

Rhythm in the Spoken French of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island

Varieties of Acadian French spoken in Newfoundland (NF) and Prince Edward Island (PEI) have been studied from the standpoint of their morphosyntax (e.g. King 2005; King & Nadasdi 1997), discourse markers (Butler 1990) and segmental phonology (e.g. King & Ryan 1991). What is lacking for these varieties, and for Acadian French in general, is research documenting prosodic characteristics. This paper seeks to fill this gap through an exploratory and comparative study of rhythm.

The first researcher to call attention to the rhythm of Acadian French is Lucci (1972: 19) who observes a tendency in the Moncton region for the penultimate syllable to be lengthened, giving Acadian rhythm its “choppy” quality. Cichocki (1997), in the first study of Acadian rhythm based on acoustic analysis, notices this same phenomenon in Nova Scotia French, pointing out the differences between this pattern and the general rhythmic pattern of European French (isochronous unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable).

The two Acadian varieties chosen for this study (Abram-Village, PEI, and L’Anse-à-Canards, NF) differ considerably in terms of their dialect contact history. While Abram-Village French can be seen as a case of dialect isolation of a traditional Acadian variety, L’Anse-à-Canards French can be viewed as a case of dialect contact, due to the arrival in the 19th century in this Port-au-Port Peninsula region of a considerable number of new immigrants from France, joining the resident Acadian population whose presence dated from the previous century (Butler 1995). King & Ryan (1991) note some important differences between NF French and the Chéticamp (Nova Scotia) variety in terms of the use of typically Acadian nasal vowel variants. Based on these tendencies observed in the literature, we can hypothesize that this NF variety will have a different rhythmic structure from that of the more traditional Acadian variety of PEI.

For this initial exploratory study, a corpus of two speakers (one female and one male) from Abram-Village and two speakers (one female and one male) from l’Anse-à-Canards is analyzed. *Praat* is used to segment for duration measurement the three-minute narration sequences for each speaker at the level of segment, syllable, rhythm group and intonation group. Using Cichocki’s (1997) method, syllable durations in different positions in the rhythm group are compared. In addition, the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) (Low et al. 2000) is calculated to compare the degree of stress vs. syllable timing of the two varieties.

Initial results show that both varieties pattern along the lines of what Cichocki (1997) observed in Nova Scotia Acadian, in contrast with European French, in that there is a smaller duration difference between stressed final syllable of the rhythm group and the penult than in European French. There is also less regularity in unstressed syllable duration than in European French. The PVI analysis shows that there is more variability in syllable duration in PEI than in NF, thus suggesting that the NF contact variety patterns more closely with the syllable-timed tendency of European French than does the traditional Acadian variety of PEI, in effect.

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