Far be it from them: Patterns of subjunctive use amongst students, teachers and the community

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Research on the effect of formal instruction on transmitting the standard has shown that when prescriptive grammar furnishes a clear distinction between a standard and non-standard form, teachers tend to hew to prescriptive injunctions while their students remain resolutely aligned with the community norm, even if non-standard (e.g Miller 2007). What happens when the prescriptive norm is elusive?

Such is the case of the French subjunctive. For centuries grammarians have laboured to delimit the conditions requiring it and the meanings it conveys, resulting in a set of prescriptive rules that is notoriously complex, vague and contradictory. Conversely, mood choice has developed in a highly regular but untaught way in the community: though sensitive to some morphosyntactic conditions, it is predominantly lexically constrained, occurring primarily under a few matrix verbs and a handful of embedded verbs (Poplack 1992). Moreover, real-time comparisons of 19th and 20th century French reveal that, despite a rate increase, productivity is waning as the subjunctive becomes more lexically entrenched.

How do teachers use the subjunctive? Do they espouse an obscure prescriptive norm or the robust community grammar? And how do their students respond? To answer these questions, we investigated this variable in the speech of 166 French-language teachers and high-school students within and outside of school. Results reveal that the community trends are persisting unabated in the speech of both groups: subjunctive use is overwhelmingly lexically determined, lexical entrenchment is reaching near-categorical rates, and it continues to be conditioned by the same morphosyntactic constraints operative since the 19th century. These results suggest that when prescription is unclear, community usage, standard or not, serves as the model. Thus success in the transmission of the standard cannot be assessed without detailed knowledge of both the complexity of the prescribed target and the strength of the community norm.

References