

A Linguistic Perspective on Ontarian French

Raymond Mougeon and Michael Canale

ontario institute for studies in education

Dans cet article nous passons en revue les principaux résultats des recherches récentes consacrées au français de l'Ontario. À la lumière de ces résultats il apparaît que le français de l'Ontario n'est pas un jargon hybride (conception populaire) mais un authentique dialecte du français ayant des rapports étroits avec le français du Québec et le français européen contemporain ou passé. Nous montrons pourquoi il est nécessaire de faire la lumière sur le français de l'Ontario et indiquons que les éducateurs franco-ontariens pourraient jouer un rôle important en disséminant chez leurs élèves une image plus positive du français ontarien.

It appears clearly from the results of several linguistic studies devoted to Ontarian French that the latter constitutes an authentic Canadian dialect of French. Although it differs in several ways from standard French, it is no less authentic. These results should perhaps come as no surprise to contemporary linguists. However, they stand in sharp contrast to the popular views on Ontarian French which can be found both among the Anglo-Ontarian community and among some of the members of the Franco-Ontarian community. The headline of an article on Ontarian French published in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* (1977) constitutes a capsulated example of such views: French Language is Bastardized in Ontario.

In the present article we would like to: (1) briefly review some of the recent findings on Ontarian French, (2) try to show why views such as the ones disseminated by the *Globe and Mail* are not only inaccurate but also harmful to the Franco-Ontarian community, and (3) examine some of the implications that the recent findings on Ontarian French may have for French language instruction in Ontario.

ONTARIAN FRENCH AND OTHER FRENCH CANADIAN DIALECTS

In several studies devoted to aspects of Ontarian French it is pointed out that Ontarian French shares several features with other varieties of Canadian French, notably with Quebec French. Thus Ontarian French was shown to treat the auxiliaries *avoir* and *être* in the compound tenses of the past in the same way Quebec French uses them (Canale, Mougeon, & Bélanger, 1978). More specifically both Ontarian and Quebec French

are shown to use, in the compound tense, the regular auxiliary *avoir* instead of the irregular auxiliary *être* (e.g., *j'ai parti* instead of *je suis parti*). The latter auxiliary is prescribed in the grammars of standard French for a small subset of verbs of motion and change of state and for pronominal verbs. Furthermore, Canale, Mougeon, & Bélanger (1978) show that in both Ontarian and Quebec French the "regularization" of the compound tenses through auxiliary *avoir* follows the same hierarchical pattern: certain motion verbs are conjugated almost always with *avoir* (e.g., *tomber*, *partir*) while others like *aller* and the pronominals are most often conjugated with *être*. In other studies (e.g., Mougeon, Bélanger, Canale, & Ituen, 1977; Mougeon, Bélanger, & Canale, 1978), it is shown that Ontarian French shares with Quebec French several common aspects of preposition usage. In this respect one can mention the use of *sur* instead of standard *chez* before substantives or proper nouns referring to human beings (e.g., *sur mon grand-père* instead of *chez mon grand-père*) or the use of the adverbs *dessus*, *dessous*, *dedans* for the prepositions *sur*, *sous*, *dans* (e.g., *dessous la table* instead of *sous la table*). Similarities between Ontarian French and Quebec French have also been found with respect to the use of the conjunction *que* (Beniak, Côté, & Mougeon, 1978). More specifically, as it was shown previously for Quebec French (cf. Connors, 1975; Sankoff, 1973), Ontarian French was shown to delete the complementizer *que* (e.g., *il pense il va pas le faire*) under specific phonological constraints and to add *que* to conjunctions such as *quand comment*, *pourquoi* (e.g., *je sais pourquoi qu'il est venu*). Finally in a study devoted to the vocabulary of forestry workers in northeastern Ontario (Germain, 1977), one finds lexical data which were previously reported upon in lexicographical studies of Quebec French (e.g., *Glossaire du parler français au Canada*, 1968). It can be said in conclusion of this brief overview that as the description of Ontarian French progresses it becomes increasingly clear that Ontarian French is above all a Canadian dialect of French. The fact that it shares many features with Quebec French is perhaps not surprising if one bears in mind that most of the present day Franco-Ontarian population consists of early or recent immigrants from Quebec.

