This paper is the first quantitative variationist investigation of future temporal reference in the French department d’outre-mer of Martinique. In all French varieties, future temporal reference is realised predominantly via three different strategies: the inflected future (je serai), the periphrastic future (je vais être) and the futurate present (je suis).

According to both prescriptive and pedagogical grammars, the principle factor conditioning variant selection is the temporal distance between speech time and the future eventuality expressed by the verb (Hawkins & Towell 1996, Grevisse & Goosse 2008). Previous variationist studies – based on Acadian, Laurentian and Hexagonal French data – have attempted to test this claim quantitatively and have demonstrated that a range of linguistic and social factors condition future temporal reference variability in the French language. Whilst research indicates that temporal distance tops the constraint hierarchy in Acadian speech communities (King & Nadasdi 2003, Comeau 2011), sentential polarity has been identified in all Laurentian and Hexagonal studies as the greatest determinant of variant choice: The inflected future is overwhelmingly preferred in negative contexts, whereas the periphrastic is favoured in affirmative utterances (Poplack & Turpin 1999, Evans Wagner & Sankoff 2011, Grimm & Nadasdi 2011, Roberts to appear).

The present study reports on variation in a 2011 corpus of spoken Martinique French. I investigate whether the constraint systems reported for other varieties of French also hold in a Caribbean context. The analysis is based on a sample of 30 speakers, stratified by age, educational level and gender, who were interviewed in self-selected dyads using a traditional sociolinguistic interview protocol. Due to high levels of French/créole martiniquais bilingualism, informants’ use of French was controlled for and measured using a modified version of Mougeon and Beniak’s (1991) language-restriction index.

Chi-square and fixed/mixed-effects logistic regression models highlight the complex set of constraints governing Martinique future temporal reference variability. Crucially, they reveal that the strategies of encoding future time in Martinique French differ from its mainland European counterpart. Instead, results show that the variable mirrors the findings reported in the extant Canadian literature: Whilst the periphrastic is the dominant variant in this particular speech community, with a frequency distribution comparable to Laurentian varieties, the constraint hierarchy patterns like the geographically isolated and highly conservative Acadian French variety (King 2000).

By contrasting variable usage in Martinique French with European and Canadian speech communities, this paper provides a local as well as a global perspective on French morphosyntactic variability. The present study contributes to our understanding of the linguistic factors that unite and divide la francophonie, whilst adding a French perspective to the existing literature on global linguistic trends (see Meyerhoff & Niedzielski 2003, Buchstaller & D’Arcy 2009).