

PRESCRIPTION VS. PRACTICE:
THE EVOLUTION OF FUTURE TEMPORAL REFERENCE IN FRENCH

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Because many of the forms participating in inherent variability are not attested in the standard language, they are often construed as evidence of change. We test this assumption by confronting the standard, as instantiated by a unique corpus covering five centuries of French grammatical injunctions, with data on the evolution of spontaneous speech over an apparent-time span of 119 years.

Reasoning that forms salient enough to have attracted the attention of grammarians were likely widespread in the speech of the time, we demonstrate how these materials may be used to (i) infer the existence of prior variability, (ii) trace the evolution of normative dictates associated with the variants, and most revealing, (iii) discern hints of prior linguistic conditioning of variant selection. These are then operationalized as factors in a multivariate analysis and tested against the facts of usage.

The linguistic focus is on future temporal reference, a notoriously variable sector of the grammar in which competing exponents have persisted for centuries. Systematic comparison of grammatical treatments with actual speaker behavior shows virtually no correspondence between the motivations offered in the literature and those constraining actual variant choice. Prescriptive efforts to explain variability, by ascribing to each variant form a dedicated reading or context of use, have had no effect on speech, which is shown to be governed by a powerful set of tacit variable constraints. These in turn are unacknowledged by the grammatical tradition. The result is a great and growing disconnect between the variable rules governing speech and the normative dictates that underlie the notion of the standard. We explore the implications of these findings for the use of grammarians' observations as data for linguistic analysis.*

Keywords: morphosyntactic variation, language change, future temporal reference, French, prescriptive grammar, standardization, sociolinguistics

1. INTRODUCTION. Because the doctrine of form-function symmetry is so firmly entrenched in linguistic thought, alternate ways of expressing the same referential meaning or function are often construed as deviations from a norm. Many of the forms participating in such variability are not attested in the standard language, which is typically construed as invariant and immutable. When the (prescribed) standard is taken as a benchmark, as is the case in much linguistic analysis (if only implicitly), the most natural inference is that alternative expressions are the product of change.¹ In this article

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¹ Examples are legion. Arguably the one with the most far-reaching consequences involves the variable use of nonconcord verbal *-s* in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Under the (erroneous) assumption that contemporary standard English agreement represented the 'original' rule, decades of research were invested in controversy over the trajectory by which AAVE had changed from this prior state (e.g. Bailey et al. 1989, Brewer 1986, Fasold 1972, Feagin 1979, Jeremiah 1977, Labov et al. 1968, McDavid 1969, 1977, McDavid & Davis 1972, Myhill & Harris 1986, Pitts 1981, Poplack & Tagliamonte 1989, 1991, Schneider 1983, 1989; see Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001 for detailed discussion). Likewise Laurier (1989) characterized the contemporary nonstandard alternation between the French subjunctive and indicative in 'subjunctive-selecting' contexts as LOSS of the subjunctive, purportedly a recent result of contact-induced change. In fact, this variability was attested (if only via grammarians' corrections) since at least 1685 (d'Aisy). And such cases could be multiplied.

we test this assumption by confronting the injunctions of the standard, as instantiated by a meta-analysis of five centuries of grammatical tradition, with data on the evolution of spontaneous speech over an apparent-time span of 119 years. We illustrate with French, perhaps the most highly codified of languages, whose prescriptive tradition dates back at least as far as the fourteenth century (Stengel 1976, Swiggers 1984, cited in J.-C. Chevalier 1994) and continues to flourish unabated through the present.

The linguistic focus is on future temporal reference, a notoriously variable sector of grammar in which competing exponents have persisted for centuries. The question of why so many variant forms are required to make reference to the future has attracted much attention from prescriptivists and linguists alike, affording abundant hypotheses that can be tested against usage data. We acknowledge that this appeal to (normative) grammars to elucidate variability may at first blush appear oxymoronic. Variationists focus on heterogeneity, while the goal of standardization is to render language invariant. As Wagner (1968) perspicaciously observed, however, it is precisely where speakers have a choice between different ways of expressing the same thing that norms can be established: one of the competing forms is designated as *STANDARD*; the others are rejected or explained away. As we demonstrate in what follows, it is precisely this tension between ratification and rejection that proves so revealing. Despite few mentions of what is today referred to as *INHERENT VARIABILITY*, we submit that grammarians' efforts to eradicate it are themselves evidence of its existence.

In the collective imaginary, the standard is embraced as the ultimate authority on correct usage. It should thus be instructive to characterize the actual impact of prescriptive dictates on spontaneous speech, especially in restraining or arresting linguistic change. This is another goal of this research.

1.1. EXPRESSING THE FUTURE IN FRENCH. The French future temporal reference sector is particularly hospitable to variability. Three main morphological variants have been competing for centuries, even in identical contexts (here, proximate future): the *SYNTHETIC FUTURE (SF)*, as in 1, the *PERIPHRASTIC FUTURE (PF)*, as in 2, and the *FUTURATE PRESENT (P)*, as in 3.

- (1) Ça **ira** (SF) peut-être mieux **demain**. (OH.118.1139)²
 'Maybe it **will go** better **tomorrow**.'
- (2) Tu sais, on **va** vous **fusiller** (PF), **demain matin**, à cinq heures.
 (OH.056.751)
 'You know, we are **going to** shoot you **tomorrow morning** at 5 o'clock.'
- (3) Aujourd'hui on mange du boeuf, **demain** on **mange** (P) du lard.
 (OH.103.443)
 'Today we **eat** beef, **tomorrow** we eat lard.'

Most grammarians, prescriptive and descriptive, espouse the idea that the variants are selected according to the way the future eventuality is envisioned, and/or the semantic or pragmatic import to be conveyed (§2.2). In spontaneous speech, however, they are rarely used in accordance with the values proposed (Poplack & Turpin 1999). This is because most references to future states or events are made using only one of the variants theoretically available. Our efforts to understand these facts also motivated the current study.

² Codes in parentheses refer to corpus (OH = *Corpus of Ottawa-Hull French*, RFQ = *Récits du français québécois d'autrefois*), speaker, and line number. Examples are reproduced verbatim from audio recordings.

2. DEFINING THE STANDARD: THE RHGF. What is the standard? Beyond its well-documented sociopolitical features (conduits promoting its use, legal or quasi-legal status, the reverence in which it is held by language professionals as well as laypeople), and the aforementioned penchant for suppressing (optional) variability, a linguistically useful definition remains elusive. With its overriding focus on proscription, and a veritable plethora of rules and exceptions, it is often unclear just what is prescribed, where, and how. This is why linguists often characterize the standard as an ideology (e.g. Lippi-Green 1997, Milroy 2000, Milroy & Milroy 1999, Trudgill 1999, Watts 2000). Yet in order to comprehend and contextualize nonstandard uses, it will be useful to know what qualifies their ratified counterparts as standard. In the venerable tradition of linguistic exegeses of *Appendix Probi* (Powell 2007), we approached this question by going straight to the source: grammarians' actual injunctions with respect to a given variable construction. Our main window onto what could be considered STANDARD French is the *Recueil historique de grammaires du français* (RHGF; Poplack et al. 2002), a compilation of 163 grammars of French published between 1530 and the present. These are distributed as in Table 1.

PERIOD	N GRAMMARS	% CORPUS
1. 1500–1699	17	10%
2. 1700–1799	23	14%
3. 1800–1899	45	28%
4. 1900–1949	18	11%
5. 1950–1999	60	37%
TOTAL	163	100%

TABLE 1. Distribution of grammars constituting the RHGF by period.

Although the RHGF is neither a complete, nor even a representative, sample of the thousands of grammars written about the French language, it can nonetheless be construed as a rough reflection of the number of works published in each of the periods we identified as pertinent for linguistic analysis. The fact that the bulk of the grammars constituting the RHGF are clustered between 1800 and 1999 reflects the estimate that 'thousands' of French grammars were published in these two centuries alone (J.-C. Chevalier 1994). In contrast, relatively few grammars date from the two centuries we refer to as Period 1. The latter half of the twentieth century, a period that coincides with the flowering of modern linguistics, is shown in this article to represent an important bellwether in the development of the doctrine of form-function symmetry, and the concomitant treatment of inherent variability. We distinguish it as Period 5.³

Other repertoires of French grammars are available (e.g. Chervel 1982, Colombat 1998, Huot 1991, Lauwers 2004, Stengel 1976), though their goals have largely been bibliographical; some have also been annotated. To our knowledge, none has been analyzed systematically with the express purpose of tracing how the prescriptive enterprise characterizes the standard, and the way it handles linguistic variability. In constructing the RHGF we specifically targeted grammars that could shed light on the (variable) usage of the past in one of four ways:

³ As few French grammars were published in Canada before 1850, the RHGF is constituted mainly of grammars from France. And of the twenty-nine that could be qualified as 'Canadian', only a third contained specific references to Canadian French, the others being reprints or reproductions of European French grammars. As we found no regional differences in the treatment of future temporal reference, in this study we make no distinction between European and Canadian grammars.

(a) by attesting variability, as does the citation in 4, by observing that the [futate] present alternates with the synthetic future variant in expressing future time.

(b) by dating variability. The inference from 4 is that such alternation existed prior to 1640, when Oudin's grammar was published.

