Liaison in French Spoken in the Capital Region of Canada
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A large number of studies, both theoretical (Morin, 2005; 2003; 1987; etc.) and empirical (e.g. Encrevé, 1988; Côté, 2011; DeJong, 1988, etc.) have focused on liaison – the pronunciation of a word-final consonant under certain conditions (i.e. before a word-initial vowel). Despite this growing body of research, few studies have empirically tested widespread claims of its association with formal speech or of its dwindling use in spoken discourse over time. The present study aims to fill these gaps by studying Canadian French, a variety that has remained largely under-represented in the available literature.

Our research objectives are to determine to what degree liaison in spoken French-Canadian discourse is a function of style, as well as to what extent internal factors condition its application in both apparent and real time. In addition, we investigate the link between prescription and actual use of liaison in Canadian French by focusing on contexts defined as both obligatory and optional by Grevisse (2011).

Data were extracted from the Corpus Français de l’Outaouais au nouveau millénaire: milieu scolaire et milieu social (Poplack & Bourdages, 2008), constituted of the spoken discourse of students and teachers. We consider the teacher’s speech to be representative of the standard since, according to societal norms, the role of the French teacher is not only to teach standard French, but also to transmit its prescribed norm. The students, on the other hand, are representative of the community norm which can be compared in real time to informal spoken discourse from the Corpus du français parlé à Ottawa-Hull (Poplack, 1989), collected from the same neighbourhood approximately twenty-five years earlier.

Our subsample consists of twenty-four speakers (twelve from each corpus) stratified by age and sex. A twenty-five minute portion of speech was analyzed for each speaker. All ‘obligatory’ or ‘optional’ liaison sites were extracted and coded. Following the exclusion of a number of contexts identified as invariable in a pilot study, a total of 2897 tokens were ultimately retained for analysis.

As was reported in other varieties of French, liaison is variable in many of the contexts in which it is prescribed as obligatory (e.g. Côté, 2011; Durand & Lyche, 2008; Encrevé, 1988, etc.). Some of the common assumptions about liaison, however, did not stand up to empirical assessment. First, we found remarkable stability in overall rates of liaison in real time, refuting the claims of its decline in spoken French. Second, since teachers’ and students’ liaison production rates were nearly identical, these results do not support the idea that liaison is associated with formal speech. Moreover, these similarities across age groups and levels of formality extend beyond overall rates to the internal factors conditioning its use. However, the overall rates of liaison across groups are actually masking conflicting tendencies: liaison is increasing in some contexts while simultaneously receding in others as a result its entrenchment with certain lexical forms.