

# SHANA POPLACK

*Trudeau Fellow 2007, University of Ottawa*

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## BIOGRAPHY

World-renowned sociolinguist Shana Poplack studies language as it is spoken, especially in bilingual and minority language contexts in Canada. With her unique data banks of natural speech, she uses novel analytical methods to trace the evolution of speech varieties within their social, historical, and linguistic contexts.

Insights from Shana Poplack's studies of spoken Canadian French, Canadian English, African American vernaculars, New World Spanish, and the language of urban immigrant communities have challenged received wisdom about the quality of these languages. She demonstrated that alternating between languages in bilingual discourse is a skill, not a defect, and that borrowing vocabulary does not disrupt the grammatical structure of the recipient language. She showed that Black English (in Nova Scotia, for instance) is neither incorrect nor a creole, but an offshoot of Early Modern English that resisted mainstream linguistic change. She debunked the purist idea that natural internal grammatical developments in Canadian French are "corruptions" imposed by contact with English.

Shana Poplack studied in France and the United States, earning her Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania before joining the University of Ottawa in 1981. She has had an unbroken string of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada research grants, enabling her to maintain her world-acclaimed Sociolinguistics Laboratory. A prolific and highly respected scholar, she has published a long series of influential papers and books, e.g., *African American English in the Diaspora* (2001), and is a perennial keynote speaker at linguistics and language conferences worldwide.

She is Canada Research Chair in Linguistics and Distinguished University Professor at the University of Ottawa, a Killam Research Fellow (2001), a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and a recipient of the Society's Chauveau Medal (2005). Shana Poplack was nominated a Trudeau Fellow in 2007; she received the Killam Prize in the Humanities in 2007, and the 2008 Premier's Discovery Award in the Social Sciences and Humanities. She was recently named Fellow of the Linguistic Society of America.

### **ABSTRACT**

When Shana Poplack came to Canada many years ago, she noticed differences between the French she had learned in school and the French spoken here. Local francophones were quick to assure her that their language was *not* the language of Voltaire: good French was to be found in France. Where did this idea come from? Who decides what is good and what is not? If the way we speak is non-standard, then what is standard? Who speaks it? Shana Poplack will tell us the surprising story of how the grammatical enterprise has failed to regulate the way we speak, based on her research confronting the way grammatical rules have evolved since the 16<sup>th</sup> century with our speech today. Using examples from French and English, she will show us that the notion of standard language is an arbitrary one, and that the forms grammars prescribe have little to do with the language we speak.

LECTURE

## What Language Do We Speak?

University of Moncton (New Brunswick)

FEBRUARY 24, 2009

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Ever since I can remember, I have loved language. Originally, in its “expressive” and “poetic” capacities: the way it could be used to create beautiful literature and poetry. But I was introduced to the incredible power of the spoken word very early on. That happened when I moved to New York City from Pennsylvania at the age of nine. At that time, New York City had a very distinctive variety of English, which, in contrast to its restaurants, museums, and fashion statements, was not admired or emulated. Rather, it was *stigmatized*, not only by outsiders, but by New Yorkers themselves. This phenomenon, known as “linguistic insecurity,” turns out to be widespread across the world, including of course in Canada. One of the things I want to explore in this paper is the nature of the force that instills such insecurity: the prescriptive grammatical enterprise.

Now although New Yorkers may have found fault with the way they themselves spoke, they were also fiercely proud of it. I found *that* out the hard way, when my peers singled me out for my Pennsylvania

1. The research on which this paper is based is part of a larger project entitled “Confronting prescription and praxis in the evolution of grammar” generously supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (#410-99-0378) and Killam Foundation grants. It is the fruit of a joint effort with Nathalie Dion, and many other members of the University of Ottawa Sociolinguistics Laboratory, who participated in the collection, transcription, location, extraction, coding and analysis of tens of thousands of tokens of data that form the basis of this study.

vowels, which were quite different (albeit not stigmatized) from their native New York City vowels. These experiences drove home the realization that in people's minds, not all ways of speaking are the same, and some of those ways are perceived as better than others. The quizzical—but still jovial—remarks about my “accent” assumed their true importance later, when I saw their counterparts being levelled, without any of the joviality, at the many minority groups that make up New York City, whose distinctive varieties of English—variously labelled Black English, Spanglish, Chinglish, etc.—are widely considered to be deficient, incorrect, and just plain bad. And these value judgments have had serious repercussions in terms of educational failure, employability, and unequal opportunity for their speakers.

