

On levelling in European French: some thoughts from a PFC perspective

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Acknowledgment

Many of my remarks are in reaction to the recent, thought-provoking book by Nigel Armstrong and Tim Pooley (2010)

Social and Linguistic Change in European French, Chippenham and Eastbourne:
Palgrave Macmillan

PFC
***La phonologie du français
contemporain :***
usages, variétés et structure

A collaborative programme coordinated by:

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- DGLFLF: Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France ;
- ILF: Institut de Linguistique Française ;
- IUF: Institut Universitaire de France
- CNRS and many other institutions.

What is PFC ?

PFC is a programme whose primary aim has been the description of the pronunciation of French in its geographical, stylistic and social diversity (diatopic, diaphasic, diastratic variation).

On the basis of a uniform protocol, a group of some fifty researchers is involved in the constitution of a vast corpus of spoken French throughout the world. Through common tools and methods of analysis, PFC has the ambition of offering of global vision of the phonology of French. The programme now covers all areas from phonology to discourse and offers a reference corpus for the study of modern French in its unity and diversity.

<http://www.projet-pfc.net/>

Survey protocol

- a common protocol is used everywhere
inspired by classical work in sociolinguistics (e.g. Labov, Milroy's)
- \approx 12 speakers per survey
ideally 3 generations; native to the survey point; information relating to age, gender, occupation, educational background
- 4 tasks:
 - a word list
 - a text
 - a guided interview, labelled semi-formal below (\approx 20 min)
 - a free conversation, labelled informal below (\approx 20 min)possibly extended to other tasks according to the researcher's interests or specificities of the variety

What is in the PFC database?



- Sound files for the 2 conversations (semi-formal, informal), the word-list of 94 items and the text
- Orthographic transcriptions for the text and for 5-10 minutes for each type of conversation (under Praat, TextGrid format).
- Codings for schwa and liaison
- Codings for prosody for sample portions
- Phonemic alignment for the text (LIMSI)
- Metadata: information relating to the speaker and the recording

The database (2011)

- 77 surveys in all. 35 surveys on line transcribed and coded
 - Mainland France (north vs. south), Francophonie (Reunion Island, Belgium, Switzerland, French speaking Africa, Algeria, Canada)
- 372 informants (46% men, 54% women)
- 49728 liaison sites / codings



PFC throughout the world



-  Enquête terminée et consultable en ligne
-  Enquête en cours

PFC in Europe



-  Enquête terminée et consultable en ligne
-  Enquête en cours

Word list (first part)

- | | | | |
|--------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| 1. roc | 22. infect | 43. creux | 64. slip |
| 2. rat | 23. dégeler | 44. reliure | 65. compagne |
| 3. jeune | 24. bêtement | 45. piqué | 66. peuple |
| 4. mal | 25. épier | 46. malle | 67. rauque |
| 5. ras | 26. millionnaire | 47. gnôle | 68. cinquième |
| 6. fou à lier | 27. brun | 48. bouleverser | 69. nier |
| 7. des jeunets | 28. scier | 49. million | 70. extraordinaire |
| 8. intact | 29. fêter | 50. explosion | 71. meurtre |
| 9. nous prendrions | 30. mouette | 51. influence | 72. vous prendriez |
| 10. fêtard | 31. déjeuner | 52. mâle | 73. botté |
| 11. nièce | 32. ex-femme | 53. ex-mari | 74. patte |
| 12. pâte | 33. liège | 54. pomme | 75. étriller |
| 13. piquet | 34. baignoire | 55. étrier | 76. faites |
| 14. épée | 35. pêcheur | 56. chemise | 77. feutre |
| 15. compagnie | 36. socialisme | 57. brin | 78. quatrième |
| 16. fête | 37. relier | 58. lierre | 79. muette |
| 17. islamique | 38. aspect | 59. blanc | 80. piquais |
| 18. agneau | 39. niais | 60. petit | 81. trouer |
| 19. pêcheur | 40. épais | 61. jeûne | 82. piquer |
| 20. médecin | 41. des genêts | 62. rhinocéros | 83. creuse |
| 21. paume | 42. blond | 63. miette | 84. beauté |

Word list (minimal pairs)

85. patte

86. pâte

87. épais

88. épée

89. jeune

90. jeûne

91. beauté

92. botté

93. brun

94. brin

Asymmetry in the reliability of reading performance

The presence of contrasts within the reading of minimal pairs, word-lists and texts is obviously not proof positive of the existence of these oppositions within spontaneous speech.