(c) by reporting the social meaning ascribed to the variants involved in the variability, enabling us to trace the evolution of normative discourse with respect to them. In this way we learned, for example, that through the eighteenth century, grammarians indirectly stigmatized choice of the conditional tense (over the standard imperfect) in protases of hypothetical *si* complexes by associating it with foreigners, as illustrated in 5. By the second half of the twentieth century, they had come around to identifying it as the province of the masses (6), thereby implicitly ratifying it as native, if stigmatized, usage.

(d) perhaps most revealing for our purposes, by furnishing hints of linguistic CONDITIONING of variability, as in 7, the admission of the futurate present only in temporally disambiguated contexts. Such conditions can be incorporated into analyses of contemporary usage in ways we describe below, clarifying the relationship between prescription and praxis, and enhancing our understanding of the role of the former in regulating linguistic variation and change.

- (4) 'Notez en passant que nous auons vne façon de parler où nous mettons le present de l'indicatif [P] pour le futur [SF].' (Oudin 1640:184)
 'Note, by the way, that we have a way of speaking where we put the present indicative for the future.'
- (5) 'Les étrangers font souvent cette faute.' (Féraud 1787:524)
 'Foreigners often make that mistake.'
- (6) 'Le conditionnel ne se rencontre qu'en langue populaire.' (Brunot 1965:890)
 'The conditional can only be found in common speech.'
- (7) 'I. LE PRÉSENT 4°. . . est toujours accompagné de quelque nom ou adverbe de temps qui marque le futur.' (Vallart 1744:237)
 'The [futate] Present is always accompanied by some noun or temporal adverb marking the future.'

2.1. EXPLOITING THE RHGF. Once we have located such diachronic signposts of variability, we can make use of the RHGF to quantitatively assess, within a given grammar, across grammars, and within a given time period as well as over time, five key characteristics of a variable: its overall SALIENCE, as expressed by the proportion of grammars mentioning it; PERSISTENCE of meanings and/or linguistic contexts associated with each variant; CONSISTENCY of variant treatment; social EVALUATION of each variant; and approximate date of ATTESTATION of variants, readings, and contexts of use. In keeping with the PRINCIPLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY (Labov 1972), we systematically extract every relevant mention of the expression of future temporal reference, such as those illustrated in 4–7 above. In so doing, we take account not only of mentions of the competing variants, but also of the grammars that fail to acknowledge them. These mentions are then analyzed so as to reflect grammarians' actual preoccupations with respect to the variable, as revealed by extensive content analysis. In this way we discovered that prescriptive discourse around the choice of future variant has always focused on the semantic readings expressed by competing forms (in contrast, say, to choice of the conditional in protases of *si* clauses, which, as noted above, abounds in negative social connotations). We use this information to elucidate the trajectory by which syn-

chronic developments in the grammatical sector in question came about, by ascertaining whether there is a precursor to current variability, and if so, whether variant choice is conditioned as prescribed, then or now. To the extent that the prescriptive enterprise affects the course of linguistic change, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that variants with a long tradition of stigma would eventually wane over time, perhaps to be relegated to informal or vernacular styles, while the opposite could be expected of those that have been endorsed as ‘standard’ (or even enjoyed benign neglect). Ensuing sections are devoted to testing this hypothesis.

2.2. EXPRESSING THE FUTURE IN STANDARD FRENCH. Quantitative analysis of grammatical mentions over time, displayed in Table 2, reveals, first, that nearly a third of the grammars fail to weigh in on the future temporal reference variants at all. Unlike many other French variables (e.g. auxiliary *avoir/être* alternation, mood selection in protases of hypothetical *si* clauses, yes/no-question formation), none of the future variants has attracted any particular stigma (or prestige), a *laissez faire* policy that has persisted through the present. It is thus all the more curious that the number of pertinent mentions peaks so sharply post-1950 (the ‘Modern Linguistics’ period): 78 percent of the sixty RHGF grammars published at this time invoke the variants. We return to this issue below.

PERIOD	NO MENTION OF FTR		MENTION FTR, BUT			
			NO PERTINENT INFORMATION		PERTINENT MENTIONS OF FTR	
	%	N	%	N	%	N
1. 1500–1699	47	8/17	35	6/17	18	3/17
2. 1700–1799	22	5/23	22	5/23	57	13/23
3. 1800–1899	44	20/45	29	13/45	27	12/45
4. 1900–1949	17	3/18	28	5/18	56	10/18
5. 1950–1999	20	12/60	2	1/60	78	47/60
TOTAL	29	48/163	18	30/163	52	85/163

TABLE 2. Distribution of grammars according to type of mention of future temporal reference (FTR) by period.

We noted earlier that the possibility of simply substituting one future temporal reference variant for another had been acknowledged as early as 1640 (ex. 4). The bulk of the normative effort since that time, however, has been channeled into DENYING that the variants are in fact interchangeable, as depicted in Table 3.

PERIOD	DENIES VARIABILITY	SF VARIES WITH P	SF VARIES WITH PF
	%	%	%
1. 1500–1699	50	50	—
2. 1700–1799	87	13	—
3. 1800–1899	100	—	—
4. 1900–1949	80	10	10
5. 1950–1999	87	4	9

TABLE 3. Distribution of grammars invoking variability in the expression of FTR by period.

How then is their coexistence explained? We discovered that grammarians employ three major strategies to redress the imbalance between form and function.

(i) One or more of the variant forms may be STIGMATIZED as foreign, childish, low-class, or, at best, ‘colloquial’, which is how Baylon and Fabre (1973) characterize PF in 8.

Functions	1500–1699		1700–1799							1800–1899							1900–1949																										
	1530	1569	1660	1706	1744	1757	1753	1754	1762	1768	1769	1787	1796	1798	1799	1808	1809	1830	1839	1843	1846	1850	1858	1859	1867	1877	1878	1912	1930	1922	1928a	1930a	1934	1935	1936	1943							
INFLECTED FUTURE																																											
<i>Readings</i>																																											
proximate																																											
distal																																											
neutral			■																																								
progressive, nonprogressive																																											
certain, probable																																											
doubtful, uncertain																																											
distinct from present																																											
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definite																																											
not conditional																																											
hope, possibility, hypothesis																																											
obligation																																											
incipient action																																											
unfinished action																																											
fearful																																											
desired																																											
<i>Contexts of use</i>																																											
with negation																																											
with adverbial modification																																											
PERIPHRASTIC FUTURE																																											
<i>Readings</i>																																											
proximate, immediate																																											
progressive																																											
certain																																											
imminent																																											
linked to present																																											
inevitable																																											
distal, inevitable																																											
incipient action																																											
definite																																											
reinforced future																																											
resolved, intended, guaranteed																																											
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without temporal modification																																											
in subordinate clauses																																											
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proximate, immediate																																											
distal, if announced																																											
certain																																											
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<i>Contexts of use</i>																																											
in speech																																											
with temporal modification																																											
vivid style																																											
consequence of preceding discourse																																											
informal style																																											

TABLE 4. Grammatical treatment of future temporal reference variants by century.

(ii) One or more of the variant forms may be IGNORED, as exemplified in 9, where Girard (1982 [1747]) simply observes that future time is expressed by the synthetic variant.

(iii) Alternation among variant forms may be EXPLAINED AWAY by assigning to each a dedicated reading or context. This is exemplified in 10, where a predication with SF is characterized as ‘less certain’ than one with PF.

(8) ‘Dans la langue familière, la périphrase *aller* + infinitif [PF] tend à prendre la place du futur [SF].’

(Baylon & Fabre 1973:126)

‘In casual speech, the periphrasis *aller* + infinitive [PF] tends to replace the [synthetic] future.’

(9) ‘Lorsqu’on représente l’événement comme devant positivement arriver dans la suite, cela fait le temps avenir; qu’on nomme FUTUR [SF], tel qu’on le voit dans cette frase: “je me donnerai de la peine; mais j’en viendrai à bout”.’

(Girard 1982 [1747]: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 [SF], as illustrated in this sentence: “I will work hard but I will prevail”.’

(10) ‘. . . le futur catégorique [SF] engage un processus de certitude—d’où vient ses valeurs possibles de promesse ou de prédiction—qui reste toutefois moins certain que le procès présenté par le futur périphrastique [PF] . . .’

(Leeman-Bouix 1994:162)

‘. . . the categorical future [SF] engages a process of certainty—whence its possible values of promise or prediction—which, however, remains less certain than the process presented by the periphrastic future [PF] . . .’

In the remainder of this section we focus on the third strategy: the quest for form-function symmetry, which, as we show, in fact encapsulates the essence of the evolution of normative discourse about the expression of the future in French.

Table 4 synthesizes the readings and contexts of use assigned to the future temporal reference variants over the five centuries we examined. These are listed on the vertical axis. The horizontal axis represents the time line, each column corresponding to one of the eighty-five grammars making pertinent mentions of future temporal reference (Table 2). These are identified by their publication date. Filled squares show which grammar(s) invoked each reading or context of use.⁴ Our analyses of the prescriptive treatment of the future are based on these data.

Five elements of the somewhat chaotic display of Table 4 are noteworthy. First, an unexpectedly large number of functions are assigned to each of the variants: twenty to SF, nineteen to PF, and fourteen to P. Are the variants really used in these ways? If so, associations between form and function could be expected to display a modicum of consistency, if not over time, then at least across grammars within a single time frame.