By the time I got to university, my love of language had morphed into a love of languages, and I majored in the Romance family, studying French, Spanish and Portuguese. Before I even finished university this fascination had propelled me to the countries where these languages are spoken, and I ended up doing graduate work in Paris at the Sorbonne. That was another eye-opener. There I learned that despite years of studying French, and the facility I had acquired with Racine, Molière and Corneille, not to mention modern classics, I could not order a cup of coffee or a pack of cigarettes without being asked to repeat myself over and over. And those efforts would then be ridiculed and/or corrected by the shopkeeper or policeman or bureaucrat I was trying to engage. The take-home message was that there was a right way to speak French and I was not doing it. Imagine my surprise when I learned years later that native francophones from Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Tunisia, Haiti and of course Canada were not doing it either. It was not Parisian French, so it was not good.

Despite all this, in Paris I fell in love with what was to become my life's work: sociolinguistics, or the scientific study of language in its social context—the way real people speak in real life and the repercussions this may have for them and the members of the speech communities in which they live.

I had the incredible good fortune to do my Ph.D. at the University of Pennsylvania, under the direction of William Labov, the founder of modern sociolinguistics. Labov has dedicated himself to converting people's random impressions about language into replicable science, a preoccupation which I inherited.

It was in my capacity as a sociolinguist that I was hired in the 1980s by the University of Ottawa. The national capital region, like any bilingual area, is heaven on earth for a sociolinguist—a natural laboratory for the study of language contact and language change. It is also a place where once again linguistic differences emerged at the very forefront of the provincial and national discourse about language rights and linguistic inequality. The gist of this discourse is that Canadian French is very different from European French (or more precisely, the prestige dialects of European French), and not in a good way. Some people point to the supposedly archaic nature of Canadian French, alleging that it retains older forms that have since disappeared from modern European counterparts, like *char* (car), *breuvage* (drink), *barrer* (lock) and *astheure* (now or nowadays). For those who endorse this view, the problem is that Canadian French has *failed* to change in tandem with the mainstream varieties. But much more troublesome is the widespread idea that it *has* changed, mainly via attrition, through loss of core vocabulary and important grammatical features like the subjunctive, for example. And most people, laypeople as well as linguists, ascribe this to one or both of the following reasons: 1) separation from the European metropolis, where the language has supposedly remained in its pristine state, and 2) long-term contact with English, the majority language in most of the country. These are thought to have caused the minority language to lose its distinctive traits, while imposing other, English-origin features that contravene the spirit of the French language. Both of these ideas are eminently reasonable, but when I tried to find scientific proof, I learned that neither scenario had ever been confirmed empirically. This became the linchpin of a wide-ranging, decades-

long research program into *how* language changes and what role, if any, language contact plays.

Now in order to claim that language (or anything else) has changed, it is necessary to know what it has changed *from*. This requires access to an earlier stage predating the change. In the case of linguistic change, it should be an earlier stage of the *spoken* language, since it is in speech that most changes originate and spread; the written language is much the same wherever it is used. But the groundwork that this entails is usually bypassed, under the assumption that the “standard” language constitutes a viable benchmark for comparison. As a consequence, when a particular way of speaking differs from the standard, the inference is that it is the result of a *change*. This makes it crucial to understand what the standard actually is, and this question was the driving force behind the massive project I describe here, and the surprising finding that the standard is not the immutable entity it is thought to be. As we shall see, it is more an ideology than anything else.

### Products of Standardization

Normal everyday speech often differs considerably from what is designated as “standard,” because of its core property: inherent *variability*, or alternate ways of expressing the same thing. This variability exists at every level of linguistic structure, from the sound system to the syntax, as in the examples below, taken from the speech of ordinary individuals.

1. a. “I mean, when I’m talking **ing** français.” (QEC.004.1179)<sup>2</sup>
- b. “And I said, ‘If things don’t change around here, I’m getting**in**’ out of here.” (QEC.037.630)

2. Codes in parentheses refer to corpus (QEC= Quebec English Corpus [Poplack *et al.*, 2006], H = *Corpus of Ottawa-Hull French* [Poplack, 1989], RFQ = *Récits du français québécois d’autrefois* [Poplack & St-Amand, 2007]), speaker and line number. All corpora are housed at the Sociolinguistics Laboratory, University of Ottawa. Examples are reproduced verbatim from audio recordings.

2. “I understand *there wasn’t* really too many arguments over that. Everyone like pretty much made a big joke about any cliques *there were* about that.” (QEC.303.1018)
3. a. “And now—nowadays the tooth fairy gives out like five-dollar bills, I’m *like* ‘I used to get a quarter, if I was lucky.’” (QEC.304.1013)
- b. “People notice it when I go over to Ontario. They *say*, ‘You’re not from here, are you?’” (QEC.126.1383)
4. a. “And when I hear these mothers say, ‘Well I *can’t* do *nothing* with my child’, oh, I wanna cry.” (QEC.006.2530)
- b. “But then next semester I *can’t* take *anything* extra, ’cause we have a *stage* at the end, like with the compressed semester.” (QEC.067.237)

From a scientific linguistic point of view, these pairs of variant expressions are *equivalent*, in the sense that they are both equally effective at transmitting the *referential* message we want to convey. Thus, whether we say I’m *talking*, as in (1a), or I’m *gettin’*, as in (1b), the interpretation that the activity is ongoing (which is the meaning of the {-*ing*} suffix) is equally available. Likewise, whether we say *there were cliques* with verbal agreement or *there wasn’t arguments*, without, it is equally clear that the referent is plural. Linguistically speaking, then, the alternating forms convey the same information. But from a social perspective, this is far from the case. In fact, faced with a choice between alternatives like these, most of us will readily identify some as “right” and some as “wrong,” or at the very least, some as superior and others to be avoided at all costs.