ONTARIAN FRENCH AND EUROPEAN FRENCH

Just as Quebec French has been shown to possess features which characterized earlier varieties of European French, we have shown in several of our studies on Ontarian French that the latter possesses similar carryovers. For example, the deletion of *que*, the use of *sur* instead of *chez*¹ noted above, or the double conditional (e.g., *si j'aurais su j'aurais pas venu*²) (cf. Beniak, Côté, & Mougeon, 1978), typical of Ontarian French (also commonplace in Quebec French) can be looked upon as carryovers from older varieties of European French (cf. Grevisse, 1975, and Haase,

1969, among others). In a similar vein, Cassano (1977) points out that the use of *être après* in Windsor French, to express the continuous aspect, (a typical feature of Quebec French as well — cf. Barbeau, 1970) can be interpreted as a preservation of sixteenth century European French usage. Likewise preposition usage in Ontarian French contains many cases of carryovers from earlier varieties of French; witness the use of *à* to introduce time expressions (e.g., *à matin* / *this morning*; *à soir* / *tonight*; *à c't'heure* / *now*; *à tous les jours* / *every day*). The Ontarian French lexicon also abounds in features that may be looked upon as relics of older varieties of French. In this respect, in a study devoted to the lexicon of Prescott-Russell French (Lapierre, 1977), one can find words such as *broche* (*fence wire*), *échantillon* (*measuring tool*), *batterie* (*threshing area*), and *boulin* (*log*) which were once used in earlier varieties of European French. Finally as regards phonology one can mention among other things the presence of the phoneme /h/ in contemporary Ontarian French (Léon, 1967; Mougeon et al., in preparation). In Ontarian French it is frequent to hear this phoneme at the beginning of words possessing an aspirated initial *h* (e.g., *le hibou* [lə hibu]; *la hache* [la haʃ]). The aspirated *h* is no longer pronounced in modern standard French. However, it is still pronounced in a few dialects of European French (Norman French in particular). In older varieties of French (fifteenth and sixteenth century French notably — cf. Cohen, 1967) the aspirated *h* was pronounced. It is therefore possible to interpret the presence of phoneme *h* in Ontarian or Norman French as a preservation from older varieties of European French.

In our studies of Ontarian French we have also identified features which have been found for contemporary (often popular) varieties of European French. The use of locative adverbs instead of locative prepositions, the addition of *que* to the French conjunctions and the regularization of the compound past tenses via *avoir* noted above are examples of such features. To this one could add the use of the preposition *à* to express possession (e.g., *la maison à ma matante* — cf. Beniak et al., 1978) or the use of the relative pronoun *que* instead of its standard equivalent *dont* (*l'auto que je me sers à tous les matins*). All of these features were noted for European French by Frei (1971) and Guiraud (1973).

ONTARIAN FRENCH IS NOT A MIXTURE OF FRENCH AND ENGLISH

One cannot deny that English has had some influence on the evolution of Ontarian French (cf. Mougeon, Bélanger, & Canale, 1978). However, the presence in Ontarian French of a limited number of expressions unquestionably attributable to borrowing from English is not sufficient evidence to justify the reference to Ontarian French as a hybridized variety of French (cf. for example Hull, 1956, or Orkin, 1971, for similar

overstatements about varieties of Ontarian French). In our own research on Ontarian French we have found that most of the grammatical expressions that seem to reflect the influence of English can be viewed equally well as natural and logical developments of the French language (cf. for example Mougeon, Bélanger, & Canale, 1978, or Canale, Mougeon, Bélanger, & Ituen, 1978). Furthermore for the limited number of expressions which could be attributed unquestionably to a transfer from English (calques, literal translations — e.g., *la télévision est dessus* / *the television set is on*), it was found that such expressions were used infrequently in comparison to their French equivalents. This led us to posit that, on its own, interference does not constitute a force which can significantly affect the evolution of contemporary Ontarian French. In the words of Sapir (1921), "Language is probably the most self-contained, the most massively resistant of all social phenomena. It is easier to kill it off than to disintegrate its individual form" (p. 226).