This is not the case. Figure 1 charts the persistence of functions assigned to each variant over the duration. Only ONE of the fifty-three displayed in Table 4—the association of PF with proximity in the future—was found to persist over all five periods. Most of the others are IDIOSYNCRATIC (labeled ‘1 period’ in Fig. 1)—never mentioned before or after the period in question. Examples of such ephemeral readings include ‘hope’, ‘fear’, ‘desire’, and ‘impatience’.

⁴ Henceforth, for ease of exposition, when invoking the implementation of strategy (iii) (factoring out variability by assigning a reading or context of use to each form), we refer to them collectively as FUNCTION, reserving READING and CONTEXT for their accepted uses.

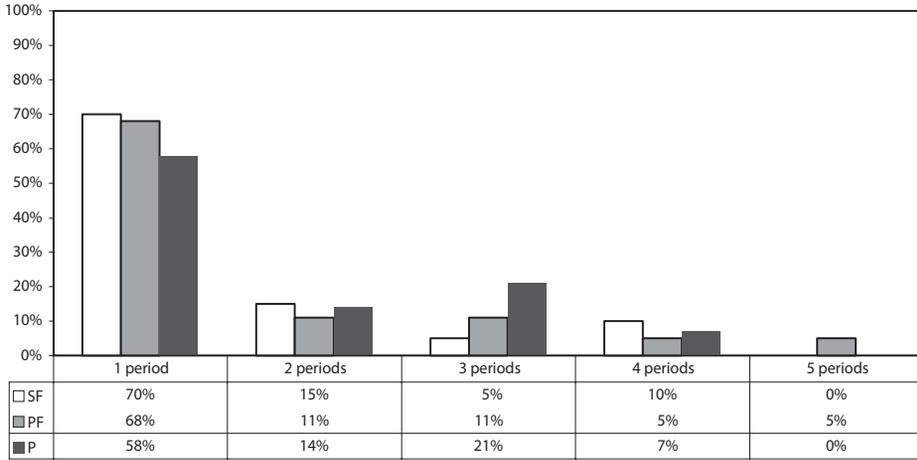


FIGURE 1. Persistence of functions assigned to variants, by period.

PERIOD	PERIPHRASTIC					
	SYNTHETIC FUTURE		FUTURE		FUTURATE PRESENT	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
1. 1500–1699	5	1	16	3	0	0
2. 1700–1799	25	5	16	3	36	5
3. 1800–1899	5	1	0	0	14	2
4. 1900–1949	5	1	11	2	7	1
5. 1950–1999	60	12	58	11	43	6
TOTAL	100	20	101 ^a	19	100	14

TABLE 5. Period in which function was first invoked.

^a Due to rounding

Moreover, closer inspection of the distribution of functions over time (Table 5) shows that most were FIRST invoked after 1950. This is also (perhaps not coincidentally) a period in which the number of functions associated with each variant increases dramatically (shaded in Table 5): 80 percent of all readings and contexts invoked over the five centuries studied were assigned during the latter half of the twentieth century.

Another unexpected finding is the remarkable lack of consensus—whether across or even within grammars—over which function to associate with which variant. Although they tend to be presented contrastively, implying that they are isomorphic with forms, systematic comparison of functions and variants (Table 6) reveals that the same function is often (more than a third of the time) assigned to more than one variant.

This is particularly true of PF and P, which share the majority of their functions (the main distinction between them involving the (prescriptive) requirement of adverbial specification).⁵ Some readings have been assigned to all three of the variants: for example, proximity, distance, certainty, and intention. Elsewhere a single variant is assigned contradictory meanings. Thus, SF is said to express both certainty (11) and doubt (12), hope (13) and fear (14), and to convey neutral future (15) as well as the specific nuances in 11–14.

⁵ Interestingly, despite this overlap, no grammar admitted that PF and P were interchangeable (see Table 3).

SYNTHETIC FUTURE	PERIPHRASTIC FUTURE	PRESENT
proximate/immediate	proximate/immediate	proximate/immediate
distal	distal	distal
certain/probable	certain/probable	certain/probable
intended/resolved/guaranteed	intended/resolved/guaranteed	intended/resolved/guaranteed
progressive	progressive	
definite	definite	
incipient	incipient	
neutral	imminent	imminent
nonprogressive	linked to present	linked to present
doubtful/uncertain	inevitable	inevitable
distinct from present	assured	assured
indefinite	in speech	in speech
not conditional	informal style	informal style
obligation		
unfinished action	reinforced future	impatience
feared		consequence of preceding discourse
desired	in writing	with temporal modification
hope/possibility/hypothesis	without temporal modification	vivid style
with negation	in subordinate clauses	
with adverbial modification	with certain verbs	

TABLE 6. Readings and contexts of use ascribed to each variant.

- (11) ‘On devrait, en bonne logique, ne l’employer [SF] que lorsqu’on est sûr de son fait.’ (Frontier 1997:533)
 ‘To be logical, we should only use it [SF] when we are certain of its realization.’
- (12) ‘[PF] présente la réalisation du procès comme plus assurée et sa réalité comme plus certaine que le futur [SF], qui laisse subsister un doute . . . ’ (Riegel et al. 1998:315)
 ‘[PF] presents the reality and the realization of the process as more certain than the future [SF], which leaves some doubt . . . ’
- (13) Le futur simple [SF] ‘a généralement besoin d’un terme de temps dissocié pour exprimer quelque chose d’un peu moins vague qu’un espoir, une possibilité, une hypothèse.’ (Buffin 1925, cited in de Boer 1954:87)
 ‘The simple future [SF] “generally requires an indication of dissociated time to express something a little less vague than hope, possibility, hypothesis.”’
- (14) ‘Le futur [SF], qui est l’inconnu, n’offre guère de point de repère: deux temps lui suffisent. En revanche, il est souvent “chargé” de notions diverses (idées de possibilité, d’obligation, etc.) et de sentiments (désir, crainte, etc.).’ (Brunot & Bruneau 1969:337)
 ‘The future [SF], which is the unknown, offers no reference point: two tenses suffice. On the other hand, it is often “loaded” with different notions (ideas of possibility, obligation, etc.) and feelings (desire, fear, etc.).’
- (15) ‘Et l’on peut aussi marquer vne chose, comme devant arriuer simplement, comme *poiésō* je feray, *amabo* j’aymeray [SF].’ (Arnauld & Lancelot 1660:104)
 ‘And we can also mark a thing, as simply going to happen, like *poiésō* I will do [SF], *amabo* I will love [SF].’

This is true even within a single time period and, more tellingly, a single grammar. Thus the synthetic variant is characterized by Dubois (1965) as progressive and nonprogressive (16), and by Silvestre de Sacy (1799) as determined and undetermined (17), as well as definite and indefinite (18).

- (16) ‘... [le] futur simple [SF] ... contient en même temps les valeurs de progressif et de non-progressif (cas non-marqué).’ (Dubois 1965:117)
 ‘The synthetic future [SF] ... contains the values of progressive and nonprogressive (unmarked case) at the same time.’
- (17) ‘“Je ferai” [SF] a un rapport de simultanéité avec une époque postérieure. C’est donc un futur. Il a cela de particulier que l’époque peut, à notre choix, être déterminée ou ne l’être pas. Je puis dire, “je ferai” [SF], sans ajouter quand; et je puis dire, “je ferai demain” [SF].’ (Laveaux 1846:684)
 ‘“I will do” [SF] has a relationship of simultaneity with a posterior time. It is therefore a future. Its particularity is that the time can be determined or undetermined, as we wish. I can say, “I will do it” [SF] without specifying when, and I can say, “I will do it tomorrow” [SF].’
- (18) ‘Futur absolu indéfini [SF] “Cela sera, puisque Dieu l’a dit.”
 Futur absolu défini éloigné [SF] “Je crois que le monde ne finira pas de long-tems”.’ (Silvestre de Sacy 1799:125–26)
 ‘Absolute indefinite future [SF]: “That will be, since God said so.”
 Absolute definite remote future [SF]: “I believe that the world will not end for a long time”.’

Even the relationship between variant and TEMPORAL DISTANCE of the future predication, which we had assumed to be relatively straightforward, turns out to be contradictory, since each of the variants has been associated with both proximate and distal futures. This is exemplified in the grammar excerpts reproduced in 19–21.

- (19) a. ‘Le futur [SF] refuse une telle dépendance au présent et exige une date objective ou une distance avec le présent.’ (Léard 1995:197)
 ‘The future [SF] 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: “Cela fera [SF] 900 francs pour Madame”, disent les commerçants; —d’une période commençant au moment où l’on parle.’ (Grevisse 1993:1257)
 ‘It refers to future time, but very proximate: “that will be [SF] 900 francs, Madam”, say the merchants, of a period beginning at speech time.’
- (20) ‘... [PF] marque un futur vu du présent, souvent un futur proche, parfois un futur plus lointain mais considéré comme inéluctable.’ (Grevisse 1993:1192)
 ‘[PF] marks a future viewed from the present, often a proximate future, sometimes a more remote future, but considered unavoidable.’
- (21) ‘... [le présent (P)] peut aussi traduire le futur immédiat ...’
 ‘Dans un projet, annoncé maintenant, le présent [P] peut traduire un futur qui peut être assez éloigné ...’ (J.-C. Chevalier et al. 1971:338)
 ‘The [futate] present can also express immediate future ...’
 ‘In a plan announced now, the [futate] present can express a rather distant future.’