Nevertheless, the comparison of minimal pairs, lists of words in random order and the reading aloud of the text allows for a rapid and often reliable evaluation of various aspects of the phonological system.

Moreover, the absence of contrasts within the various reading tasks and in particular the minimal pairs provides strong evidence against the existence of these same contrasts within spontaneous speech. We have few examples in our data which would invalidate this claim.

Lack of contrasts within minimal pairs

Thus, for practically all southern French speakers, no opposition is made between e/ε , a/α , $o/\ɔ$, $\emptyset/\œ$ even in the reading of minimal pairs. Consider as a typical example J.C., a student at Toulouse-le Mirail. Although she distinguishes *brun* et *brin*, a standard southern French feature, she pronounces the other pairs identically:

85. *patte*

86. *pâte*

87. *épais*

88. *épée*

89. *jeune*

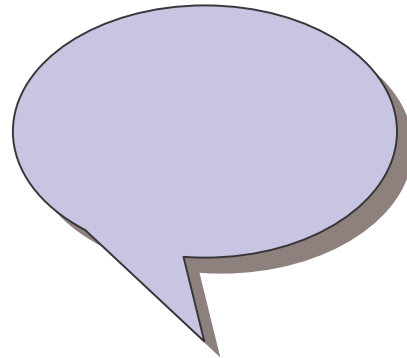
90. *jeûne*

91. *beauté*

92. *botté*

93. *brun*

94. *brin*



Presence of contrasts within minimal pairs

On the other hand, M.D., who is also a student at Toulouse-le Mirail, gives the impression of being able to distinguish a/α , o/\mathfrak{o} , $\emptyset/\mathfrak{œ}$, at least if we took his reading at face value:

85. *patte*

86. *pâte*

87. *épais*

88. *épée*

89. *jeune*

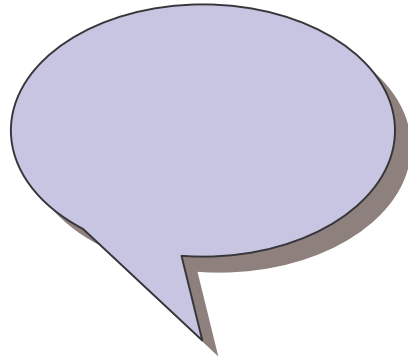
90. *jeûne*

91. *beauté*

92. *botté*

93. *brun*

94. *brin*



Cross-checking the evidence

Yet, when the list of words in random order is examined, one can immediately see that these oppositions are not made by M.D.:

12. *Pâte* 

74. *Patte* 

The same is true of his reading of the text, as shown by the following examples:

Et plus récemment, son usine de pâtes italiennes. 

Quelques fanatiques auraient même entamé un jeûne prolongé dans l'église de Saint-Martinville 

Other phenomena tested in the list

In summary, the list is intended to provide a rapid survey of all classical vocalic and consonantal oppositions in French. A few other phenomena are also included. For example, the behaviour of word-initial /#sl/ and word-final /kt#/ is examined. For some Midi speakers, these are realised as [zl] et [k] even when the word-list is read aloud (ex. *slip*, *infect*):.



Finally, the reading of the numbers preceding the individual words is not just useful to index the words. Given the lack of careful monitoring of the numbers by comparison with the following words, we often obtain pronunciations closer to the vernacular of the speakers.

Conversational styles

1. 'Led', semi-formal conversation

Dyadic with asymmetry of roles; set questions initially (sociolinguistic portrait of informants) but leading to a more spontaneous conversation.

2. 'Free', informal conversation

Two or three people maximum (to ensure the quality of recordings) converse freely.

PFC Transcriptions

Level zero of the PFC project is provided by orthographic transcriptions under PRAAT.

Exemple :

E1: Alors, c'était pas trop dur, comme ça d'une traite, c'est toujours, euh, (bruit de feuille)

FB: Et voilà

E1: Donc, euh, donc, donc, je vais vous poser des questions si jamais ça vous gêne, s'il y a quoique ce soit, qu'il n'y ait pas de, euh. Tout d'abord, est-ce que vous êtes née dans la région ?