Consider the variant forms of quoting shown in (3). Most would agree that the *be like* quotative (3a) is the flighty, silly way of reporting speech, and that *say* (3b) is correct. The same is true of the alternate ways of negating an utterance illustrated in (4). If your teachers were like mine, you probably learned that “double negatives” (4a) are wrong, even illogical, since “two negatives [purportedly] make a positive.”

Such attitudes are widely shared by English speakers worldwide, regardless of prevailing usage patterns. In fact, empirical quantitative research has shown that Canadians under 30 use the quotative *be like* up to 90% of the time (Dion & Poplack, 2007). It is ousting the older *say* to such an extent that at this point it is unclear whether or how long *say* will survive. “Double” negatives, as in (4), have been with us since Middle English, and they are perfectly logical, and in fact prescriptively obligatory, in French as well as other Romance languages.

If the variant forms are equivalent from a communicative perspective, where do these shared ideas about right and wrong, good and bad, come from? They are the product of *standardization*, the process of selecting one of a set of competing forms and ratifying it as correct. The aim of standardization is to *fix* language in some pure, uniform state, and this in turn entails eradicating this kind of linguistic variability and resisting language change. The prescribed uses are then imposed and diffused by normative institutions such as schools, grammar books and language academies like the *Académie française* and the *Office de la langue française*. This is how they eventually filter into the collective consciousness.

The study of language as it is actually *spoken* on the ground, even by the most highly educated individuals, reveals not only that it is replete with variability, but that the variant forms are *not* used according to the prescriptions of language “authorities.” The familiar examples of well-known and widely prescribed grammatical rules reproduced in (5) are almost never followed in everyday speech.

5. a. “No dangling prepositions!”
- b. «Les *si* chassent les *–rais!*»<sup>3</sup>

This discovery prompted me and the team of researchers at the Sociolinguistics Laboratory I direct at the University of Ottawa to

3. Literally, *si* (‘if’) ousts *–rais*, the French prescriptive injunction against using the conditional ending on a verb located in an *if*-clause.

consider just *what* the standard is, how successful our normative institutions have been at promulgating it, and whether anyone in fact speaks it. These are the questions I invite you to explore with me as I present some results of an ongoing project confronting *prescription*—what the grammars tell us to do—with *praxis*—what we actually do in the course of everyday speech. Though I exemplify with French, I stress that these findings apply to every language with a tradition of standardization.

