

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' APPRECIATION, PERCEPTION, AND PRODUCTION OF QUÉBEC FRENCH FEATURES

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the relationships between the appreciation, perception, and production of Québec French (QF) speech patterns by 58 Spanish speakers of French as a second language (L2). Participants completed a phoneme rating task, listening to 32 short sentences featuring specific QF speech patterns (affrication, nasalisation, high lax vowels, apical /r/) and 32 matched sentences without such patterns, and rating their exposure to, appreciation of, and desire to adopt a similar pronunciation using sliding scales. Finally, participants repeated 16 sentences targeting QF nasals, affrication, diphthongs and high lax vowels.

Results showed that although L2 learners were more exposed to QF patterns, they obtained extremely low scores at the repetition task and at the identification of the speaker's origin. The lack of relationship among all variables highlights participants' negative attitudes towards QF and the primacy of phonemic perception over production, which have implications for the development of L2 pronunciation.

Keywords: Second language pronunciation, French, speech perception and production, sociophonetics

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of attitudes has been largely investigated in social psychology examining, for instance, native speakers' attitudes towards speakers of a different speech variety, e.g. [5], [12], foreign-accented speakers, e.g. [16], [18], or members of diverse ethnolinguistic groups in their respective language, e.g. [24], [36]. From a second language (L2) acquisition perspective, learners' attitudes have shown to be closely related to language attainment.

Regarding L2 pronunciation, learners' judgments and attitudes have shown to play a crucial role [32]. That is, L2 speakers with positive attitudes towards a language variety, its speakers and culture are predisposed to have more interactions with the target language community and put more efforts in learning (and using) that speech variety, [7], [15]. L2 speakers' linguistic appropriation may help them express their

individual identity in the L2 environment by deciding to use or avoid phonological features that are specific to a group of speakers that learners associate with values and attributes, [2], [31], [32]. On the other side, if learners' preconceived (negative) ideas towards a language variety persist, it is unlikely that they will ever adopt such pronunciation norm and increase their contact with the target language speakers.

Scholars looking at language attitudes and pronunciation, e.g. [9], [23], [32], almost exclusively focused on L2 English, with a rare exception in L2 Spanish [34]. A great deal of research looking at speakers' attitudes towards the acquisition of L2 French has been conducted, consistently reporting negative opinions towards the Québec French (QF) speech variety, e.g. [3], [20], [21]. However, no study has ever focused on the links between learners' linguistic attitudes and their actual perception and pronunciation of the target features. These are crucial in that they complement measures of L2 speech perception and production typically investigated from a sociolinguistic perspective, [4]. In this line, the current study examined the relationships between non-native speakers' appreciation, perception, and production of QF speech patterns.

2. NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS QUÉBEC FRENCH

For decades, native QF speakers have developed negative attitudes towards their own speech variety, in favour of the French spoken in France (FF) [8]. More recent research also reported QF speakers' negative opinion towards their so-called "bad accent", [21], [25], [30]. This linguistic insecurity may have contributed to the development of L2 speakers' positive attitudes towards the FF norm and negative ones regarding the local variety. Studies have shown that the attempts to persuade L2 French learners that QF represents a legitimate variety to learn and embrace in daily life without being necessarily stigmatized or limited in their professional opportunities have failed, e.g. [3], [26]. In fact, immigrants in L2 French classes still favour the FF variety, [20], [21], considered (from their point of view) as "international", [3], [33], "standard",

“neutral”, “formal”, more comprehensible, and less complicated to learn [19]. These stereotypes towards the FF variety clearly show that the pronunciation model students aim for represents an idealized and imaginary norm [36].

Negative attitudes towards QF likely conceal a fundamental issue, namely, that L2 learners of French are unaware of actual differences between QF and FF. For instance, they tend to confuse speech samples produced in the QF and the FF varieties, misidentifying formal registers of QF as FF, [3], [19]. Additionally, L2 learners of French are unaware of what exactly conversational FF sounds like, classifying spontaneous speech patterns that are usual in FF (e.g., schwa deletion, consonant assimilation) as belonging to QF [19]. Idiomatic expressions heard on the street are also labelled as being specific to QF, while these are also common in other French-speaking countries [3]. These results thus confirm that (from the perspective of the L2 learner) FF is the desired variety to be learned in class, while QF corresponds to the language of communication on the street. Such attitudes, based on a lack of awareness towards the QF variety, certainly have considerable effects on L2 speakers’ success in learning the L2. This idealized (and erroneous) view L2 learners have of the sounds corresponding to each French variety contributes to their negative attitudes and incapacity to correctly identify the origin of a speaker which “necessarily limit people’s ability to position themselves psychologically within, or in opposition to, local community norms” [38], thus enabling them to opt for a model in L2 French.

With respect to L2 speakers’ awareness of different varieties of French, studies have shown possible causes for this lack of knowledge among learners in Québec. In a qualitative study, [3] asked L2 speakers of French about the aspects differentiating the variety they hear on the streets in Montréal and the variety being taught in class. The majority of L2 participants mentioned the general accent; only four of the 110 adults expressed comments targeting specific aspects of QF, such as affrication, and three of these participants referred to /a/ vowel backings. Because QF speech patterns are typically not addressed [13], [28] or barely mentioned [3] in L2 French classes, it is not surprising that so few L2 speakers noticed any segmental aspects differentiating the language varieties heard in class and on the street.