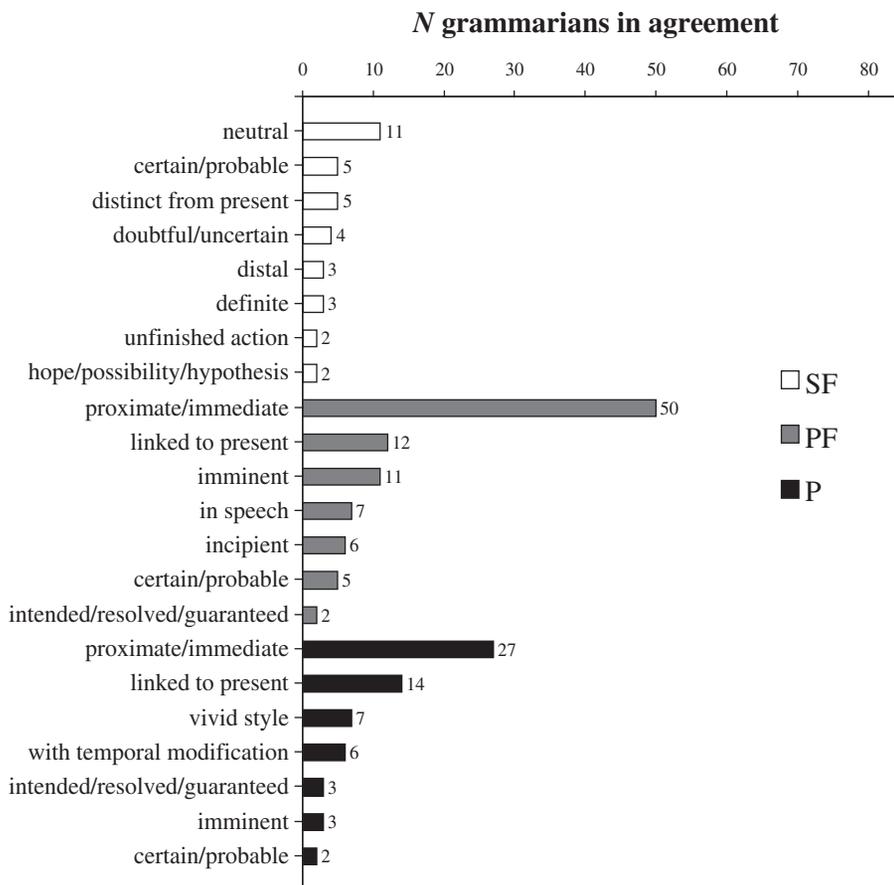


FIGURE 2. Intergrammar agreement on nonidiosyncratic functions assigned SF, PF, and P.

Figure 2 compares the rate of intergrammar agreement on the nonidiosyncratic functions assigned to SF, PF, and P respectively. The most consistent reading ascribed to SF is that of neutrality, as illustrated in 15. Note, however, that the agreement rate is only 13 percent (eleven grammars), suggesting that the vast majority of grammarians associate this variant with some other function, while failing to agree on what it is. Somewhat more consensus is found on proximity which, at 32 percent (twenty-seven grammars), is the dominant reading for P. There is far more agreement—a full 59 percent (fifty grammars)—that PF also expresses proximity (although recall from Table 4 that eighteen other functions were also invoked).

2.3. SUMMARY OF THE NORMATIVE TAKE ON FUTURE TEMPORAL REFERENCE. Our meta-analysis of the French normative tradition confirms that alternate expressions of the future have been attested since the earliest times. But beyond acknowledging the variant FORMS, only rarely do grammarians identify them as alternate expressions of the SAME referential meaning. On the contrary, by ascribing to each a specific nuance or context of occurrence, they effectively rule out the recognition of inherent variability. Nevertheless, we view the normative treatment of the future temporal reference variants as a precursor to the well-documented synchronic variability illustrated in 1–3 and 26–28. Let us review the evidence. Not only is an unexpectedly large number of functions

assigned to each variant, but the vast majority of them are also ephemeral, associated with one of the periods operationally distinguished, never to recur again. The lack of consensus on which, let alone on a unique, function to assign to which variant has led to the ascription of some functions to all three variants, and of contradictory functions to a single variant. Even where agreement has been achieved, it is only at a relatively (if not very) low level. These findings, taken together, suggest that (i) the variants can express the same meanings, and (ii) the meanings are not entirely coterminous with the variants. It is precisely this kind of form-function asymmetry that is characteristic of inherent variability.

Interestingly, all of the above trends gain momentum post-1950, the period we have associated with the flowering of modern linguistics. Indeed, not only were a large majority of the readings and contexts of use detected in our research first invoked during this time, but most of them are also idiosyncratic to it. While in previous centuries no single reading had been assigned to all three variants, multiple readings (as many as four: proximity, remoteness, certainty, intention) are now assigned to each. Herculean efforts to reestablish form-function symmetry, though ultimately unsuccessful, are thus a hallmark of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Now the temporal category of future is traditionally associated with a variety of irrealis or nonfactive modalities (e.g. Celle 2005, Fleischman 1982, Gheorghiu-Găță 1993, Gobert & Maisier 1995, Laurendeau 2000, Tasmowski & Dendale 1998, Vet 1993, among many others). And it is clear from Tables 4 and 6 that a disproportionate number of the meanings invoked over the duration relate to speaker attitudes toward the content of the predication. As we have observed elsewhere (Poplack & Malvar 2007, Poplack & Turpin 1999), however, in the absence of supporting contextual information in the discourse, most of these are not available to the analyst (nor very possibly, to speaker or interlocutor). It is this indeterminacy (linked to the analyst's interpretation of the speaker's conviction, intention, or involvement with respect to the event) that licenses so many readings of the variants and is no doubt responsible, at least in part, for the persistent lack of agreement over which forms convey which.

3. A VARIATIONIST PERSPECTIVE. The variationist perspective on the alternation among variants, which we adopt in the ensuing analyses, is that even if the different functions did play a role in variant selection, the distinctions they embody need not apply every time one of the variants is used. This is because in certain well-defined discourse contexts, distinctions in referential value or grammatical function can be NEUTRALIZED. Such neutralization is the fundamental mechanism of variation and change (D. Sankoff 1988a:153–56). The evidence detailed in preceding sections is consistent with a neutralization analysis for the future temporal reference variants, at least in some contexts. But even where it has occurred, variant choice is not random or free. On the contrary, it is the product of a complex series of considerations resulting from the interplay of a variety of now competing, now coinciding, environmental factors. Analytically, the factors represent HYPOTHESES about the motivations ascribed in the prescriptive and descriptive literature to the choice among SF, PF, and P, as well as our own observations of variant usage. These hypotheses relate mainly to the meaning and/or function of the variants, for example, whether PF expresses proximity, or SF neutrality. In what follows, we examine the fit between prescribed usage and actual usage by testing these hypotheses against the expression of future temporal reference in spoken French. We first describe the data and methods we employ.

3.1. USAGE. Usage data were extracted from spoken-language corpora representing two stages of Quebec French, a variety that is widely considered, if not altogether

nonstandard, to have diverged considerably from Standard French. Synchronic speech materials come from the *Ottawa-Hull French Corpus* (OH; Poplack 1989), a substantial (2.5 million word) compendium of highly informal conversations with a random sample of francophones native to the National Capital Region of Canada. Participants are stratified according to standard sociolinguistic factors. Diachronic data come from the *Récits du français québécois d'autrefois* (RFQ; Poplack & St-Amand 2007), a corpus of audio recordings made by folklorists in the 1940s and 1950s (Lacourcière 1946, Roy 1981) with insular rural Québécois—mostly loggers, farmers, and fishermen—born between 1846 and 1895. Under the apparent-time hypothesis (Bailey 2002, Bailey et al. 1991, Labov 1966, 1994), and accumulating results showing the stability of the morphosyntax across the lifespan (Bailey 2002, Bailey et al. 1991, Cukor-Avila 2000, Daveluy 1987, Lessard 1989, G. Sankoff 2005, G. Sankoff & Wagner 2006), these materials can be taken to represent the French spoken in Quebec during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the time at which these individuals were acquiring it. Analysis of these data furnishes a rare opportunity to measure the progress of change in spoken French over an apparent-time span of approximately 119 years.⁶

Two characteristics of these samples make comparison between them especially instructive for our purposes. First, while the contemporary speakers represent a range of socioeconomic classes and occupations, the RFQ sample is almost uniformly of peasant stock. Second, since education was not compulsory in Quebec until 1943 (Lin-teau et al. 1983), the RFQ speakers had little or no formal instruction.⁷ The urban OH residents, by contrast, have all had at least elementary education, if not a good deal more. To the extent that the school system has been successful in promulgating the standard (and routing out unsanctioned uses and forms), the speech of the OH informants should differ from that of their less educated elders in most closely approximating the standard.⁸

In addition, the corpora, both gathered using standard participant-observer techniques, albeit by different fieldworkers at a thirty-six-year remove, represent the respective VERNACULARS of their time (Poplack & St-Amand 2007). In contrast to the behavior of superposed variants used only occasionally, and possibly irregularly, the unmonitored speech of the vernacular is considered 'the most systematic data for linguistic analysis' (Labov 1984:29). Indeed, taken together, the materials contain thousands of spontaneous references to future eventualities, but no judgments or introspection about them. This makes them ideally suited to investigating the strategies speakers employ unreflectingly and their fit with prescribed injunctions. The transcribed data of 164 speakers (120 from the OH sample and 44 from the RFQ) were exhaustively searched, and every predication making unambiguous reference to future time was extracted.