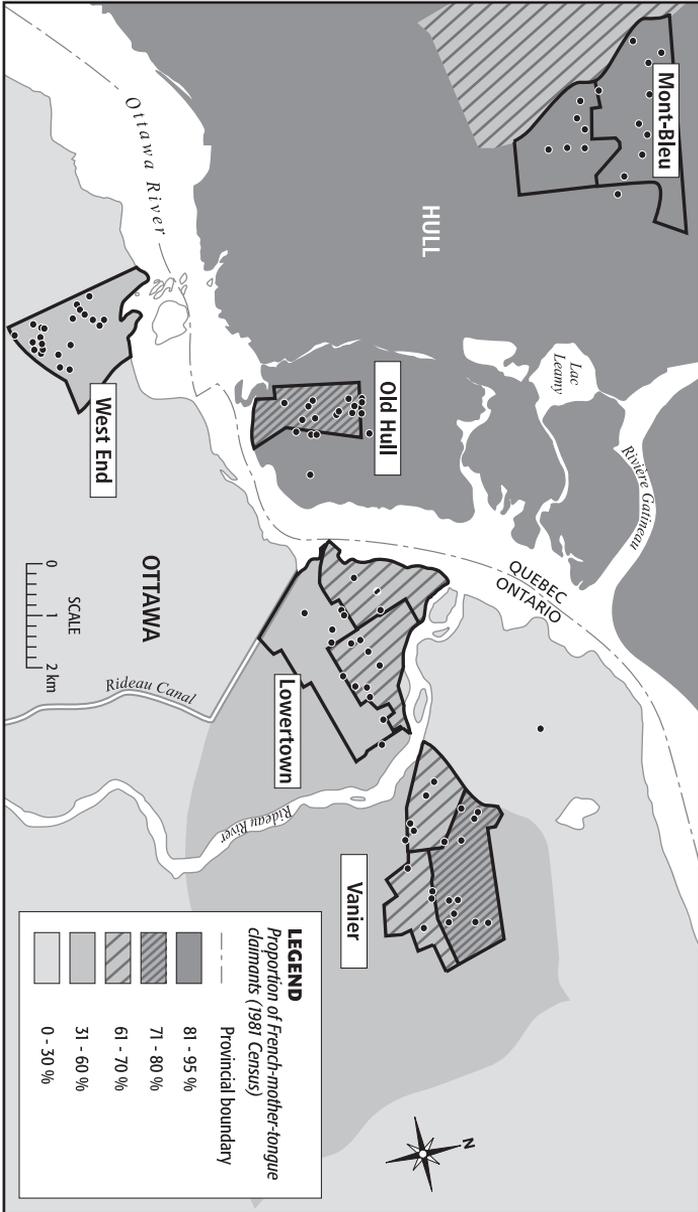
### Seeking Standard French

To track the way the prescriptive enterprise has characterized the standard over time, we constructed the *Répertoire historique des grammaires du français* (RHGF; Poplack *et al.*, 2002), a unique database of 163 French grammar texts published since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Normally, one consults a grammar to determine how to conjugate a verb or where to place an adverb, but our purposes were completely different:

- a. To verify the existence of prior variability. The excerpt reproduced in (6) suggests there are two ways to form a direct question in French.
- b. To *date* the variability and associated variants. From the publication date of the Gaiffe grammar cited in (6), we can deduce that these forms had been alternating since at least 1936.<sup>4</sup>
- c. To identify indicators that motivate the choice among variants. For example, Radouant, cited in (7), recommends the use of *est-ce que* when the question is in the first person singular.
- d. To define the characteristics of the language grammarians endorse. This idealized language would not include the interrogative particle *-ti/tu* (as in *c'est-tu vrai*), for example, because, at least according to Damourette and Pichon, it is low-class (8).

4. Actually, they have been around for centuries.

Map 1. Francophone communities studied in the National Capital Region (Poplack, 1989)



6. « *Est-ce qu'il est venu?* est courant; *est-il venu?* a déjà un soupçon de recherche et témoigne en tout cas d'un certain degré de culture. » (Gaiffe *et al.*, 1936, p. 76)

'*Est-ce qu'il est venu?* is current; *est-il venu?* is slightly more studied and suggests some level of culture.'

7. « De plus en plus fréquemment, dans la langue parlée, quand la question porte sur le verbe et surtout s'il est à la **1<sup>re</sup> personne du singulier**, on emploie la formule invariable *est-ce que*. » (Radouant, 1922, p. 232-233)

'More and more often, in the spoken language, when the question focuses on the verb and especially for the **first person singular**, the invariable form *est-ce que* is used.'

8. « L'interrogation particulière avec **ti** appartient surtout à la **parlure vulgaire**. » (Damourette & Pichon, 1930, p. 340)

'The interrogative particle **ti** is mainly found in **uncultured speech**.'

We confronted these normative prescriptions with usage—both contemporary and older, to establish the extent to which prescription and praxis influence each other. Contemporary usage is exemplified by the French spoken spontaneously in the national capital region (Map 1), which we have been studying for more than two decades.

### The Variable Expressions of Future Time

To illustrate our approach, let us consider the variable expression of future time. Three variants have been competing for centuries: the inflected future (IF; 9a), the periphrastic future (PF; 9b) and the futurate present (P; 9c).

9. a. « Moi, j'ai dit, 'laisse faire, on **ira** (IF) à messe *demain matin*' » (OH.070.686)  
 'I said, "Never mind, we'll **go** (IF) to church tomorrow morning."  
 b. « Il va dire, 'bien *demain*, [...] tu **vas aller** (PF) au Bingo, tu **vas gagner** (PF)'. » (OH.065.2301)

‘He’ll say, “okay, tomorrow you’re *going to go* (PF) to Bingo, and you’re *going to win*”(PF).

- c. «Il dit, ‘j’y *vas* (P) *demain matin*, chez vous.’» (OH.119.861)  
 ‘He said, “Tomorrow morning, I *go* (P) to your place.”’

Why do we need all these ways of expressing the future? Most grammarians would reply that each of them carries subtle nuances about the way the future eventuality is envisioned: for example, the periphrastic future (known in French as the “futur proche” or proximate future) supposedly refers to states or events that will occur soon (as expressed by *tomorrow* in the examples in (9)).

But our research into oral usage reveals that these variants are not necessarily associated with the nuances that grammarians attribute to them. That is because almost *all* references to the future—proximate or distal—are expressed by one variant: the periphrastic, as illustrated in Figure 1).

