

Lealess, Allison V. & Poplack, Shana. 2009. Aiming for a fuzzy target – teaching, learning and using the French subjunctive. CLA 2009. May.

Ongoing research on the effect of formal instruction on transmitting standard French has shown that although teachers tend to hew to prescriptive injunctions with respect to a number of morphosyntactic variables, their students remain resolutely aligned with the implicit norms of the community, often non-standard. In particular, when prescriptive grammar furnishes a clear distinction between a standard and a non-standard form, teachers tend to opt for the former (e.g. use of negative particle *ne* and of the imperfect after *si*, avoidance of the possessive preposition *à* [e.g. Miller 2007]). What happens when multiple expressions of a grammatical function are admissible, contingent on the context in which they are used?

Such is the case of the subjunctive. Grammarians have invested much effort in delimiting the conditions requiring it and the meanings it conveys. This has resulted in a set of prescriptive rules that is not only notoriously complex, but – more important -- vague and contradictory. Conversely, mood choice has developed in a highly regular but untaught way in the community: though sensitive to some morphosyntactic conditions, the subjunctive is largely lexically constrained, highly likely to occur with a few matrix verbs (esp. *falloir* and *vouloir*, which together account for more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the data) and a handful of embedded verbs (*faire*, *aller*, *être*, *avoir*) (Poplack 1992). Moreover, real-time comparisons with French data collected in the 1950s and 1980s reveal that these associations have strengthened over time. While the subjunctive has increased in rate over the duration (by approximately 32% for the matrix and 15% for the embedded verbs), now reaching rates as high as 91%, it is decreasing in productivity, becoming more and more entrenched in the small set of aforementioned verbs. Outside of this environment, its rates are negligible, but stable, across time.

How do teachers model the use of the subjunctive in such a context? Do they alter their grammar to transmit a prescriptive norm that differs from that of the community? If so, how permeable are the students to this input, which conflicts with what they have received outside of school? To answer these questions, we undertook a study of this variable in the speech of French-language teachers and their high-school students both within and outside of the classroom. Preliminary results show that the community trends are persisting unabated in the speech of not only the students, but also of their teachers. For both cohorts, the subjunctive continues to be preferred when the embedded verb is suppletive (indicating a preference for ritualized routines rather than productive rule application), and the syntactic relationship between main and embedded clause is unambiguous (when the complementizer *que* is overt, and when main and embedded verbs are adjacent in the utterance). But the lexical entrenchment of the subjunctive in progress for decades is now reaching near-categorical rates (as high as 97%).

Rather than arresting the change, consistent with their role of promulgating the standard, the teachers are participating in it fully, right on par with their students. This is consistent with the finding that students' use of the subjunctive is not sensitive to speech style or setting. These results suggest that the community norm serves as default when the prescribed norm is unclear. Thus success in the transmission of the standard cannot be assessed without detailed knowledge of the complexity of the prescribed target, on the one hand, and the strength of the community norm, on the other.

References

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