The long tail of language change: Québécois French futures in real time

Since at least the mid 19th century, the inflected future (IF) has steadily declined in Québécois French (Poplack & Dion 2009). The innovative periphrastic future (PF) has become the default in the affirmative; IF is virtually categorical in the negative:

(1) Puis quand vraiment elle va être au niveau secondaire, elle va sûrement en avoir besoin, fait que là on hésitera pas à en acheter un. [Lysiane B. 007, 1984]

‘When she will actually be in high school, she will certainly need one [a computer], so then we won’t hesitate to buy one.”

A decline in IF with decreasing speaker age in the 1971 Montréal corpus (Sankoff & Cedergren 1972) appeared to represent a continuation of this historical trend: more than half of those under age 25 used PF categorically in the affirmative (Wagner & Sankoff 2011). Their finding that a panel of 59 speakers had significantly increased their use of IF between 1971 and 1984 was therefore entirely unexpected.

The current paper reports on a trend study undertaken to test Wagner & Sankoff’s proposal that their finding of a lifespan increase should be interpreted as age grading rather than as the inception of a retrograde change. We matched a sample of 34 speakers from the 1971 Montréal study for age, sex, and social class with 34 different speakers from 1984. There was no significant difference (p <.05) in the rate of IF use between the two years (for affirmative uses only, 13.3% [N=892] in 1971 and 15.4% [N=1283] in 1984). Since this finding effectively rules out the "retrograde change" interpretation of the panel results, our trend study confirms Wagner & Sankoff’s proposal.

Both trend and panel results are crucial in understanding the relationship between change in the grammars of individuals and language change as an historical phenomenon. We argue that, at the tail end of a morphosyntactic change, age grading is a factor in prolonging the life of a conservative variant. Whereas stability at the community level is normal late in a rather slow change over a period of only 13 years, 13 years is a significant interval in the lifespan of an individual. An adolescent peak in vernacular forms (Labov 2007; Tagliamonte & D’Arcy 2010) may be responsible for the very low rates of IF among younger speakers: of the 10 adolescent panel speakers who were non-users of IF in 1971, 8 had begun using it as adults by 1984 (Wagner & Sankoff 2011). Blondeau (2007) shows that accession to adulthood is the crucial transition point: her sample of 12 adults did not continue increasing their use of IF through middle age. As the conservative variant, IF is preserved at higher frequencies in writing than in speech (Lesage & Gagnon 1993), and its association with literacy links it to formality and politeness. Increased use in adulthood contributes to slowing the disappearance of affirmative IF by providing input to children, who nevertheless do not adopt it until it is socially appropriate to do so, as adults themselves.
References