This is a first discrepancy between what grammarians prescribe and the way we actually speak. Is this the result of change? To find out, we conducted a meta-analysis of the evolution of normative discourse on this subject over the centuries. We began by systematically extracting from the grammars that make up our corpus every reference to the future, like the one shown in (10). We then divided the results into five periods relevant to our analysis.

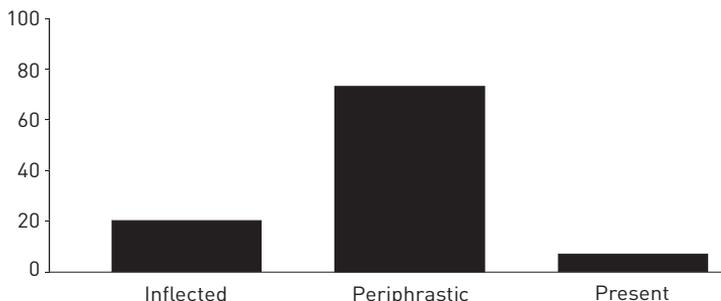


Figure 1. Distribution of future variants: 20<sup>th</sup> century

10. «I. LE PRÉSENT 4 °[...] est toujours accompagné de quelque nom ou adverbe de temps qui marque le futur.» (Vallart, 1744, p. 237)

‘The [furate] Present is always accompanied by some noun or temporal adverb marking the future.’

### Normative Treatment of Variability

Perhaps the most striking result of this exercise was the discovery that the normative tradition largely *refuses* to acknowledge that the three forms are in fact interchangeable in the same context. On the contrary, to achieve the grammarians’ ideal—where each form reflects a single meaning—they completely deny variability, by means of three main strategies. 1) They may simply discount one of the variants, as Girard does, (11a) by stating only that the inflected form expresses the future; 2) they may stigmatize one of the variants by characterizing it as foreign, infantile, low-class or, in the best-case scenario, “colloquial,” which is how Baylon & Fabre describe the periphrastic future in (11b); or 3) they may explain away the variability by assigning to each form a dedicated meaning or function. In other words, instead of admitting that the forms may all express the same thing, they claim that each plays a distinct role. This is the meaning of the assertion in (11c) that a predication formulated with the inflected future is less certain to occur than if the periphrastic future had been employed.

11. a. «Lorsqu’on représente l’événement comme devant positivement arriver dans la suite, cela fait le **temps avenir**; qu’on nomme **FUTUR**, tel qu’on le voit dans cette frase: *je me donnerai de la peine; mais j’en viendrai à bout.*» (Girard, 1747, p. 20)  
 ‘When the event is represented as definitively taking place at a time to come, that calls for the **future tense**, which we call **FUTURE [IF]**, as illustrated in this sentence: “I **will** work hard but I **will** prevail.”’

- b. « Dans la **langue familière**, la périphrase *aller + infinitif* [PF] tend à prendre la place du futur I [IF]. » (Baylon & Fabre, 1973, p. 126)  
 ‘In **casual speech**, the periphrasis *aller + infinitive* [PF] tends to replace the [inflected] future [IF].’
- c. « [FS véhicule des] valeurs possibles de **promesse** ou de **prédiction**—qui reste toutefois **moins certain** que le procès présenté par le futur périphrastique [PF] » (Leeman-Bouix, 1994, p. 162).  
 ‘[IF conveys] possible values of **promise** or **prediction**—which, however, remains **less certain** than the process presented by the periphrastic future [PF].’

Let us look more closely at this third strategy—the quest for form-function symmetry, because in fact it encapsulates the essence of the evolution of normative discourse about the expression of the future in French.

A systematic study of all the nuances and contexts associated with the variants over five centuries of normative tradition reveals that each variant is assigned a large number of functions: 20 for the inflected future, 19 for the periphrastic form and 14 for the futurate present. If the variants really expressed (or express) all these nuances, one would expect at least a modicum of consistency in the associations between form and function over time. But only *one* association has persisted throughout these periods—that between the periphrastic future and proximity. Most of the others are idiosyncratic—that is, they were never mentioned before or after the period in question.

