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Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil : The case of "que" in Montreal French

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Article abstract

This paper studies the use or nonuse of the word « que » in Quebec French. Historical records show that in Old French and in 17th century French, the word « que » is optional in sentences such as « Je pense que »... Looking at the occurrences of « que » found in the Sankoff-Cedergren and Montreal 84 corpora of spoken French, the author shows that the occasional absence of « que » in Quebec French today is not the result of an ill-educated misuse of the language, but is rather an option which has developed within a systematic grammar distinctive to Quebec. For reasons linked to the linguistic norm, this is an option that many people choose not to exercise.

Plus ça change, plus c'est pareil : The case of "que" in Montreal French ¹

Jane Warren *

This paper studies the use or nonuse of the word 'que' in Quebec French. Historical records show that in Old French and in 17th century French, the word 'que' is optional in sentences such as 'Je pense que'... Looking at the occurrences of 'que' found in the Sankoff-Cedergren and Montreal 84 corpora of spoken French, the author shows that the occasional absence of 'que' in Quebec French today is not the result of an ill-educated misuse of the language, but is rather an option which has developed within a systematic grammar distinctive to Quebec. For reasons linked to the linguistic norm, this is an option that many people choose not to exercise.

Cet article étudie l'usage du mot 'que' en français du Québec. Les témoignages historiques montrent que ce mot est optionnel en français jusqu'au XVII^e siècle dans les phrases telle que 'Je pense que'... En analysant les occurrences de 'que' trouvées dans les corpus Sankoff-Cedergren et Montréal 84, l'auteur montre que l'absence occasionnelle de 'que' en français du Québec aujourd'hui n'est pas le résultat d'un mauvais usage de la langue, mais bien une option qui s'est développée au sein d'une grammaire particulière au français du Québec. Pour des raisons liées au prestige de la norme linguistique, c'est une option que bien des gens choisissent de ne pas exercer.

Background

For too long Montreal French was popularly thought of as a distorted version of metropolitan French, as though the complexities and subtleties of educated Parisian speech had been vulgarised on the wind-swept frontiers of the New World². But the nationalist awakening of the 1960s and 1970s opened the ears of the *Québécois* to the inherent integrity of their language. This new pride in a distinct *québécois* identity led to the establishment of the first corpus of Montreal French in 1971. It formed the basis for numerous studies into distinctive aspects of *québécois*. These included investigations of the use of subject pronouns (Laberge, 1977), elision of /l/ in articles and pronouns (G Sankoff & Cedergren, 1976), and the widespread absence of the negative marker *ne* (G Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). Each drew on the same paradigm: to examine an individual linguistic feature in order to explore how *québécois* functioned as a coherent system in its own right (see Thibault & Vincent, 1990 for a comprehensive bibliography of work undertaken on *québécois*).

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Among the first of these studies was a pioneering examination, conducted by Gillian Sankoff and two fellow linguists in 1971, of how Montreal French speakers used or omitted³ the word *que* in certain common constructions such as *je pense que c'est ça* and *l'homme que j'ai vu*. They concluded the absence of *que* was primarily conditioned by the preceding and following sounds (or what linguists call the phonological context). So, a Montreal speaker might say *je pense c'est ça*. This token exemplifies what G. Sankoff et al found to be one of the most favourable contexts for absence of *que*, a preceding and following /s/. They went on to present some broad findings about how the use or nonuse of *que* varied among social groups. The underlying point of their investigation was such "omissions" were not slips by uneducated or provincial speakers with an undeveloped sense of a grammar, but evidence of communal speech practices which were conditioned by systematic rules differing from those of "prestige" French.

It is possible to find evidence of nonuse of *que* as early as the Old French period (see Moignet, 1973: 339; Nyrop, 1930: 159; Ritchie, 1907: 121-156; Togeby, 1974: 133), especially in verse texts such as the *chanson de geste*. Examination of this earlier evidence suggests it was optional to put the *que* in, rather than leave it out. In Old French, it was common to put two independent clauses side by side, with no overt grammatical link. By the seventeenth century, however, the emphasis was on making grammatical devices explicit. French grammarians of the time insisted the *que* must always be there on the surface in the prestige, written language.

But spoken prestige French did not surrender to such prescriptions easily. In the early seventeenth century, the Dauphin, later Louis XIII, was followed about by his personal physician, Jean Héroard, who took notes several times a day of the Dauphin's utterances (see Ernst, 1985 for an analysis of part of Héroard's journal). According to Héroard's records, the young Dauphin often omitted his *que*, not only in completive clauses (e.g. *je pance je pissurai dedan*; "I think I'll piss in it") and in certain compound conjunctions such as *pendant* (*que*) and *afin* (*que*) but even in relative clauses (e.g. *la sphaere vou m'avé poumise*; "the sphere you promised me").

