Since Sankoff & Thibault’s foundational (1977) study of Montreal French, a number of sociolinguists have documented variable auxiliary selection in the language. For Laurentian varieties, the envelope of variation comprises a set of intransitive verbs which take être (BE) in Referential French, mainly verbs involving inherently-directed motion, such of as partir “to leave” and sortir “to go out” (Sankoff & Thibault 1977; Willis 2000). However, this literature is silent with regard to pronominal verbs, i.e., verbs which co-occur with reflexive/reciprocal clitics, such as se lever “to get up” and se trouver “to find oneself”. It turns out that this second set of verbs selects only être even in isolated, non-urban varieties of Laurentian French (Seutin 1975; Russo & Roberts 1999). In contrast, studies of Acadian French have found that use of avoir (HAVE) approaches categoriality not only with verbs of inherently-directed motion but also with pronominal verbs (e.g., Péronnet 1991; King & Nadasdi 2003). The aim of this paper is to provide an account of this divergence.

I first present new quantitative data for the highly conservative Acadian variety spoken in Baie Sainte-Marie, Nova Scotia, data which confirm the results of previous Acadian studies. I then show that 19th century dialectological surveys (e.g. Geddes 1893; Legendre 1890) reveal an Acadian/Laurentian split on the Quebec/New Brunswick border, providing support for pre-20th century divergence. I next consider settlement history: Acadian settlers came largely from one particular area of France, the center-west, and were mainly of rural background and members of the lower class (Massignon 1962). On the other hand, Laurentian (New France) settlers were of more mixed origins, both geographically (Charbonneau & Guillemette 1994) and socially (Choquette 1997). While variable auxiliary selection with pronominal verbs is documented from the earliest stages of the language (Grevisse 1986), I show on the basis of grammatical commentary that it was subject to regional variation – variation relevant for the New France colony – as early as the 16th century (Du Wes 1530; Palgrave 1532). On the basis of data from the Atlas linguistique de la France (1902-1910) and mid-20th century sources (e.g. Rézéau 1976; Svenson 1959), we see that such variation survived well into the 20th century in France.

However, the Acadian/Laurentian puzzle turns out to be more complex than simply dialect persistence. Prior research on both Laurentian (Sankoff, Thibault & Evans Wagner 1994) and Metropolitan (Esch 2002) French has shown that patterns of auxiliary selection may change across the lifespan. In the present study, data from a variety of sources show that auxiliary use with verbs licensed by se is highly salient. The evidence includes 19th century Acadian parodic texts (Gérin & Gérin 1982; Poirier 1890) wherein avoir use is an enregistered feature of the variety, along with pedagogical initiatives aimed at teaching Referential French norms to young Acadians which show that this context is very much subject to correction (Balcom 2008). The puzzle thus involves the interplay of several factors, including settlement history, degree of geographical isolation and normative pressure, and differences in social (re)evaluation.