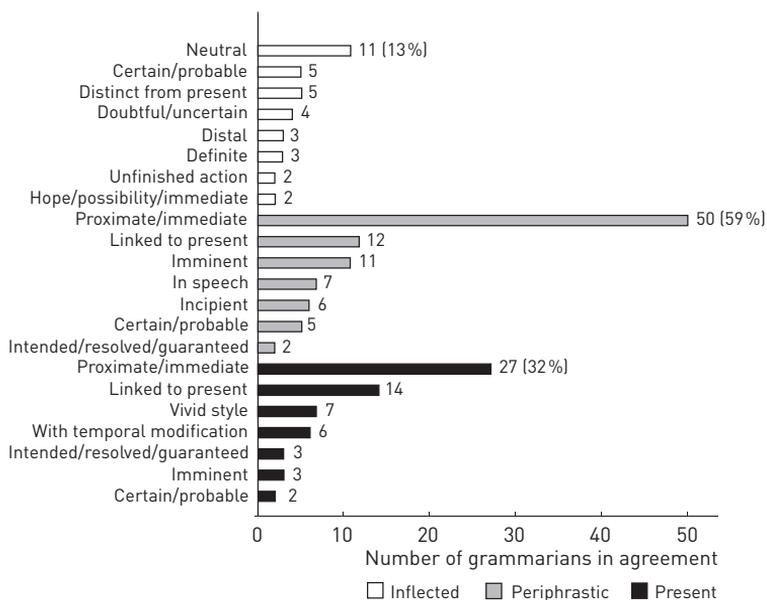
But the most surprising result lies in the lack of *consensus*—across or even within grammars—on the functions to be associated with each variant. Although they tend to be presented contrastively, implying that they are isomorphic with forms, our analysis reveals that the same function is often associated with two or even all three of the variants. Sometimes contradictory functions are attributed

to the same variant. Thus the inflected future is said to express certainty and doubt (12a-b), hope and fear, and neutrality as well as very specific nuances. And this is true not only within a single period, but also, and more tellingly, within a single grammar! For example, the inflected future is characterized by Dubois (1965, p. 117) as having progressive and non-progressive value, and by Silvestre de Sacy (1799, p. 125-126) as being determined and undetermined, as well as indefinite and definite.

Even the relationship between variant and *temporal distance* turns out to be contradictory, since each variant has been associated by a grammarian with both proximate and distal futures, as exemplified in (13).

12. a. «On devrait, en bonne logique, ne l'employer [IF] que lorsqu'on est sûr de son fait.» (Frontier, 1997, p. 533)  
 'To be logical, we should only use it [IF] when we are certain of its realization.'
- b. « [PF] présente la réalisation du procès comme plus assurée et sa réalité comme plus certaine que le futur [IF], qui laisse subsister un doute » (Riegel *et al.*, 1998, p. 315).  
 '[PF] presents the reality and the realization of the process as more certain than the future [IF], which leaves some doubt.'
13. a. «Le futur [simple] refuse une telle dépendance au présent et exige une date objective ou une distance avec le présent.» (Léard, 1995, p. 197)  
 'The future [IF] does not depend on the present and requires an objective date or distance from the present.'
- b. «Il s'agit d'un **moment futur, mais très proche.**» (Grevisse, 1993, p. 1257).  
 'It refers to future time, but very proximate.'

Figure 2 shows that the most consistent semantic value ascribed by grammarians to the inflected future is *neutrality*, the idea that something will simply happen. Note, however, that the



**Figure 2.** Inter-grammar agreement on non-idiosyncratic functions assigned to IF, PF and P

inter-grammar agreement rate is only 13%. Far greater consensus is obtained on the periphrastic future—59% of grammars associate it with the value of *proximity*.

### Comparison with Speech

How well do these grammatical prescriptions capture the way the variant forms are actually used in the expression of future temporal reference in contemporary spoken French? We have already seen some evidence (examples 9 a-c) that the usage facts would not necessarily cooperate, namely, that *all* the variants co-occur in the same contexts, here proximate future: *demain*. Is this an isolated occurrence or a regular pattern? To find out, we extracted 3,559 references to the future from the 2.5 million words of recorded speech making

up the *Ottawa-Hull French Corpus* (Poplack, 1989), and modeled the mechanism underlying the choice speakers make among the variant forms by means of multivariate analysis (Table 1).

Table 1 reproduces two particularly noteworthy results of independent analyses of the factors affecting the selection of the inflected, periphrastic and futurate present variants respectively. The first concerns temporal distance. We have seen that the association of the periphrastic future with proximity was the major area of agreement among grammarians. But in contemporary speech temporal distance has no effect on variant choice. On the other hand, by far the most important predictor of variant choice is contributed by *negation* of the future eventuality. The inflected future is overwhelmingly preferred in negative contexts, as illustrated in exemple (14), where two affirmative clauses (with PF) are followed by a negative clause featuring IF:

14. «Dire que dans quatre cents ans d’ici bien, il *va avoir* (PF) encore des Fauteux puis ils *vont* encore *parler* (PF) français! Qu’ils *parleront* (IF) *pas* l’anglais.» (OH.004.3611)

‘To think that in four hundred years from now, well, there are still **going to be** [PF] Fauteux, and they are still **going to speak** [PF] French! They **won’t be speaking** [IF] English.’