FB: Euh, dans le Tarn et Garonne.

E1: Dans le Tarn et Garonne. <FB: A Moissac.> A ?

FB: Moissac.

E1: Moissac.

FB: Pas loin de Montauban.

E1: Pas loin de Montauban. Oui, donc c'est et vous y retour/ enfin, vous y retournez, euh. Donc, là, vous êtes sur la fac, sur Toulouse.

FB: La semaine. <E1: La semaine > Et le week-end, chez mes parents à Moissac.

E1 : D'accord. Et, euh. Vous êtes née quand ?

FB : En mille neuf cent soixante dix sept.

Coding systems: e.g. schwa

- A 4 figure coding system
 - Field 1: presence/absence
 - Field 2: position of schwa within the word (monosyllable, initial syllable within polysyllable, internal syllable, final syllable)
 - Field 3: left context (C, V...)
 - Field 4: right context (C, V...)

Some preliminary results

Vocalic inventory: Midi French

Stability of traditional system

i	y	u
E	œ	o
	a	

OPEN SYLLABLE

i	y	u
e	ø	o
	a	

CLOSED SYLLABLE




i	y	u
ɛ	œ	ɔ
	a	

NB the Loi de Position (LdP) goes counter RF
(Reference French)

An example of levelling: the loss of /h/

Members of three generations from the same family in the Basque country reading the sequence « Le hasard, tout bêtement... » in the PFC text.

The presence of [h] is only attested for the older speaker.

1. JM (92) mother. 
2. MA1 (65) daughter. 
3. MA2 (38) grand-daughter. 

Another example: the disappearance of the palatal lateral /ʎ/

Members of three generations from a family in the
Basque country reading aloud the same words.

1. JM (92 ans) mother.

55. *étrier* [etχije] 75. *étriller* [etriʎe] 

2. MA1 (65 ans) daughter.

55. *étrier* [etχije] 75. *étriller* [etχiʎe] 

3. MA2 (38 ans) grand-daughter.

55. *étrier* [etχije] 75. *étriller* [etχije] 

Schwa: some questions

Is schwa behaviour stable within Midi French?

How different is it from northern and other varieties of French?

Can one observe some levelling tending towards some form of standard (e.g. a supra local variety in the sense of Armstrong & Pooley 2010)?

Schwa: Midi French

- Traditional system
 - *Clara demande doucement le sel*
 - *Clara demand(e) à Paul*
- Durand & Eychenne (2003) show clear evidence for increasing deletion of schwa in final syllables (age-grading and also geographical and possibly social differences: more deletion in Biarritz (Pays Basque) than in Douzens (Aude)).

Schwa: Midi French

- Hypothesis:

Final syllables (*demande*) and internal syllables (*doucement*) are the two positions which are most affected by the ongoing change (NB quasi systematic non presence in the North)

MF schwas: word-final vs.-internal contexts

	VCeC Douc^ement Schwa présent	VCe#C belle^e table Schwa présent
Douzens	94.9% (94/99)	78.7% (420/533)
Lacaune	97% (63/65)	78.8% (328/416)
Aix-Marseille	74.5% (44/59)	19% (44/232)
Marseille-centre	65.2% (62/95)	17.3% (62/357)
Biarritz	71.8% (97/135)	26.4% (168/636)

MF schwas: monosyllables vs. word-initial syllables

	V#Ce#Ce dans le vent Schwa présent	V#CeC à demain Schwa présent
Douzens	94.5% (533/564)	98.2% (91/98)
Lacaune	95.1% (488/513)	95.4% (83/87)
Aix-Marseille	83.1% (440/529)	94.2% (66/70)
Marseille-centre	79.2% (392/495)	84.5% (104/123)
Biarritz	76.6% (519/677)	85% (102/120)

MF schwas: age grading

Age	V#Ce#C Schwa présent	VCeC Schwa présent	VCe#C Schwa présent
<26	70.7% (232/328)	21.2% (17/80)	31.4% (115/366)
26-59	80.6% (1052/1305)	47.8% (180/376)	21.7% (189/871)
>59	94.6% (954/1011)	66.9% (249/372)	78.7% (811/1030)

Levelled features in Midi varieties: vowels

(i) Nasal vowels e.g. *bain* [beŋ] > [bɛŋ] > [bẽ]

