the implications of these findings for the use of grammarians' observations as the data for linguistic analysis.

REFERENCES:

Poplack, Shana & Turpin, Danielle. 1999. Does the FUTUR have a future in (Canadian) French? *Probus* 11 (1):133-164.