3.2. ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT OF VARIABILITY. In contrast to other treatments of the future (e.g. Aaron 2006, Flydal 1943), this study takes as its point of departure not the morphological EXPONENTS of futurity, but rather the future temporal reference sector *per se*. The results we report thus do not apply to NONTEMPORAL uses of the variants,

⁶ Calculated from informants' dates of birth, which range from 1846 to 1965.

⁷ In any event, the folklorists who originally collected the data specifically targeted the untutored (Lacourcière 1959:32, Poplack & St-Amand 2007).

⁸ Informants from the highly bilingual OH region also differ in terms of proficiency in and intensity of contact with English. Because the insular Québécois knew little if any English, their speech represents a precontact variety of Quebec French (Poplack & St-Amand 2007), constituting a control on the contemporary materials.

for example, to express spatial movement, as in 22, or habituality, as in 23, nor to frozen or fixed uses, as in 24, or quotations, as in 25 (see Poplack & Turpin 1999 for details).

- (22) Tu viens-tu? On **va aller** voir ta grand-mère. (OH.023.3182)
 ‘Come on, we’re **going to** go see your grandmother.’
- (23) Il **va les chercher** toutes les dimanches. (OH.023.1009)
 ‘He **goes** to pick them up every Sunday.’
- (24) J’avais toutes sortes de- de verres, de coupes, qu’est-ce que tu **voudras** là. (OH.080.1632)
 ‘I had all kinds of glasses, goblets, you name it (lit. whatever you **will** want).’
- (25) Le Bon Dieu a dit, ‘tu ne **tueras** point’. (OH.107.1637)
 ‘The Good Lord said, “Thou **shalt** not kill”.’

Retained for the present study are 7,650 tokens (3,357 OH + 4,293 RFQ) making unambiguous reference to future time, in contexts where speakers must CHOOSE among the major variants illustrated in 1–3 above.

3.3. HYPOTHESES ABOUT VARIANT CHOICE. Data were coded according to a number of hypotheses about variant choice. As noted above, however, due to the subjective nature of many of the readings associated with the future temporal reference variants, operationalizing them as factors and empirically testing them was often difficult, if not impossible. To avoid circularity, our coding of such factors was based not on the meaning (said to be) embodied in a given variant, but on independent contextual indicators of such meaning where available.

The hypotheses that we were able to operationalize in this way captured lexico-semantic and morphosyntactic properties of the contexts admitting the variants. Some relate to the verb, others to the subject. At the syntactic level we investigated the effects of clause type, adverbial specification, tense sequencing, and polarity; and at the discourse level, temporal distance between speech time and future eventuality, imminence, contingency, and expressive content of the proposition (where these could be ascertained; see Poplack & Turpin 1999 for details). The actual contributions of these factors to variant choice are determined by the multiple-regression procedure incorporated in VARIABLE-RULE ANALYSIS (Rand & D. Sankoff 1990, D. Sankoff et al. 2005). We make use of this information to address the question of which prescriptive injunctions are operative in speech. The results of these analyses are reported in the next section.

4. EXPRESSING THE FUTURE IN SPEECH. The examples in 1–3 provided a first indication that usage facts would be at odds with prescription, namely, that the different variants all cooccur in the same contexts, here proximate future. This raises the questions of whether this is a case of NEUTRALIZATION in discourse, and if so, whether it results from LOSS of the association between variant and temporal distance. Turning first to the distribution of variants across time, as a barometer of potential change, we discovered that nineteenth-century French already featured the same three variants, in the same contexts, as exemplified in 26–28, again with proximate future reference.

- (26) ‘Le curé’, il dit, ‘**demain matin**’, il dit, ‘il **va manger** (PF) une volée’, il dit, ‘il **va manger** (PF) une rince’. (RFQ.023.4292)
 ‘“The priest”, he says, “**tomorrow morning**”, he says, “he is **going to** get smacked”, he says, “he is **going to** get a beating”.’

(27) Il dit, ‘je vous **dirai** (SF) ça **demain matin**, pensez à mes affaires cette nuit.’
(RFQ.037.580)

‘He says, “I **will tell** you that **tomorrow morning**, think about it tonight.”’

(28) Arrive chez eux, il dit à sa femme, il dit, ‘écoute’, il dit, ‘**demain matin**, je **tue** (P) la vache’.
(RFQ.038.2111)

‘Gets home, he says to his wife, he says, “listen”, he says, “**tomorrow morning**, I **kill** the cow”.’

Moreover, despite the important increase in PF, and the corresponding decrease in SF over the duration, Table 7 shows that the variants are distributed in the same way (PF > SF > P) at both stages.

VARIANT	OH		RFQ	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
periphrastic future	73	2,627	56	2,630
synthetic future	20	725	36	1,663
futurate present	7	242	9	398
TOTAL	100	3,559	101 ^a	4,691

TABLE 7. Distribution of FTR variants in spoken French over time: nineteenth (RFQ) and twentieth (OH) centuries.

^a Due to rounding

Thus, not only has PF been the majority variant since at least the nineteenth century, but it is also clearly gaining ground.⁹ In the context of such a vigorous change in progress, what motivates a speaker to retain SF?

4.1. TESTING HYPOTHESES. Table 8 displays two independent variable-rule analyses of the probability that the synthetic variant will be selected, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century French, when all contributing factors are considered simultaneously. Factor weights vary between 0 and 1; the higher the number, the greater the likelihood of SF in each of the contexts listed on the left. Contexts are organized into ‘factor groups’ displayed in descending order of their importance in accounting for the variability.

We adduce three lines of evidence deriving from variable-rule analysis in interpreting its results: (statistical) SIGNIFICANCE of the effect (at the 0.05 level), MAGNITUDE of effect (as determined by the RANGE between the highest and lowest factor weight in a factor group), and DIRECTION of effect, as expressed by the hierarchy of factor weights within a factor group.¹⁰ The pattern that emerges is construed as the detailed structure of the relationship between variant and context, or the ‘grammar’ underlying the variable surface manifestations. Comparison of results for the two stages of French affords a graphic view of what has changed in this grammar, if anything.

Of all the factors detailed above, only four turned out to contribute statistically significant effects to the choice of SF.¹¹ It is on these that we focus here.

⁹ Because the minority variant P remains unchanged, in terms of both rate and conditioning (Dion & Poplack 2006, Poplack & Turpin 1999), in the remainder of this article we focus on the major players, SF and PF.

¹⁰ For the purpose of interpreting the results of Tables 8 and 9, the (necessarily limited) information given in this section should suffice. For further detail on the assumptions, premises, method, and interpretation of variable-rule analysis, see Guy 1988, 1993, Poplack & Tagliamonte 2001, D. Sankoff 1988b, Tagliamonte 2006, Young & Bayley 1996.

¹¹ Contributions to the probability that PF will be selected are the mirror image of those displayed for SF in Table 8: to obtain the latter, subtract the number shown from 1.0.

	OH			RFQ		
<i>corrected mean</i>		.155			.354	
<i>total N</i>		3,357			4,293	
	PROB	%	N	PROB	%	N
POLARITY						
negative	.99	97	456/471	.99	99	451/457
affirmative	.31	9	269/2,886	.37	32	1,211/3,834
<i>Range</i>		68			62	
SPEECH STYLE						
more formal	.81	42	22/53	.64	51	109/212
less formal	.49	22	695/3,203	.49	38	1,554/4,081
<i>Range</i>		32			15	
ADVERBIAL SPECIFICATION						
presence	.59	13	47/358	.65	47	238/502
absence	.49	21	592/2,877	.48	37	1,381/3,739
<i>Range</i>		10			17	
TEMPORAL DISTANCE						
distal	.48	16	79/495	.60	41	193/476
proximal	.51	18	119/679	.50	30	342/1,153
<i>Range</i>		3			10	

TABLE 8. Variable-rule analysis of the contribution of linguistic factors to the selection of SF in spoken French over time: nineteenth (RFQ) and twentieth (OH) centuries.

5. RESULTS.

5.1. ADVERBIAL SPECIFICATION. We first note a slight tendency for SF to cooccur with a temporal adverbial, illustrated in 29 with contemporary (OH) data.

(29) L'enfant **connaitra** (SF) pas la différence **plus tard**. (OH.120.1251)
 'The child **won't** know the difference **later on**.'

