Measuring the effectiveness of proscription: possessive prepositions in French

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Current rivalry between possessive markers in French (1) stems from variability in Latin (Nyrop 1899).

(1) “L’ami de ma mère…” (FdO.112.333 1); “…l’amie à ma soeur” (FdO.115.320)
‘The friend of (de) my mother…’; “…the friend of (à) my sister’

In Old French (OF), case (Cas régime) was the majority possessive marker, competing mostly with preposition à, but also de (Foulet 1977; Väänänen 1956). Once case marking was ousted, à expanded into the Cas régime’s former preferred environments (Bauche 1929, Seutin 1975). In the 17th century, minority variant de was declared standard, and à proscribed. It did not recede from the sector, however, persisting across space and time (e.g. Guiraud 1973, Béniak & Mougeon 1982).

In order to track this evolution, each occurrence of à and de used in possessive contexts was extracted from three corpora of French speakers born between 1846 and 1994. The 1389 tokens were coded for over a dozen factors hypothesized to influence variant choice since OF.

Results reveal that à is increasing: from 7% in the 19th-century to 25% in the 1980s, it is the majority variant for today’s youth (56%). Despite the vigorous change in favour of the non-standard form, the variable structure of possessive variability has remained unchanged for centuries: astonishingly, the linguistic factors affecting variant choice in OF are still operative today: à is preferred in both its original contexts and those inherited from the Cas régime, and avoided in the environments traditionally associated to de.

Given that à has not been recognized at all since the 17th century, how was its associated conditioning preserved so faithfully? We discuss the implications of these findings for the strength of implicit usage constraints, transmitted not only in the absence of any prescriptive model, but also in the face of prescriptive injunctions to the contrary.

References

1 Codes in parentheses identify the corpus, speaker and line number of the transcription.