3. CURRENT STUDY

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the relationships between L2 learners’ attitudes towards the QF speech patterns, and their perception

and production of these features. Regardless of the debate about the primacy of phonemic perception over the production of the sounds, e.g. [1], [14], it can be argued that if L2 speakers misidentify the features that belong to a less appreciated speech variety (or don’t perceive them), they will erroneously develop a negative opinion towards the speakers of that variety and be deprived of L2 input, which is necessary for language attainment. With these considerations in mind, the current study adopted a sociolinguistic perspective to answer to the following research question: What are the links between L2 French speakers’ appreciation, perception, and production of specific phonetic features of QF? The overall aim of this study was to understand the reasons underlying L2 speakers’ negative (or positive) attitudes towards the QF variety. To answer the research question, learners rated their exposure to and appreciation of each feature of QF and were asked to identify the origin of the speaker as well as their desire to have the same pronunciation. Their speech production was assessed using a delayed sentence repetition task targeting QF nasals, affrications, diphthongs and high lax vowels. More details about the method are presented in the following section.

4. METHOD

4.1. Participants

Fifty-eight Latin American speakers of L2 French (M = 22; F = 36) were recruited for the current study. They were born and raised in Colombia (n = 42), Mexico (n = 6), Venezuela (n = 5), Peru (n = 2), Chile, Guatemala, and Cuba (1 each). All participants (20–66 years old, M = 36) started learning L2 French after age 18 and had completed advanced L2 French courses in either their home country or Canada. On average, they had been living in the French-speaking province of Québec for six years (range = 6 months–22 years).

4.2. Instruments

4.2.1. Sociodemographic questionnaire

At the beginning of each individual meeting, participants filled out an extensive questionnaire (37 questions) targeting their second language learning experience, as well as their exposure to and perception of the French varieties spoken in Montréal.

4.2.2. Listening proficiency test

The second task consisted of a listening proficiency test adapted from the *Test d’évaluation de français*

adapté au Québec (TEFAQ) from the *Chambre de commerce et d'industrie* (CCI) de Paris, Île-de-France [6]. Listed among the eight certifications recognized by the *Ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles du Québec*, the TEFAQ includes audio samples uttered in either QF or FF. The online version, which contains a reduced number of questions (n = 26), presents four sections targeting different objectives. In section A (3 questions), participants need to associate the right picture to the different descriptions presented orally. Section B (10 questions) assesses L2 speakers' ability to understand short audio messages like radio announcements, while longer messages showing different opinions are presented in Section C (10 questions). Finally, the last three questions (Section D) ask participants to indicate whether the written sentences correspond to those uttered by the speaker.

4.2.3. Phonemic rating task

The third task of this study consisted of a phonemic rating task which includes a set of 32 short sentences featuring specific QF speech patterns and 32 matched sentences without such patterns. Two QF female actors were recruited to create the speech stimuli which included 32 five-syllable sentences. They recorded both versions of the stimuli separately (i.e., with the QF feature and without the QF feature) for a total of 64 sentences. Cross-splicing was used to result in two sets of 32 speech stimuli phonetically identical, except for the presence or absence of the QF speech pattern.

Based on the 44 distinctive features reported to be used by a majority of Québécois and/or perceived as being characteristic of their speech variety [29], the following features were included:

- Affrication of /t/ and /d/ in front of /i/ and /y/ ([ts] and [dz], as in *tu* (you) and *dix* (ten));
- High lax vowels in closed syllables, except in front of the continuant consonants /r/, /v/, /z/, and /ʒ/ ([I], [U] and [Y], as in *vite* (fast), *lune* (moon), and *plume* (feather));
- Anterior nasal vowels ([ã] instead of the FF [ã], as in *enfant* (child));
- Apical /r/.

After listening to each speech stimulus, participants had to indicate on three different 1,000-point sliding scales how often they heard that pronunciation, whether it was pleasant to hear, and if they wanted to have the speaker's pronunciation. Participants also had to choose whether the speaker came from France, Québec, or somewhere else.

4.2.4. Delayed sentence repetition task

A delayed sentence repetition task was used to measure L2 speakers' production of QF phonemes. Used in prior research to measure L2 segmental accuracy [10], [11] as well as suprasegmental accuracy [17], [37], this task allows for a direct comparison of participants' production. Compared to a reading task, this elicitation procedure also offers the advantage of enhancing more fluent speech, e.g. [27], without relying on subjects' reading ability [37] or L2 decoding proficiency, e.g. [41], enhanced in the presence of congruent L1 and L2 writing systems, as in Spanish-French, see [22]. To avoid mimicry, a three-second delay was introduced between the presentation of the question (i.e., the prompt) and the participant's repetition of the response. An audio signal (i.e., a chime) was added after that short pause as a sign for the previously trained participant to start repeating.

To create the speech stimuli of the sentence repetition task, the same female actors recorded a list of 16 pairs (i.e., question and response) in a QF formal register. Eight pairs were used as distractors, which means that none of them included a QF feature, while the other eight pairs each presented two QF features. The targeted features selected from a list of 44 distinctive QF speech patterns [29] were:

- Affrication of /t/ and /d/ in front of /i/ and /y/ ([ts] and [dz], as in *tu* (you) and *dix* (ten));
- High lax vowels in closed syllables, except in front of the continuant consonants /r/, /v/, /z/, and /ʒ/ ([I], [U] and [Y], as in *vite* (fast), *lune* (moon), and *plume* (feather));
- Nasal vowels ([ã] instead of the FF [ã], as in *enfant* (child));
- Diphthongs produced in closed syllables (e.g., [pæv] as in *père* (father)), also used to indicate a semantic distinction between words such as *faites* [fæt] and *fête* [faet] or *patte* [pat] and *pâtes* [pawt].

5. RESULTS

Preliminary analyses revealed that although L2 learners were more exposed to QF patterns, they obtained extremely low scores at the repetition task and at the identification of the speaker's origin. The lack of relationship among all variables highlights participants' negative attitudes towards QF and the primacy of phonemic perception over production. Results will be presented in relation to the implications for L2 pronunciation development.

6. REFERENCES

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