CONCLUSION

As linguistic research on Ontarian French develops, it becomes more and more evident that Ontarian French is not a bastardized jargon but is an authentic dialect which shares many features with other French dialects (past or present and Canadian or non-Canadian). It is important to recognize here that although Ontarian French differs in certain ways from modern standard European French it nonetheless constitutes a true linguistic system. Like any dialect of French it possesses both a set of characteristic features and rules which set it apart from other dialects and a core of linguistic items and rules common to all French dialects. As a rule-governed linguistic system it constitutes a tool which is well suited to fulfill the communicative needs of the Franco-Ontarian community.

There are several reasons we think it is important to uphold the authenticity of Ontarian French and to show up the inaccurate and prejudiced nature of opinions such as the one disseminated by the *Globe and Mail*. Unfounded negative views on Ontarian French can serve as justification to deny or restrict societal and governmental support for the maintenance of French in Ontario: a minority linguistic community which speaks an inferior dialect may be viewed as not worthy of support. Negative views on the language of a given linguistic community can have harmful consequences on the self-image of members of the community (cf. Hall, 1960, & Labov, 1972). Furthermore, to assert that a given linguistic community speaks an inferior or bastardized language variety is almost to say that the members of that community are also inferior.

Given the growing tendency for younger Franco-Ontarians to assimilate into the English speaking majority (cf. Castonguay, 1976; Mougeon & Canale, 1978) it appears to us to be very important to dispel the prejudices that surround Ontarian French and assert the authenticity of

this dialect. Failing to do so may lead even greater numbers of younger Franco-Ontarians to a rejection of the French language. We believe that Ontario French language schools can help significantly in improving the Franco-Ontarian community's perception of Ontarian French. We urge all Franco-Ontarian educators and especially those responsible for the teaching of French to re-examine their views in the light of the recent research on Ontarian French and of the growing disaffection toward French which has been found among younger Franco-Ontarians. It is hoped that as a result of such re-examination a growing number of Ontarian teachers of French as a first language will see the necessity to follow a pedagogical approach which is more tolerant and positive toward Ontarian French and more encouraging toward Franco-Ontarians. It can be further argued that such an approach may bring about a significant improvement in the Franco-Ontarian students' acceptance and acquisition of standard Canadian French (cf. Mougeon & Beniak, 1979).

Further it seems to us that the recent linguistic findings on Ontarian French examined above could be of interest to Ontarian teachers of French as a second language. Such teachers could use the results of the descriptive studies on Ontarian French to produce instructional materials which could be used to develop their students' familiarity with Ontarian French and with Canadian French at large (cf. Ullmann & Balchunas, 1979). As a result Ontarian learners and teachers of French as a second language may profit from contacts with Franco-Ontarians to improve their communicative skills in the French language.

Finally we believe that what we have just said about the authenticity of Ontarian French and the necessity to uphold such authenticity also applies to other dialectal varieties of French spoken in the other eight majority English-speaking provinces. For example, some of the results of a large scale dialectological survey of Acadian French (Massignon, 1962) indicate that this dialect of French shares various features with earlier varieties of French, with Quebec French and with Ontarian French. It has been established (Lieberson, 1970) that the younger French Canadians in the western provinces and in all of the Maritimes (New Brunswick excepted) assimilate into the English-speaking majority even faster than the younger Franco-Ontarians. If the French spoken in these provinces is, like Ontarian French, the object of negative and prejudiced views, it will be all the more necessary that it be presented in a scientific and favorable light.

NOTES

We would like to thank Edouard Beniak and Daina Green for their helpful criticism on an earlier draft of this article.

¹ The origins of this construction are not completely established yet. According to Juneau & Poirier (1973) the use of *sur* for *chez* dates as far back as Middle

French. We hypothesize that it may be an extension of expressions such as *sur la terre de* (on the property of).

- ² This is an example of double conditional usage and of regularization of the compound past conditional of *venir* via *avoir* according to the usage described above.

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Raymond Mougeon is associated with the Centre for Franco-Ontarian Studies and Michael Canale is associated with the Research and Development Office, both at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, Ontario M5S 1V6.