

Chalier, Marc (2021): *Les normes de prononciation du français : une étude perceptive panfrancophone* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie, 454). Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter. 544 p.

This book, which is an adaptation of the author's PhD thesis defended in 2020, examines the issue of the language norms circulating in the French-speaking world. More specifically, it raises the question of whether French can be considered a pluricentric language, with different norms from one region or country to another, especially in the realm of pronunciation. According to the current state of knowledge, the question of the existence of different normative centres – generally widely accepted for Quebec, especially in the field of lexicography (as is well illustrated by the works describing the Quebec lexical norm) – is most often approached through the study of linguistic representations and attitudes circulating in the French-speaking world. The author argues for the need to complement the numerous research studies in this field with a more systematic consideration of the reactions prompted by exposure to concrete linguistic features, for example based on perceptual tests conducted with non-expert speakers. These types of empirical approaches help shed light on the pronunciation features that are concretely valued (or devalued) in a given community, over and beyond the clichés or preconceived ideas that may exist about these features.

Marc Chalier's study focuses on three regions of the French-speaking world, for reasons that differ for each. First, the author seeks to take stock of the pronunciation norms in the Paris region, where certain phonetic features are currently undergoing change – thus calling into question certain descriptions of the standardized and normalized pronunciation still favoured, for example in education. Second, he looks at a series of phonetic features that can be observed in French-speaking Switzerland and in Quebec, and attempts to evaluate their acceptability in normative terms, i.e., whether these features are considered correct in the register under study. For these regions, the idea, in other words, is to assess whether a local standard is valued by the participants.

The author's theoretical and methodological choices are fully in line with the current trend of perceptual linguistics of varieties (translation of the German *perzeptive Varietätenlinguistik*, a framework developed mainly by German researchers, see for example Krefeld and Pustka 2010), of which he combines the three perspectives he regards as complementary, namely the study of linguistic awareness, linguistic behaviour, and perceptions of specific language features. More specifically, the main research questions posed by the author can be summed up as follows:

- What are the main linguistic representations and attitudes of Parisians, Swiss and Quebecers regarding accents (their own and those of others)? And in particular, what prestige do they assign to the various accents in the French-speaking world?
- What are the pronunciation features favoured by model speakers in the communities studied and which are therefore likely to be part of the standard and valued usage in these communities?

- How are certain features typical of their region, as used by model speakers, assessed by non-expert speakers? Are these features considered appropriate in circumstances where one expects the use of careful, correct language?

The methodology established by the author to answer these questions is impressive. For the first part of the study, a questionnaire was administered to 288 informants (96 people per region) recruited via quota sampling (rather than convenience sampling, which is more convenient to do but less reliable in terms of representativeness) so as to cover a variety of social profiles. The results of these questionnaires were subjected to regression analysis performed with R. The second part of the study involved analysis of the linguistic productions of 60 model speakers (20 per region), more specifically radio and television newscasters. These speech professionals underwent an interview and two reading tasks (one text and two word lists). The analyzed pronunciation features, all taken from the reading tests, were subjected to acoustic analysis (formant measurements) or, for some, auditory analysis (by inter-rater agreement). The final portion consisted of a perceptual test based on a series of pairs of stimuli taken from the words read by the model speakers and involving two pronunciations of the same word – one deemed characteristic of the given community and the other a deviation from it.¹ For each pair of stimuli, participants were asked to choose the production deemed most correct and the most appropriate for a newscast and in a French second language class. The features were assessed by a panel of 288 informants (96 per region), again using quota sampling. The test was administered online with the SoSci Survey platform and the results were subjected to regression analysis.

Each component of the study is the subject of its own chapter setting out the results, region by region. The meticulous approach of the author – who systematically reviews each research question and the results obtained, often recalling the arguments behind certain methodological choices – sometimes makes for a degree of redundancy when reading the book, but the regular summaries and discussions nevertheless help keep a strong thread throughout the text. Along the way, the author paints a portrait of the three sociolinguistic contexts addressed. In the case of Paris, whose accent is considered most prestigious by the Parisian participants themselves, the author concludes that there is a growing tendency to neutralize the oppositions /a~ɑ/ (as in *patte~pâte*), /ɛ~e/ (*est~et*) and /œ~ɛ̃/ (*brun~brin*) in the production of the model speakers (with complete neutralization in some cases), but at the same time, he points out a preference for maintaining the oppositions in the perceptual test. As for Quebec, the author observes that the linguistic awareness of Quebecers clearly shows

¹ It is worth noting that the three perceptual tests conducted in Paris, Switzerland and Quebec included excerpts produced exclusively by model speakers from the region under study. Therefore, when the Quebec participants were asked to assess the [fɛt] and [fɛ:t] pronunciations of the word *fête*, these productions were always by Quebec newscasters, even though relatively few of them use features closer to the European pronunciation.

