Rhythm and Language Contact in Ontario French

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This paper applies Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) analysis to Ontario French in order to analyze possible consequences of language contact for rhythm patterns. Sociolinguistic work on French in Ontario has focused primarily on lexicon and morpho-syntax (e.g. Mougeon & Beniak 1991, Mougeon & Nadasdi 1998), but with some studies on segmental phonetics (Thomas 1986), morphophonology (Tennant 1996) and prosody (Cichocki & Lepetit 1986). This body of research demonstrates that the minority demographic situation of most Franco-Ontarians, with the concomitant factors of restriction in French language use and competition between French and English for the dominant language within the repertoire of each speaker, has consequences for variation in Ontario French: grammatical simplification, overt interference from the majority language, English, and covert interference from English in the form of convergence.

It can be said that French and English in contact in Ontario present an ideal case for exploring the possible influence of a stress-timed language on a syllable-timed language, using PVI metrics (Grabe & Low 2002, White & Mattys 2007) that have been applied to other language contact and dialect variation situations (Low et al. 2000, Carter 2005, Thomas and Carter 2006). In this initial study, we use the Mougeon Franco-Ontarian adolescent corpus to analyze rhythm in Hawkesbury French (majority Francophone) and North Bay French (minority Francophone), establishing for each speaker a PVI index based on a minimum sample of 200 PVI quotients. We find that, contrary to what would be expected if stress-timed English rhythm were influencing syllable-timed French rhythm, speakers in the minority setting, and particularly those with “restricted” French language use, do not show consistently higher PVIs than those from the majority community. Results are discussed in the terms of prosodic structure of Canadian French and Nolan and Asu’s (2009) assessment of the PVI as a measure of rhythm.