	INFLECTED	PERIPHRASTIC	PRESENT
<i>Corrected mean</i>	.145	.727	.052
total N	725	2627	242
<b>POLARITY</b>			
Negative	<b>.99</b>	.01	ns
Affirmative	.36	<b>.65</b>	ns
<b>TEMPORAL DISTANCE</b>			
Distal	ns	ns	ns
Proximal			

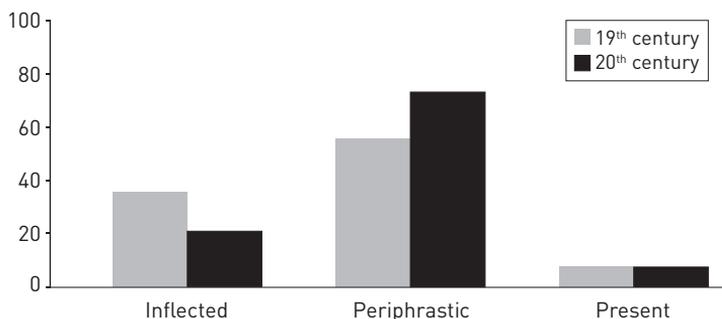
**Table 1.** Contribution of linguistic factors to variant choice: 20<sup>th</sup> century [adapted from Poplack & Dion, 2009]

This spectacular contribution of negation—a probability of .99—was not even acknowledged by grammarians. Thus the major grammatical injunction—use the periphrastic future to express proximity—does not apply to speech, while the major pattern for speech—use the inflected future in negative contexts and the periphrastic future pretty much everywhere else—is absent from grammars.

Why should this be? When we first discovered these two effects, we were sure they were recent changes, possibly induced by contact with English, since this is such a heavily bilingual area.

To confirm this deduction, we had to go back to a time before the intense contact with English, which we did using another corpus, the *Récits du français québécois d'autrefois* (RFQ; Poplack & St-Amand, 2007), a sample of audio recordings made by folklorists Luc Lacourcière and Carmen Roy with insular, rural Québécois born in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. A comparison with our 20<sup>th</sup> century speech data allowed us to measure the progress of change in the expression of the future in oral French over a period of 119 years in real time. This exercise revealed that speakers born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were already using the three variants in the same contexts, as illustrated by the examples in (15).

15. a. « Qu'il **sera** [IF] pendu à dix heures *demain matin* devant mon château. » (RFQ.048.1726)  
 'That he **will be** [IF] hanged at ten o'clock tomorrow morning in front of my castle.'
- b. « Ou bien donc il **va-t-être** [PF] pendu à dix heures *demain matin* devant mon château. » (RFQ.048.1821)  
 'Or that he **is going to be** [PF] hanged at ten tomorrow morning in front of my castle.'
- c. « Il dit, elle se **marie** [P] *demain matin*. » (RFQ.032.1202)  
 'He said, she **gets married** [P] tomorrow morning.'



**Figure 3.** Distribution of temporal reference variants:  
19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> centuries

And these variants were even distributed more or less in the same way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as they are today (Figure 3), despite the marked increase in the use of the periphrastic variant since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the corresponding decrease in the use of the inflected future.

What about the conditions that govern the *choice* of variant? A comparison of the factors that contribute to the choice of one variant over another in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Table 2) reveals that they are essentially the same. This indicates that the main constraints at work today were already in place more than a century ago. In particular, negative polarity was already by far the most important factor, so this effect is in no way an innovation.

Now let us examine the role of temporal distance. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it wielded a minimal but nevertheless statistically significant effect. This effect has been lost in contemporary French. Our study of the grammatical tradition highlights the supposed association between the periphrastic future and *proximity*, while the simple future is characterized as being rather neutral. Table 2 shows that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the variants were not used this way. On the contrary, if the inflected variant had any temporal nuance at all at the

	19 <sup>th</sup> century			20 <sup>th</sup> century		
	INFLECTED	PERI-PHRASTIC	PRESENT	INFLECTED	PERI-PHRASTIC	PRESENT
<i>Moyenne corrigée</i>	.268	.514	.133	.145	.727	.052
N total	1677	2630	398	725	2627	242
<b>POLARITÉ</b>						
Négative	.91	.01	.69	.99	.01	ns
Affirmative	.43	.64	.48	.36	.65	
<b>DISTANCE TEMPORELLE</b>						
Éloignée	.62	.43	.45	ns	ns	ns
Proche	.45	.53	.52			

**Table 2.** Contribution of linguistic factors to variant choice: 19<sup>th</sup> vs. 20<sup>th</sup> century [adapted from Poplack & Dion, 2009]

time, it was that of *distal* future. It is in fact the periphrastic future that had (and still has) neutral value, since it is the most frequent and unmarked variant.

## Conclusion

We are now in a position to return to the question that motivated this work: what *is* the standard? First and foremost, it is an idealization, and a rather arbitrary one at that. It changes from one period to the next, from one grammar to another, and even from page to page within the same grammar. In fact, when we actually deconstruct the prescriptive dictates that underlie the notion of the standard, we find far more heterogeneity, contradiction and confusion than in speech, even non-standard.