the acceptance of an endogenous norm, i.e., a Quebec-specific norm – a finding that is entirely in line with the evolution in linguistic representations noted by sociolinguists since the 1970s (see Remysen and Rheault, forthcoming). This observation is confirmed by the analysis of the pronunciation of the model speakers (who mostly use the characteristic features of the Quebec variety considered in the study) and, above all, by the perceptual test (which confirms that many of the features associated with standard usage in Quebec are indeed perceived to be such by the participants, who consider them to be more appropriate in a formal context than the features associated with the European pronunciation). Finally, the results for French-speaking Switzerland show a rather moderate linguistic emancipation, considering that the Parisian pronunciation is regarded as more prestigious by the Swiss participants and that the model speakers of this region tend to incorporate a number of features associated with the Parisian accent. The perceptual test suggests a complex picture, with a positive assessment of some Swiss features (such as maintaining the length opposition /e~e:/ in *penser* and *pensée*) and at the same time a preference for some features of Parisian origin, a trend especially observable among some younger participants (most of whom prefer, for example, the pronunciation of *brun* with [ɛ̃]). Hence it is difficult, in the author's view, to assert the existence of a specifically Swiss standard regarding pronunciation, contrary to what is observed for Quebec. He thus concludes that the French-speaking world is no longer monocentric (as long wished for by a certain tradition strongly rooted in the linguistic consciousness of French speakers), but rather bicentric (with the existence of two normative centres, the dominant Parisian norm in Europe and the dominant Québécois norm in North America), if not pluricentric (with multiple normative centres).

The study presented in *Les normes de prononciation du français* is based on original unpublished data whose collection and analysis represent a considerable endeavour. Since the study by Moreau et al. (2007), no other project of this scope had been undertaken on the question of accent perception across the French-speaking world, in addition to the fact that perceptual studies are rather infrequent altogether, despite their obvious interest, because of their complementarity with approaches aimed at studying linguistic representations. As well as some of the strengths of the study already mentioned (namely the combination of the three approaches as well as quota sampling), it is worth noting the author's choice to take into account the internal sociolinguistic dynamics prevailing in the different regions under study, often considered as homogeneous communities. This is particularly evident in his decision to ask several questions seeking to assess the existence of local normative centres within Switzerland (Geneva vs. Neuchâtel) and Quebec (Montreal vs. Quebec City). The study also features numerous original and relevant observations for all sociolinguists interested in normative issues and linguistic variation in the francophone context. I would like to highlight, among many others, the observation that Quebecers attribute their accommodation (i.e., their adaptation of their accent) to other French speakers to the desire to be understood properly (which is not the case for the Swiss, who mainly

cite discomfort about their own accent) (p. 227), the observation that Quebec speech professionals use a slight diphthong when reading (this feature is therefore not systematically stigmatized) (p. 315), and the fact that Parisians tend to favour certain phonological oppositions, even if these are clearly declining among newscasters (p. 362).

Some other methodological choices raise questions that the author does not always address head-on, such as the decision to analyze the linguistic behaviour of model speakers based on tests conducted outside their real-life work context, i.e., reading news reports. Regarding the perceptual test, it is surprising that the participants only heard speakers of their own variety; while this approach certainly allows for assessing the normative status of certain characteristic features of a region, it is surprising in a study that adopts a pan-francophone perspective. Indeed, a Quebec listener, upon hearing the close and tense vowel /i/ (as in *ville* pronounced [vil]) spoken by a Quebecer, may assess this pronunciation negatively (the Québécois generally pronounce it [vɪl], with a near-close, lax vowel) yet consider the feature acceptable if pronounced by a non-Quebecer. Moreover, in the Quebec test, it would have been preferable when analyzing the pronunciation of the nasal /ã/ to use a word in which this phoneme falls on the final syllable, given that the Quebec pronunciation with [ã], i.e., with a more anterior articulation, is the most common and likely the most salient in perceptual terms.

Another worthwhile remark concerns the interpretation the author cites to explain certain contradictory results obtained in the perceptual test, especially when the perception of a word in an isolated context differs from that of the same word appearing in a phrase (for example, the perception of /a-a/ in *pâtes* vs. *son usine de pâtes italiennes*). In several places (e.g., p. 394), the author attributes this difference to an opposition between the representations of the listeners (which would play a more important role when the word is presented in isolation) and their perceptions (which would be preponderant when the word appears in a longer context). It seems illogical to oppose the process underlying the excerpt assessment in such a clear-cut way, when this process brings into play a complex set of factors of both an attitudinal and perceptual nature. In my opinion, these discrepancies are contradictory in appearance only and can be explained by the experimental context. When a feature is presented not alone, but in a group of words, the participant is necessarily confronted with more and, potentially, conflicting perceptual cues. Their answer may therefore be guided by other features than the one the study is theoretically targeting.

In some aspects, the book serves as a reminder of how difficult it can be, even for linguists such as us, i.e., people who are aware of prejudices surrounding language, to shed certain implicit biases. For example, the author often uses terminology that reinforces the image of French as a monocentric language (when opposing, for example, “regional” features with “reference” features, which seems problematic to me in light of the observations made for Quebec in particular; or when taking up the “centre”/“periphery” distinction). Similarly, it is unfortunate that the author did not check with speakers from Paris whether, in their opinion, some Parisians might try

to modify their accent when interacting with French speakers from elsewhere, even though this question was asked of the Quebecers and the Swiss. While it could be hypothesized that many Parisians have never asked themselves the question in this manner, one cannot presume their representations under the pretext that speakers from the “centre” necessarily see their own practices in a given way.

These few critical remarks in no way detract from the quality of Chalier’s work, which I highly recommend. In his conclusion, Chalier opens up many avenues of research that will be of interest to francophone sociolinguists. Among other things, the author calls for expanding his investigation to other regions of the French-speaking world; one can only hope that other researchers will take up this call.

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