Though only one grammar in the RHGF (Léard 1995) invoked this effect, it is nonetheless familiar from a number of empirical studies of spoken French (Blanche-Benveniste et al. 1990, Emirkanian & D. Sankoff 1985, Flydal 1943, Helland 1995, Jeanjean 1988, G. Sankoff & Wagner 2006, Sundell 1991). Most attempts at explaining this (minor) trend, where noted at all, rely on the purported extent to which SF is capable, in and of itself, of locating the predication in the future. Thus Flydal (1943) observes that to determine its relationship to other events, SF must be temporally disambiguated. Jeanjean (1988) and Blanche-Benveniste and colleagues (1990) likewise associate the unbounded nature of future predications with SF with its 'numerous' cooccurrences with temporal adverbs. According to Sundell (1991), the trend is due to the frequency differential between different types of adverbs: since SF signals a break with the present, it tends to show up with adverbs of 'nonsimultaneity', which in turn are more frequent than the adverbs of simultaneity which, he claims, cooccur with PF. This line of reasoning seems less than compelling in view of the heavy constraints on selection of SF in other well-determined contexts to be detailed below. In any event, in the spoken materials examined here, the presence of an adverbial phrase contributes only a small probability (.59) to the choice of SF, an effect that, already modest in the nineteenth century (with a range of 17), has further weakened by the twentieth.

5.2. SPEECH STYLE. Speech style turns out to be another determinant of variant choice, as illustrated in 30, where SF cooccurs with the markedly formal pronoun of address *vous*.

(30) Ça m'a faite bien plaisir, en tous les cas. **Vous reviendrez** (SF). (OH.119.3142)
 'It was my pleasure, in any case. You'll have to (lit. you will) come back.'

We saw that grammarians have occasionally associated PF with colloquial speech, albeit at agreement levels well below the ones associated with the major functions (Fig. 2). But with a probability of .49, PF appears from Table 8 about as likely to occur in informal speech as not; rather, it is SF that is increasingly associated with formal registers, an effect that has more than doubled since the nineteenth century. As the (at least implicitly) prescribed variant, it stands to reason that SF would be preferred in careful speech styles, a fortiori as it is receding. Such relegation of waning variants to ritualized uses or contexts is already familiar to us from the behavior of negative particle *ne* (Poplack & St-Amand 2007, G. Sankoff & Vincent 1977, 1980), interrogative *est-ce que* (Elsig & Poplack 2006), and the subjunctive (Poplack 1992), among others. This stylistic function, already present in the nineteenth-century materials, albeit to a lesser extent, is not attested in any of the RHGF grammars, which tend rather to treat SF as the unmarked, default marker of futurity.

5.3. TEMPORAL DISTANCE. The presumed association between temporal distance and variant choice is by now familiar from our review of the grammatical tradition: the proximity reading for PF enjoys the highest rate of agreement (59%) among grammarians. This is also the ONLY reading that persists over all five periods. SF, by contrast, has occasionally been associated with neutral future, albeit at a far lower agreement rate (13%). Table 8 shows that this was not the way these variants were used—even in the nineteenth century, when temporal distance was a contributing factor, however tenuous. Proximity in the future does not distinguish between variants; with probabilities around .5, both are as likely to occur in this context as not. Rather, to the extent that SF had any temporal associations at all at the earlier stage, it was with DISTAL future. Any effect of temporal distance, barely detectible in the nineteenth-century materials, has all but neutralized (with a range of only 3) in contemporary French.

5.4. POLARITY. By far the greatest determinant of variant choice is POLARITY of the future eventuality. Table 8 shows that the synthetic future is overwhelmingly preferred in negative contexts. Example 31 provides a nice illustration of the robust pattern of alternation between PF in affirmative predications and SF in negative ones.

- (31) 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** (SF) **pas** l'anglais.
(OH.004.3611)

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

This overriding contribution of negation—a probability of .99!—was already firmly in place in the nineteenth century, as exemplified in 32.

- (32) . . . il **va virer** (PF) la clef, il **va la rebarrer** (PF) puis **va la redébarrer** (PF). Il s'**apercevro** (SF) **pas** qu'elle était débarrée. (RFQ.021.1256)

'He is **going to** turn the key, he is **going to** lock it again, then **going to** unlock it. He **won't** notice that it was unlocked.'

This effect (although not always of the same magnitude) recurs quite consistently in quantitative reports of usage (Lesage 1991, Sundell 1991), especially oral (e.g. G. Chevalier 1994, Deshaies & Laforge 1981, Emirkanian & D. Sankoff 1985, Lorenz 1989, Zimmer 1994). With a few notable exceptions (Franckel 1984, Vet 1993), however, it remains largely unacknowledged elsewhere. It was noted by only one of the grammars in the RHGF (Léard 1995, citing some of the aforementioned corpus-based

studies), as can be seen in 33. But this was at least a century after the association had become virtually categorical in speech.

- (33) 'Posons au départ qu'un futur affirmatif sans contexte particulier sera marqué dans plus de neuf cas sur dix par le futur complexe [PF] . . . Avec la négation, les proportions sont inversées, et la forme simple [SF] est la norme.'

(Léard 1995:198)

'We note from the start that an affirmative future with no particular context will be marked nine times out of ten by the complex future [PF] . . . With negation the proportions are inverted, and the simple form [SF] is the norm.'

Indeed, Table 8 confirms that negative polarity was already the strongest predictor of variant choice in the nineteenth-century materials; no change in either direction or magnitude of effect is detectible. Negative contexts are thus the major determinant of selection of SF in spoken Quebec French, as well as other varieties of the language.¹²

5.5. SF AND NEGATIVE PREDICATIONS. The spectacular, though largely unacknowledged, contribution of negation to the retention of SF merits further exploration. As with the adverbial effect, a convincing account remains elusive. Some studies simply report it (Blanche-Benveniste et al. 1990, Sundell 1991). Others suggest semantic motivations. For example, Deshaies and Laforge (1981) and Jeanjean (1988) conjecture that the hypothetical reading of SF (as opposed to the 'real' reading associated with PF) is consistent with the hypotheticality of negative contexts. Flydal (1943) suggests that when an act is predicated not to occur, there is no need to situate it in time, licensing SF in this context, and ruling out (the overly specified) PF. The most elaborate treatment is that of Laurendeau (2000), who draws on Deshaies and Laforge's (1981) report of the same effect in spoken Quebec City French. He acknowledges that negative polarity 'mobilizes' SF, but rejects the idea that SF has become specialized for negative contexts, and PF for affirmative contexts (Laurendeau 2000:288). Instead, according to him, the association follows from the semantic values of the variants: SF 'projects any kind of fluctuation or suspension of the assertion, including its negation', while PF conveys 'an assertive reading to the future predication' (Laurendeau 2000:289, translation ours). For Laurendeau, the association between SF and negation resides in the fact that both are nonassertions. These explanations may well be consistent with the values their proponents assign to SF, but they do not explain why other contexts that, semantically and/or pragmatically, should be equally propitious to SF usage show little or none, nor why PF is virtually absent (at 1% in the nineteenth century and 3% in the twentieth) from negative contexts.¹³

Why is SF retained in negative predications when it is clearly receding elsewhere? The few explanations invoking the semantic properties of variant and context described above pale in the face of the persistent indeterminacy revealed in §2.2 over what the functions of SF actually are. The behavior of SF is certainly consistent with the syntactic conservatism attributed to negative clauses (e.g. Givón 1978), but in this context, the fact that polarity neither has nor had a conservative effect on SF in another Romance

¹² A recent study (King & Nadasdi 2003) found that negation played no role in the selection of SF in Acadian French, a result they attribute to the conservative nature of that variety.

¹³ The paucity of PF here prevents us from characterizing its conditioning, and thereby detecting any patterning of its use. The few tokens that did occur are the residue of the continuing entrenchment of SF in this context, which has not yet gone to completion.

language, Brazilian Portuguese, where SF has in fact disappeared from negative as well as affirmative contexts in spontaneous speech (Poplack & Malvar 2007), is puzzling. Nor is polarity operative in Spanish (Aaron 2006, Blas Arroyo 2008), despite much higher rates of SF retention overall than those reported here. This led us to consider the possibility of a structural explanation.

Comparison of the verbal constructions in 31 and 32 reveals a contrast between variants in the surface position of the negative marker with respect to the verb. Negative adverbs, including *pas*, occur between the semi-auxiliary *aller* and the nonfinite lexical verb constituting PF, but follow the synthetic verb form. Could the asymmetrical distribution of SF be due to avoidance of fragmenting the verbal compound, for cognitive, prosodic, or syntactic reasons? If so, PF should be avoided with other types of intervening elements as well. Jarmasz (2007) examined variant choice in these same materials with the four most frequent intervening elements: reflexives (34), direct object clitics (35), indirect object clitics (36), and adverbs (37).

- (34) Mon frère lui, il **va se marier** (PF). (OH.001.367)
 ‘My brother, he’s **going to** get married.’
- (35) Si ton chum t’aime assez, il **va te marier** (PF). (OH.011.2141)
 ‘If your boyfriend loves you enough, he’s **going to** marry you.’
- (36) Là il **va lui donner** (PF) peut-être une pension. (OH.080.1029)
 ‘He’s maybe **going to** give him a pension now.’
- (37) Ils **vont encore parler** (PF) français. (OH.004.3611)
 ‘They’re still **going to** speak French.’

