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Contact-induced lexical variation in Quebec English: an accountable description

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**Introduction**

**QUEBEC ENGLISH (QCE)**

- A regional variety of Canadian English (CanE) spoken by a minority of Quebecers;
- Ongoing contact with Quebec French (QfE);
- French borrowings and semantic shifts: a secondary phenomenon (e.g., Poplack et al. 2006) or a defining characteristic (e.g., Fee 2008, Boberg 2012)?

**STUDY OF LEXICAL VARIATION**

- Lexical variables are routinely examined in dialectology, but challenging to systematically analyze in corpora;
- It is difficult to identify all possible lexical variables: some propose more generic analyses (e.g., Poplack 1993);
- Corpus-based studies of QcE lexis are often imprecise (e.g., only reporting raw frequencies of one variant).

**Methodology**

**RESEARCH AIMS**

We examine known contact-induced lexical variables in Montreal (contact) and Toronto (no contact), focusing on:

- their degree of sociolinguistic integration, as reflected by use in formal contexts (newspapers);
- their geographic diffusion outside of Quebec;
- differences between distinct types of contact influence.

**VARIABLES**

- 100 variables manually defined from previous research (e.g., Boberg 2012, Fee 1991, 2008, Grant-Russsel 1999);
- Variable a set of synonymous lexical variants, at least one of which is typical of QcE and one of CanE;
- The relative frequencies of all variants are examined as per the principle of accountability (Labov 1969).

**Data**

News of the Web corpus (online newspaper articles): CanE section, 900m words.

**Analysis**

- Look up 1,000 most recent occurrences for each variable (all variants combined);
- Extract those from Montreal and Toronto;
- Manually exclude homonymy / polysemy;
- Get relative frequencies for all variants / cities.

**Results**

**IMPOSED DIRECT LEXICAL TRANSFER**

Terms referring to Quebec administration, whose only legally valid version is in French;

6 (out of 13) variables fully attested in both cities, while another 6 present only French variants.

**ELECTIVE DIRECT LEXICAL TRANSFER**

Terms of French origin for which established English equivalents exist;

17 (out of 29) variables fully attested in both cities;

Significant geographic differences in 8 cases, with French items relatively more frequent in Montreal.

**CULTURALLY-BOUND LEXICAL TRANSFER**

Terms with referents typical of Quebec, with no single established English equivalent;

10 (out of 25) variables fully attested in both cities;

Most lexical choices are geographically shared, with a general preference for French borrowings.

**Methodology**

**SEMANTIC SHIFTS**

- Existing English words used with a new meaning, usually typical of a phonologically similar French word;
- Variable a set of possible meanings (variants) associated with a single lexical form;
- 8 (out of 19) variables fully attested in both cities, with limited clear-cut cases of contact-induced shifts;
- Manual annotation of attested meanings was challenging, and the impact of shifts may be underestimated.

**Ongoing work: semantic shifts**

The observed sparsity of semantic shifts is contradicted by previous work on QCE (e.g., Fee 1991, 2008, Boberg 2012) and by psycholinguistic evidence of semantic interference in bilinguals (e.g., Romaine 1995).

Possible explanations: corpus type (e.g., semantic shifts may be more stigmatized than borrowings in writing); limits of human annotation.

**Conclusions**

48 out of 100 variables were fully attested (i.e., all variants were found in both cities):
- the presence of these contact-induced variants suggests they are sociolinguistically integrated;
- the absence of other variants may reflect the formality of the written context.

Most attested contact-related variants are used in both Montreal and Toronto:
- their relative frequency tends to be higher in Montreal;
- they appear to be typical of Quebec, but not exclusive to it.

Distinct usage patterns linked to different types of contact influence:
- the differences are generally not clear-cut;
- exception: culturally-bound lexical transfer, with a general geographically shared preference for items deriving from contact.

Issues such as semantic shifts may benefit from computational methods. Ongoing work will shed more light on this matter.

**References**