What is Cajun French?

Simply put, Cajuns are the descendants of Acadians expelled from Canada in the mid 18th Century. With the onset of British rule in Canada, the Acadians were forced to leave the homes and livelihoods that they had created for themselves in the Maritime Provinces. Referred to as Le Grand Dérangement, many of these Acadians eventually made their way to Louisiana where they settled in the southern region of the state to form what is today known as the Acadian Triangle, thus bringing their unique dialect of French to Louisiana. In fact, the name ‘Cajun’ is actually a phonetic derivation of the term Acadian. Over the course of the following 250 years, this unique group of people continued to preserve their French language and heritage, giving us Cajun French today. However, I would like to point out that, as my results will help to prove, it is far too simple to merely refer to the dialects of French spoken in Louisiana as Cajun French. Within this dialectal grouping is in fact an amalgam of distinct variations of the French language, each with their own regional phonological, morphological, and syntactic differences.

What are assimilation and affrication with respect to Cajun French?

Both assimilation and affrication occur when the dental consonants /t/ and /d/ are followed by the high vowels /i/ or /y/. In the case of assimilation, the consonants /t/ and /d/ are then transformed to include either /ts/ or /dz/.

Example: petit [poZ] → [poZ] small
difficult [diFif] → [diFisil] difficult

In the case of affrication, the fricatives /s/ and /z/ are inserted between the consonants /t/ and /d/ and the high vowels /i/ and /y/.

Example: habitu [ha bitu] → [ahbitu] accustomed

diver [div] → [div] donor

While affrication (a typical marker of Acadian French) has long been associated with Cajun French, assimilation (typical of Québécois French) has yet to be formally documented as a natural feature of CF. There do exist, however, vague references to the appearance (or lack thereof) of assimilation in CF.

One finds in the region of the Gaspe Peninsula in the north, and not at all elsewhere, the assimilation of the dental /t/ and /d/ before high front vowels (as in /di/), a trait characteristic of the Laurentian speakers of Canada. (Picone & Valindin, 2005)

It is thus my intention with this study to establish whether or not assimilation is truly limited to the particular region cited above, as well as quantify the rate of affrication in CF.

Methodology

• Using interviews from the Sylvie Dubois Cajun French Corpus (1997), I examine the use of assimilation and affrication among male speakers of CF. This corpus, which contains over 300 hours of recordings, consists of interviews with CF speakers of all ages and from various communities in Louisiana. The particular interviews used in this study all consist of two native CF speakers from the same region discussing casual topics pertaining to their lives (music, food, gossip, leisure activities, etc.).

• For this preliminary study I focus on 4 Louisiana parishes: Avoyelles, Labourche, St. Landry, and Vermillion. These 4 parishes have the highest percentage of French speakers in the Acadian Triangle.

• I chose to examine only the speech patterns of male CF speakers as men, according to Labov (2001), are more likely to remain attached to regionalisms and stigmatized forms of language.

• From the Corpus, I selected 4 speakers from each parish. Of these 4, 2 speakers are from an Old Generation (born between 1912-1928) and 2 are from a Young Generation (born between 1956-78).

• With respect to each speaker, I listened to approximately 40 minutes of recorded interview and coded every instance of assimilation and affrication as well as noted any place where these features are phonologically possible. Any token that was not clear was discarded.

• After all of the tokens for these 16 speakers were recorded, I entered them into my database for analysis which allowed for the results found to the right.

Background Information & Results

Parishes examined in this study: Avoyelles Parish (1), Labourche Parish (2), St. Landry Parish (3), Vermillion Parish (4)

Information on the four parishes of this study:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parishes</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage of French Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoyelles</td>
<td>45,511 (2009)</td>
<td>17.64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labourche</td>
<td>93,662 (2009)</td>
<td>19.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Landry</td>
<td>50,326 (2009)</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermillion</td>
<td>56,141 (2009)</td>
<td>24.89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion and Future Research

Based on the results of this preliminary study of assimilation and affrication in four Cajun French communities, I feel it is safe to say that, despite the assertion of Valindin and Picone, assimilation plays a much more important role in Louisiana than previously thought, while affrication, which has always been attributed to Cajun French due to its historical ties with Acadia, is not nearly as prevalent as one assumes. As my tables show, affrication occurs a mere 4.8% of the time, with assimilation occurring at a much higher rate of 20.1%. With respect to the individual parishes examined here, assimilation is most prevalent in Avoyelles (10.2%) and St. Landry (47.8%), with no significant levels appearing in the other two parishes. This can possibly be explained by these two parishes’ proximity to Evangeline Parish, where Valindin and Picone cite a heavy presence of assimilation. Affrication, on the other hand, is also most common in Avoyelles (8.1%) and St. Landry (20.0%), with no significant occurrences recorded for either Labourche (0%) or Vermillion (2.4%). Times parishes’ geographic distance from Evangeline and general isolation might help to explain this result. However, the overall lack of affrication/preference for assimilation found through this study supports my hypothesis that assimilation, a trait strongly associated with Quebec, is generally preferred over affrication in Louisiana.

Furthermore, with regard to the generations of speakers, it is interesting to note that assimilation is more common among the Young in Avoyelles, whereas the opposite is true in St. Landry. Similarly, affrication in Avoyelles is less common among older speakers while more common among the Old in St. Landry. As CF is a home based oral language that is not taught in schools, what is the cause of these opposite shifts in two neighboring parishes? A larger corpus and further study is needed to answer this question.

Because of this variety in pronunciation, it is time that we start to look at Cajun French as not merely a dialect of French spoken in Louisiana, but rather a collection of French varieties each with their own particular characteristics and regionalisms stemming from various Canadian roots. In order to help prove this new way of looking at Cajun French, I plan to expand my data corpus to include both more speakers from these four parishes as well as add an additional generation (Middle) to track the growing preference in each parish for one or the other form. This addition of new speakers will hopefully help to alleviate the pressure resting on my results which show practically no evidence of assimilation and affrication in Labourche and Vermillion, as well as determine if assimilation is truly restricted to Avoyelles and St. Landry.