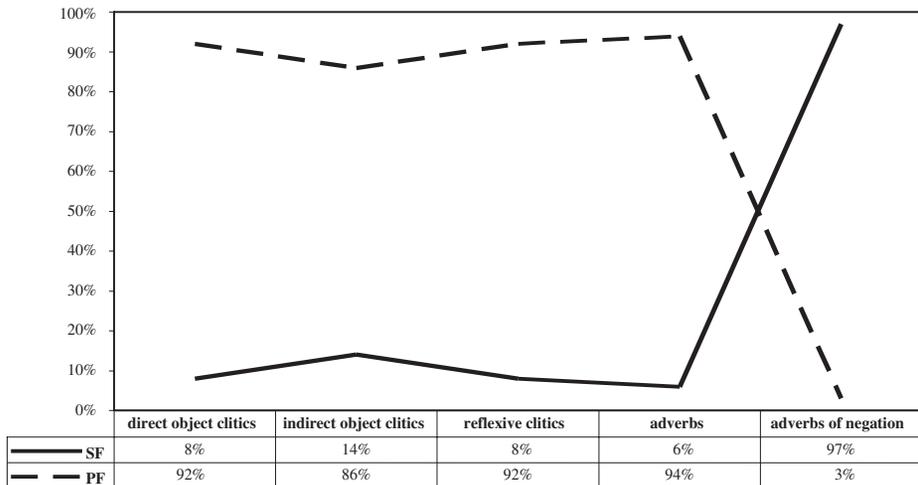


FIGURE 3. Cooccurrence of PF and SF with the four most frequent types of material intervening between constituents of a verbal compound (adapted from Jarmasz 2007).

Figure 3 displays cooccurrence rates of SF and PF in each of these contexts. It is clear that PF is overwhelmingly preferred in each, mirroring the overall distribution of variants. This confirms that the near-categorical constraint on selection of SF is specific to negative predications. We conclude that the effect is not due to factors of a structural nature, though we are still no closer to a satisfactory account. While we cannot rule out a semantic explanation, none offered thus far is consistent with the contradictory usage facts detailed above.

Nonetheless, the strict division of labor between SF and PF, coupled with the skewed distributions we have outlined, inevitably raises the question of whether the effects of adverbial specification, temporal distance, and speech style emerging from Table 8 are not in some way epiphenomenal of the overriding effect of negative polarity. We thus reanalyzed the data removing all the negative tokens. The results are as in Table 9.

	OH			RFQ		
<i>corrected mean</i>	.075			.239		
<i>total N</i>	2,886			3,836		
	PROB	%	N	PROB	%	N
SPEECH STYLE						
more formal	.80	28	12/43	.64	45	82/184
less formal	.50	9	253/2,746	.49	31	1,130/3,652
<i>Range</i>	30			15		
ADVERBIAL SPECIFICATION						
presence	.60	11	39/310	.66	44	205/467
absence	.49	9	215/2,487	.48	30	997/3,351
<i>Range</i>	11			18		
TEMPORAL DISTANCE						
distal	.47	7	33/449	.60	36	162/445
proximal	.53	9	53/609	.46	22	222/1,032
<i>Range</i>	6			14		

TABLE 9. Variable-rule analysis of the contribution of linguistic factors to the selection of SF: nineteenth (RFQ) and twentieth (OH) centuries (affirmative tokens only).

Comparison of Tables 8 and 9 confirms that all of the tendencies reported for the combined data also hold for the affirmative tokens. Remarkably enough, there is almost no change in either direction or magnitude of effect.¹⁴

Even more interesting for our purposes, Table 9 displays graphically the pathway by which SF is receding from affirmative contexts not only in terms of rate over time (from 32% to 9%), but also in terms of productivity: linguistic contexts that favored SF in the nineteenth century, however slightly, have further diminished in importance (as assessed by comparing the ranges) by the twentieth, while SF is increasingly relegated to formal speech styles. Overall then (contra Laurendeau), we conclude that SF has in fact become entrenched in negative contexts, largely serving as a stylistic marker elsewhere, and that this effect is not an epiphenomenon. PF, by contrast, has gained ground in every other context, as befits its current role of default marker of futurity.

6. CONFRONTING PRESCRIPTION WITH PRAXIS. Our meta-analysis of the prescriptive treatment of future temporal reference revealed a remarkable amount of imprecision in grammatical injunctions about variant choice. This was manifested first by the proliferation of functions associated with each variant, most of which were first assigned after 1950. In addition, little agreement was observed, at this period or any other, over which readings or contexts to associate with which variant (§2.2). We interpret this as evidence that the variants could (and did) serve a number of functions, that is, that the variability inherent in future temporal reference was operative from the earliest grammars (if not before). And while grammarians were able to achieve consensus on the way to handle this variability (in the case of the future, by factoring it out), they could not agree on the substance (which variant to associate with which function). In this context,

¹⁴ For the sake of argument, we also considered the negative tokens separately (not shown here). Because SF is nearly categorical in this context (99% in RFQ and 97% in OH), all other conditioning disappears—that is, no linguistic environment is conducive to the choice of PF.

the pervasive indeterminacy characterizing the normative tradition can be viewed as the result of unsuccessful efforts by the prescriptive enterprise to impose form-function symmetry on the heterogeneity of speech. As we describe in the next section, the appeal to external models (and concomitant neglect of usage facts) was an important contributing factor.

6.1. THE FRENCH GRAMMATICAL TRADITION. The French grammatical enterprise has a very old and deeply entrenched tradition of standardization, embodied in literally thousands of grammars written over the past five centuries.¹⁵ From very early on, the models were the classical languages (Arrivé & J.-C. Chevalier 1970, J.-C. Chevalier 1994, François 1959, Telle 1874, Wagner 1968). Sixteenth-century grammarians labored to fit French locutions into Latin and, occasionally, Greek categories, even where they were not (or no longer) relevant (e.g. nominal declension), while at the same time failing to acknowledge internal French innovations (e.g. the article). This in turn led to the endorsement and promotion of forms and structures that may in fact never have been used by speakers (Cohen 1964:64, Wagner 1968). By the seventeenth century, the focus had shifted from classical languages to the language of the aristocracy. Grammarians undertook to identify the forms worthy of the elite, while at the same time roundly condemning the language of 'le peuple' ('the masses').

Le bon usage est la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la cour, conformément à la façon d'écrire de la plus saine partie des auteurs du temps . . . Quant au peuple, il ne compte pour rien . . . Le peuple, en fait d'usage, n'est maître que du mauvais. (Vaugelas 1647:267–68)

'Good usage is the way the soundest of the courtiers speak, in accordance with the way the soundest authors of the time write. . . . As for the masses, they don't count for anything . . . The masses, in matters of usage, are only masters of what is bad.'

Thus was the 'bon usage' converted into a 'grammaire de classe' (J.-C. Chevalier 1994), the province of the fortunate few, heralding the exclusionary function of contemporary standards.

Not content simply to prescribe, the French sought to confer official status on normative dictates, which they accomplished with the creation, in 1635, of the Académie Française. Its mandate: 'travailler . . . à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure' ('work . . . to imbue our language with fixed rules and render it pure'). At about the same time, in the preface to his *Remarques sur la langue française, utiles à ceux qui veulent bien parler et bien écrire* 'Remarks on the French language, useful for those who want to speak well and write well' (1647), Vaugelas ventured that the French language had achieved perfection. It follows that any change from that state could only be viewed as deterioration. All of these characteristics make the French grammatical tradition a particularly propitious vehicle for tracing the relationship between prescriptive dictates and the evolution of vernacular variants. We have shown that the gulf between prescription and usage, established early on, has been widening steadily, with the result that today, in many areas of the grammar, there is little, if any, relationship between them.

The trajectory of PF provides a nice illustration of this point. In 1660, the Port Royal grammarians identified this variant with the Greek periphrastic *paulo post futurum* (38), thereby succeeding in distinguishing it from SF, and ruling out alternation between them.

¹⁵ Based on the data provided by Stengel (1976) and Chervel (1982), we estimate that over five thousand works were published before 1914 alone.

- (38) ‘Car on peut auoir enuie de marquer vne chose qui doit arriuer bientost. Ainsi nous voyons que les Grecs ont leur *paulopost futur met’ oliyon méllōn* qui marque que la chose se va faire, ou qu’on la dois presque tenir comme faite.’

(Arnauld & Lancelot 1660:104)

‘Because one could feel like marking a thing that is supposed to happen soon. Thus we see that the Greeks have their *paulopost futur met’ oliyon méllōn* which marks that the thing is going to be done, or that we should almost consider it done.’

A century later, in his *Principes de la grammaire françoise, pratique et raisonnée* (1753), Abbé Antonini dubbed this form *futur prochain* ‘proximate future’, in keeping with the meaning of *paulo post futurum*. The rest is history. Not only has the proximity reading for PF enjoyed the greatest consensus of any other, but it is the only one to have persisted over all five periods examined. To this day it continues to be referred to (and taught) as *futur proche*. In speech, however, proximity in the future has not favored PF since (at least) the mid-nineteenth century. The meaning of SF was far more vexed in the eyes of grammarians: the frontrunner—neutrality—achieved an agreement level of only 13 percent. But far from conveying neutral future, by the nineteenth century SF was already relatively rare and highly constrained to occur under quite SPECIFIC conditions: stylistically formal, temporally disambiguated, and above all, negative contexts. If anything, it was PF that conveyed neutral future, tending to occur in unmarked affirmative, informal, and bare (i.e. not adverbially specified) contexts. This is as expected of the majority (and increasing) variant. SF, by contrast, though prescriptively treated as the default variant (if only implicitly), is obsolescing, becoming, in the process, more entrenched in formal speech styles. The only area in which SF is currently productive—negative contexts—is unacknowledged by all but one grammarian, and this, more than a century after achieving near-categorical status. Thus not only has the prescriptive enterprise had little if any effect on the evolution of vernacular speech norms, but it has also remained impervious to the robust regular rules governing variability in speech as well.

