The rise of TU in the context of an internal reconfiguration of generic pronouns in Quebec and in France

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While the variation between the generic subject clitics ON-TU/VOUS has been documented, common ground has not been achieved when assessing a potential change in progress (Coveney, 2003; Laberge, 1977; Laberge & Sankoff, 1980). In addition, the emergence and progression of the variant TU in Quebec French is sometimes associated with influence from the English “you” and sometimes with internal constraints (Thibault 1991). Since the situation of contact with English is considered more intense in Quebec than in France, a comparative analysis of the varieties can clarify the question. Results based on a new corpus of Paris French (Zhong 2009) are compared to the findings of a variationist study of Québec French based on corpora representing various degrees of contact (Blondeau 2008).

The analysis of Paris French points toward a change in favor of the TU form, if compared with data collected at the twentieth century (Ashby, 1992; Coveney, 2003.) The change can hardly be explained by influence from English since the contact situation in France is less intense. It is hence better explained by linguistic constraints. In addition, the correlation between the use of generic TU and that of the discourse markers “tu sais/ tu vois”, of which the use creates an effect of solidarity between interlocutors, suggests that the use of TU reflects these interaction patterns. In Quebec, where TU is on the rise, the analysis indicates not only an internal reorganization of the pronominal system but that co-occurrence with specific discourse markers also points toward an internal pragmatic reconfiguration. Therefore, instead of attributing the cause of change to influence of English, results for both varieties converge towards an interpretation of the progression of the TU form due to a reorganization of the pronominal system and a reconfiguration of pragmatic patterns.

References