

Staying True to Your Roots: Language Stability Through Late Adulthood Amidst Language Shift

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This combined trend and panel study scrutinizes two variables in Lafourche Parish Louisiana French: /ɛ/ lowering before /r/, and /z/ lenition. The realization of /ɛ/ before /r/ alternates between [ɛ] and [æ], so that a noun such as *guerre* ‘war’ surfaces as [gɛr] or [gær]; the lowered variant does not carry pejorative meaning in Louisiana as it does in parts of French-speaking Canada (e.g., Walker 1984:86). Variable /z/ lenition has long been a hallmark of lower Lafourche Parish French, so that the adverb *jamais* ‘never’ is pronounced [zãme] or [hãme]. The vernacular variant is [h], as it appears more often in less careful speech (Carmichael 2007).

The current study undertakes to examine language change in adulthood and retirement. Born between 1860 and 1953, speakers were between 27 and 93 years old at interview, and all came from lower Lafourche Parish. Seven speakers were recorded in the 1940s (Guilbeau 1950); 12 were interviewed in 1977 (Larouche 1979); and another 20 completed interviews in 2010-2011 (Blainey 2013). Two of the male speakers were recorded in their late 50s and in their late 80s.

Eckert (1997:165) notes that it is unclear whether speakers show signs of age-grading at important transitions later in life (e.g., leaving the workforce), as has been shown for younger speakers entering the workforce or going to university (e.g., Cukor-Avila 2002; Wagner 2012; Rickford and Price 2013). Studies of older speakers have reported little to no change in most people’s speech patterns as they age (e.g., Labov and Auger 1993; Sankoff and Blondeau 2007). The two panel speakers provide a contrast between working and retired life to the analysis. Also, by examining older fluent adult speakers through time, the trend study tests whether language stability is still the norm in a situation of language shift.

In the past, older speakers used [ɛ] before /r/ more than younger speakers; now, only members of a particular town in lower Lafourche Parish have high rates of pre-rhotic [ɛ], regardless of age. The panel speakers both increase their use of [ɛ] as they age, appearing to conform to the variable’s previous age-based meaning. As for /z/ lenition, the proportion of [h] use increases through time in the corpus, is characteristic of informal male speech, and becomes more heavily phonologically conditioned by 2010-2011. The panel speaker interviewed by men lenites /z/ more as he ages, but the panel speaker interviewed by women only increases [h] use for *je* ‘I’ through time, showing an overall decrease in the vernacular variant. These changes are independent of the interviewers’ /z/ lenition rates.

The panel speakers’ results for /z/ lenition appear to conform to community-level changes and a nascent grammaticalization process. However, results for /ɛ/ lowering suggest that the panel speakers do not necessarily adapt to changing sociolinguistic meanings during retirement, instead adhering to the norms they experienced in the workforce, which does not provide support for age-grading in late adulthood. Overall, language shift does not appear to influence variation patterns for either /z/ lenition or /ɛ/ lowering.

Keywords: language contact and shift, Louisiana French, longitudinal study, lifespan change, phonetics and phonology

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