We have presented a number of different lines of evidence in support of this claim: assigning the same meaning to different variants, as in the case of proximity, assigning different meanings to the same variant, e.g., progressive and non-progressive, invoking

new and idiosyncratic readings at each time period, within a single period, and even within a single grammar, and confounding the meaning of the form with the meaning of the context.

In light of those findings, it will be instructive to revisit our assumptions going into this exercise. First, contrary to popular opinion (as well as our own, initially), prescriptive grammar cannot be qualified as the repository of correct French. Its injunctions tend to be vague, contradictory or accompanied by complex exceptions. In “rules” such as that reproduced in (16), nothing is prescribed.

16. «Le *futur simple* contient en même temps les valeurs de progressif et de non-progressif (cas non-marqué).» (Dubois, 1965, p. 117)

‘The inflected future [IF] contains the values of progressive and non-progressive (unmarked case) at the same time.’

It is unclear how others are to be implemented. Can an ordinary speaker really determine whether a given predication instantiates “possible values of promise or prediction which are less certain than the process expressed by the periphrastic future” (example 11c), and then *apply* this information when she goes to select a variant? Even if she could, how would she know which one to choose, since the standard is *not* a well-defined set of conventions accepted and promulgated by all grammarians. On the contrary, perhaps the most striking finding of our research is the pervasive lack of consensus, whether over time or within a given period, across grammars or within a single grammar. This means that when speakers attempt to select variant forms according to prescribed norms, they are likely to be met with conflicting information. Following one grammarian’s rules (should this be possible) may result in breaking another’s.

Another issue concerns the ways in which normative discourse moulds speech. By confronting the prescriptive rules we could operationalize with the implicit variable rules governing speech, we learned that none of them coincided. The wide variety of contexts and conditions prescribed to govern variant choice are simply not

operative in speech. On the other hand, a whole set of implicit variable constraints has arisen in the speech community, which demonstrably *do* play a major role in expressing future temporal reference. And these, in turn, are opaque to the grammatical tradition. The take-home message is: the “standard” is not a surrogate for the language. It fails to capture the major facts of actual usage, while at the same time leading us down the garden path of trying to associate with each form a unique reading or context. Nor is it a reliable benchmark for assessing change. This refutes the idea that spoken French is standard French with mistakes.

We conclude with a couple of questions prompted by this work. First, what is the source of the expert intuitions about French grammar that constitute the prescriptive discourse we have analysed?

Some of these intuitions originate in the desire to ratify (if not beautify) the French language by making it conform to classical models. The trajectory of the periphrastic future is a perfect example of this. As far back as 1660, the Port Royal grammarians, who were already trying to distinguish the variants, associated the PF with the Greek *paulopost futurum*, which denoted an action to take place soon after speech time. A century later, L’Abbé Antonini dubbed this form the “futur prochain,” and grammarians have been struggling to fit it into that mould ever since.

Other intuitions stem from efforts to impose order on the perceived chaos of linguistic variability by associating with each of the competing forms a dedicated meaning or function: if the inflected future expresses doubt, the periphrastic future should express certainty, or vice-versa.

Still others arise when the meaning of the relevant *context* is attributed to the form itself. This is how the inflected future comes to be variously characterized as a future of command, invitation, plea, wish, prudent attenuation, probability bordering on certainty, conclusion drawn without reflection, among many others. Our

meta-analysis shows that these efforts are arbitrary and inconsistent, not just occasionally, but massively so.

Now compare with the systematic, if implicit, rules that govern future temporal reference in speech. The variability they reveal is often deemed to be a reflection of the quantitative weakening or disappearance of original grammatical rules, or, when the constraints on variant choice have not been previously attested, independent innovations. But with the possible exception of temporal distance, we have not detected any evidence of change here. Quite the contrary. Some of the rules governing speech are the opposite of the prescriptive rules, such as the neutrality reading for the inflected future, when in fact we have shown that its use is actually very limited. Others have nothing to do with those rules, such as the overwhelming trend toward the inflected future in negative contexts.

Our study suggests why speakers tend not to follow prescriptive injunctions in many areas of the grammar: not only would one have to be a rocket scientist to understand and apply the myriad rules and exceptions for the prescriptively endorsed uses of many of these variables, but even those are likely to vary according to which grammar one consults. But why have grammars remain uninformed by the structure of *speech*?

The normative tradition has assumed the responsibility of transmitting the *ideology* of the standard, an effort which, in contrast to transmitting the *stuff* of the standard, has achieved great success. This of course is where we get our ideas about what is right and wrong, good and bad, even though, almost paradoxically, we do not apply them in our speech. Indeed, we cannot, really, because our speech, like our dress and many of our other social attributes, has to conform to the norms of the speech community in which we find ourselves. And this, in turn, leads to the great and widening gulf between prescription and praxis.

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