7. DISCUSSION. We are now in a position to return to some of the issues raised at the outset of this article.

7.1. PRECURSOR TO VARIABILITY? The first issue concerns the feasibility of using normative prescriptions to elucidate synchronic variability. We targeted future temporal reference, a sector of French grammar in which three variant forms have long competed for the same referential meaning. Our goal was to ascertain whether such variability represents the synchronic dissolution of an earlier stage of the language in which each variant possessed a dedicated reading or context of use. Analysis of the RHGF showed that although the variant forms may not have garnered equal amounts of prescriptive attention, all had been attested since the earliest times. This is a first indication that the current variability may have had a diachronic precursor. And because no stigma had ever been associated with any of them (beyond the occasional observation that PF was colloquial), there was no normative mission to rout any of them out. Instead, efforts to redress the form-function imbalance were channeled into factoring out the variability. Had any of these variants actually enjoyed a privative relationship with a function, this would of course invalidate the assumption that they were, technically speaking, variants of the same linguistic variable. We cannot rule this possibility out, but as we have been at pains to demonstrate, we have uncovered no compelling evidence in support of it.

Indeed, the willy-nilly meaning assignments and retractions that characterize the evolution of prescriptive discourse on future temporal reference suggest the contrary. In this context, our finding that spoken usage does not correspond to ANY of the conditions on variant choice we were able to operationalize is more understandable. We have good reason to believe the variability characterizing speech, synchronic as well as diachronic, was already present at the inception of the normative tradition. Unfortunately, we cannot reconstruct how it was conditioned, since grammarians were, and to all appearances remain, more interested in prescribing their desiderata than describing actual usage.

7.2. PRESCRIPTIVE DICTATES REGULATE SPEECH. Another issue concerns the ways in which prescriptive discourse molds speech. We had hypothesized that normatively proscribed forms would decrease over time, while those endorsed as standard would gain ground. We noted above that none of the future temporal reference variants has been subject to overt stigma. But insofar as the default variant can be equated with the proscribed form, we observe exactly the opposite trend here: SF is being ousted by vigorous ongoing change in favor of PF. We have shown that the wide variety of contexts and conditions proscribed to govern variant choice are not operative in speech. By contrast, a whole set of tacit variable constraints has arisen, which demonstrably do play a major role in expressing future temporal reference. These in turn are opaque to the grammatical tradition.

These results suggest that grammatical injunctions have had no palpable effect on the expression of future temporal reference in spontaneous speech. And this state of affairs is by no means limited to the future. Ongoing research carried out within this framework on other sectors of French grammar reveals exactly the same situation (e.g. Poplack 1992, St-Amand 2002 on the subjunctive, Elsig & Poplack 2006 on question formation, G. Sankoff & Thibault 1980, Willis 2000 on auxiliary *avoir/être* alternation, Klapka 2002 on gender assignment, Poplack & St-Amand 2007, G. Sankoff & Vincent 1977 on the expression of negation, LeBlanc 1999, Poplack 2001 on tense selection in hypothetical *si* clauses, among others). In each of these cases, grammarians stipulate normative conditions for use; in the spoken language an entirely different pattern is found. Perhaps the most blatant example of this gulf between prescription and praxis involves the particle *ne*: categorically proscribed in all but a handful of negative contexts, in speech it is virtually always absent. Likewise, even centuries of normative stigma have failed to quell the rise of the nonstandard conditional in protases of hypothetical *si* clauses.

If prescriptive dictates have not had much influence on speech, they HAVE exerted a significant effect on the thinking of other grammarians (and linguists), however. One line of evidence derives from the vertiginous increase in the number of (idiosyncratic) functions assigned to the variants since 1950. It is particularly curious that SF, which is (i) steadily decreasing in rate and productivity and (ii) almost categorically constrained to occur in a single well-defined (but unacknowledged) context, is assigned almost as many readings as PF in this period.¹⁶ Another piece of evidence is that where usage effects (adverbial support, polarity) ARE recognized in linguistic analyses, the tendency is to explain them in exactly the same way as prescriptive grammarians: by imputing subtle meaning distinctions to variant and/or context. The ascription of

¹⁶ In a parallel, though far more dramatic, development, prescriptive grammarians responded to the complete disappearance of SF from spoken Brazilian Portuguese by likewise assigning it ever more readings and nuances (Poplack & Malvar 2007).

hypotheticality to both SF and negative future predications (Deshaies & Laforge 1981, Jeanjean 1988, Laurendeau 2000) is but one example.

7.3. THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN PROMULGATING THE STANDARD. A third issue concerns the role of the school in effectively transmitting ‘standard’ (i.e. prescriptively sanctioned) forms. We addressed this indirectly by comparing two stages of French spoken by individuals who differ along the axis of formal instruction. Most of the contemporary speakers enjoy a high level of education; most of their older rural counterparts had little or none. To the extent that the educational enterprise is successful in this endeavor, the speech of the more educated should most closely approximate the standard. However, detailed comparison of the constraints conditioning variant choice in the two samples showed, remarkably enough, that these are identical. The benefit of schooling has not encouraged contemporary urban OH speakers to express future temporal reference any differently from the rural RFQ speakers. The same implicit conditions govern variant choice of all of them, although the contribution of the linguistic factors has weakened over time, while the stylistic imperative has strengthened. This in turn falls out from the vigorous change in progress: as PF expands into more contexts, there are fewer constraints on its occurrence. The rise of PF itself is entirely independent of education; it is proceeding apace in the speech of local high school students interviewed twenty-six years after the OH speakers (Poplack 2007). The same movement toward PF has been quantitatively established in Spanish (Aaron 2006, Blas Arroyo 2008) and has already gone to completion in Brazilian Portuguese (Poplack & Malvar 2007).

8. MYTHS AND TRUTHS ABOUT PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR. In hindsight, most of our assumptions going into this project were not borne out. 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’ like those reproduced in 16–18 or 19–21, nothing is prescribed. It is unclear how others are to be implemented. Can an ordinary speaker really determine which conditions obtain (e.g. whether a future predication is ‘absolute definite remote’ (ex. 18) or instantiates ‘possible values of promise or prediction which are less certain than the process expressed by PF’ (ex. 10)), and then apply this information to variant selection? And where the actual nuances to be conveyed are prescriptively ascribed to competing variants, how is s/he to know which one takes precedence?

The standard cannot be characterized as a set of accepted conventions promulgated by all grammarians. On the contrary, perhaps the most striking characteristic of the RHGF materials we analyzed is the pervasive lack of consensus, whether over time or within a given period, across grammars or within a single grammar. And this is among the works that make pertinent mentions; many (here, 29%) simply do not refer to the variable at all. This means that overt attempts to use the variants in accordance with prescribed norms are likely to be met with conflicting information. Obeying one grammarian’s rules (should this be possible) may be breaking another’s.

It follows that the normative tradition wields little authority over the spoken language. By confronting the prescriptive rules we could operationalize with the implicit variable rules governing speech, we learned that none of them coincided. This counters any idea that prescriptive dictates can be applied indiscriminately to the spoken as well as the written language. While we have no information on the extent to which they are respected in writing, it is clear that they are not followed in speech. Indeed, where prescription is diametrically opposed to community patterns (as in the case of the

negative particle *ne*, prescribed categorically but virtually absent from speech), the cost of aligning with the standard would be too great for the speaker, who must conform, at least minimally, to the norms of her speech community. The widespread (lay) belief that someone somewhere speaks standard French can perhaps be more accurately characterized as follows: some speakers display few(er) NONSTANDARD features in their French.

The take-home message for linguists 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. Linguistic analyses based on (what is perceived to be) the standard should be cognizant of these facts.

We conclude with a couple of questions prompted by this work. First, where do the expert intuitions about French grammar that constitute the prescriptive discourse we have analyzed come from? Some of them originate in the desire to ratify (if not beautify) the French language by making it conform to classical models. Others stem from the effort to impose order on the perceived chaos of linguistic variability by associating with each of the competing forms a single meaning or context, using—implicitly or explicitly—familiar contrastive distributional analysis: if SF expresses doubt, PF 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 SF comes to be variously characterized as a future of command, invitation, plea, wish, prudent attenuation, probability bordering on certainty, or conclusion drawn without reflection (e.g. Gheorghiu-Gățã 1993:580, Imbs 1968:50, Stavinochová 1977:119, Tasmowski & Dendale 1998:329), among many others. We have demonstrated that these efforts are arbitrary and inconsistent, not just occasionally, but repeatedly.

What of the regular, if variable, rules that govern future temporal reference in speech? The tendency is to conclude that they reflect quantitative weakening or disappearance of original grammatical rules, or, when the constraints operating on variant choice had 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, as with the neutrality reading for SF. Others have nothing to do with those rules, as with the negative polarity effect. Indeed, 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 nonstandard.

Where then do the regular rules governing variability in speech originate? Certainly not in the grammatical tradition. We have shown that there is a great and growing disconnect between them. Why should this be? Our study suggests why speakers tend not to hew to prescriptive injunctions in many areas of the grammar. Not only would one have to be an expert professional to understand 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 grammars have persisted in disregarding the highly structured nature of speech remains a mystery.

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