(ii) [wã] > [wẽ] e.g. *loin*, *soin*, *poing* (cf. *éloigner* [elwanje], *soigner* [swanje], *poignet* [pwanje])

(iii) increase in schwa deletion (recall above)

But counter-RF: Loi de Position (LdP)

Levelled features in Midi French: consonants

- Loss of /h/ (Basque country)
- Loss of /ʁ/
- R-retraction [r] > [R]
- ɲ > nj

Levelled features in Midi

French:

phonotactic constraints

- Increase in final [t]-presence in clusters:
intact, contact, infect.
- Decrease in voice harmony (*slip* [zlip] > [slip], Oslo [ɔzlo] > [ɔslo])
- RF-like word-initial phonotactic constraints: *sport* [ɛspɔr] > [spɔr]
- Gliding: OLj (Obstruent Liquid Yod) > Olij, as in [buklje] > [buklije]

Levelling: some questions (1)

- There is therefore evidence that a number of traditional features are eroded away or lost in all southern surveys realized so far. The evidence comes from (socio)linguistic observations on various populations and tests of accent identification showing that modern French speakers are poor at identifying other accents within France (e.g. Toulouse speakers identified as Marseille speakers).
- There are apparently few striking examples in the general literature on French of counter-levelling: i.e. local identity markers which would be on the increase.

Levelling: some questions (2)

- Hypothesis that social differences in European French are more and more connoted by lexis and grammar.
- Who is leading the change? Is France favouring more change from above than other European countries? Is France a "European exception"?
- If levelling is indeed at work could it reflect social levelling?

Schwa deletion in Midi French: is 'levelling' surprising?

- Internal factors: the clearest 'schwas' which are in weak position (unstressed final syllable, unstressed internal syllable) are deleted first. This seems to repeat a process which happened historically in northern varieties.

- External factors (some examples)

Prestige variety reflecting socioeconomic/cultural power: some form of Parisian based norm (RF), radios, television and educational process (centralised system of education, grandes écoles, role of concours such as agrégation...).

French internal immigration. Anecdotal remarks from people at the end of their career in Montpellier (France Telecom): 'on ne se sent plus dans le midi'

Mass immigration: The Algerian War or Algerian Revolution; *Guerre d'Algérie*), from 1954 to 1962, which led to Algeria's gaining its independence from France: (i) Pieds Noirs and (ii) North African immigrants (Algérie, Maroc, Tunisie, etc.). These systems are southern in terms of vowel contrasts (LdP) but closer to RF in terms of schwa presence/absence.

vs. Rôle of spelling would favour maintenance if tertiary education supported it.

Non-levelling

- The Loi de Position (LDP) is demonstrably something which has spread in Midi French over the last generations (Durand, Eychenne, Moreux, etc.)
- The examples of levelling mentioned above are not necessarily categorical (e.g. nasal vowels)
- Many cases of strong regional identity (e.g. Rémy Pech, ex-president of Toulouse 2 Le Mirail – occitan image) – a ‘nuanced’ position is necessary.

Problems

France like many other western countries has not become more egalitarian. A great deal of literature by social scientists (sociologists, economists, historians, etc.) suggests that the differences between various 'classes' / 'income groups' have sharpened. What does the levelling mean, if demonstrable on a large scale?

How does one measure the levelling?

Could it be that while there is 'informalisation' (e.g. slow erosion of 'tu'/'vous' distinction), the distinctive phonological signs have become more fine-grained with the parallel weakening of regional languages?

Is levelling proceeding faster in France than in other European countries?

If it can be demonstrated that levelling in France, particularly in the large urban areas, has been proceeding at a faster rate than in other western European countries, my suggestion – like that of many other specialists – would be to look at patterns of centralisation (particularly education) ever since the birth of the French republic.

Thanks to Philippe Boula-de Mareuil

- Alsacien PFC



Derrida



How can PFC help the debate?

- By offering a base-line for a number of phenomena: what is shared, if anything, by linguistic communities? A set of yardsticks against which one can measure aspects of variation: cf. liaison.
- By constructing new collaborative programmes: e.g. Toulouse/Manchester project aiming at the study of larger urban groups of speakers from a variety of perspectives (classical PFC surveys combined with sociological, sociolinguistic and interactionist studies.)