Que is a very versatile word found in a great number of constructions in modern French (see Gadet & Maziere, 1988). My study focuses on three: completive clauses (eg, *je pense que c'est ça*),

relative clauses (e.g. *l'homme que j'ai vu*), and subordinate clauses introduced by conjunctions formed with *que* (e.g. *je pars parce que c'est tard*). According to the French prescribed in grammar books, *que* is obligatory in such constructions. This contrasts with conversational Canadian French, where, in the same constructions, the *que* is optional. There is nothing very odd about this. In two other Romance languages, Spanish and Italian, it is entirely acceptable to omit the equivalent of *que* after certain types of verb, and this construction can be found in formal or written registers (see Subirats-Rüggeberg, 1987: 168-173 for Spanish; Nilsson-Ehle, 1947 for Italian). In English, absence of the word in similar constructions is quite uncontroversial ("I think she's right"; "the film I saw") (see Bollinger, 1972; Kroch & Small, 1978; Thompson & Mulac, 1991). It is the French grammarians' position which seems odd, as they are still so unequivocal about the obligatory presence of *que*.

Methodology

Taking up where G. Sankoff et al left off, my study of *que* (Warren, 1992b) enjoyed three advantages not available to them: the advanced statistical techniques developed during the intervening decade (see Cedergren & D. Sankoff, 1974; D. Sankoff, 1988, among others); time, which is one of the luxuries (and torments) of doctoral research; and access to an important new resource, the 1984 Montreal corpus (for details, see the introduction to this volume).

The branch of linguistics within which both Gillian Sankoff and I conducted our studies is known as variationist linguistics. The variationist approach is based on the concept of the linguistic variable, such as a word or part of a word with variant forms which have the same function. The linguistic variable in this study is *que*, and its two variant forms are *que* and *zero*. Variationist linguists typically record the speech of a representative sample of people from a particular community. Having assembled a large body of spoken data, the linguist then isolates the occurrences of the variable which interests her. These examples are known as "tokens". Statistical analysis of these tokens allows us to identify various linguistic and social factors which influence the choice of a particular variant. When the tokens are analysed by (say) age, sex, and socio-economic background, the results often provide an account of how language

use signals and reinforces social alliances and oppositions. Analysis of the linguistic factors indicates the characteristics of the language itself which tend to militate for or against the use of the variants.

Much of the focus of variationist linguistics, then, has been on language change. Stable variation, in other words, the coexistence of variant forms with no change, has to some extent been overlooked. I redress the balance here by examining the use and nonuse of *que* in three different constructions. For the statistical part of my investigation, I used variable rule analysis, which was designed specifically to deal with large bodies of linguistic data. It isolates general trends in the data, indicating the linguistic and social factors which are statistically significant in the absence of *que*. (For more details on variable rule analysis, see Cedergren & D. Sankoff 1974; D. Sankoff 1988; for details on the specific program I used, GoldVarb, which was designed for Macintosh computers, see Rand & D. Sankoff, 1990.)

My first step was to run a pilot study comparing the use and nonuse of *que* in the 1971 and the 1984 corpora using the same 16 speakers from each (Warren, 1988). The speakers formed a representative sample, socially stratified according to age, sex, educational level, and occupation. The comparison between frequency of absence of *que* in the two corpora showed there has been no change over **real** time, in other words, over the 13 years from 1971 to 1984. I also found no evidence of change over **apparent** time, in other words, there was no statistically significant difference in frequency of absence of *que* between younger and older generations. I concluded, *prima facie*, I was dealing with a case of stable variation.

My main study was a deep analysis of the usage of *que* by 24 speakers from the 1984 corpus⁴. First, I analysed the data quantitatively, investigating the social and linguistic factors which were significant in the absence of *que*. I then analysed the data qualitatively, focusing on three expressions *je pense que* (or *je pense*), *disons que* (or *disons*), and *parce que* (or *parce*), which were used very frequently by the speakers in my sample. This frequency in discourse appeared to be correlated with an increased absence of *que*. In the following sections, I present results of the global analysis of social and linguistic factors, and a detailed analysis of one of the three expressions, *je pense (que)*.

Analysis of social factors

The compilers of the 1984 corpus classified the speakers according to various social criteria, including age, sex, occupation, and education (see the explanatory guide to the corpus by Thibault & Vincent, 1990). In this study, the social profile of speakers is represented by age, sex, and socio-economic background, represented by two factors, occupation and education⁵.

I used variable rule analysis to test whether these social factors had an influence on variable use of *que*. Once the tokens had been coded and entered into the computer, the program made an assessment of how the variable was influenced by various factors. For example, I hypothesised "occupation" would be significant. This can be treated as a factor group containing the three individual factors: "professional", "white collar", and "blue collar"⁶. The program selects those factor groups it considers significant⁷, and allocates each factor in the group a number (a factor weight or probability) between 0 and 1. A figure of 0.5 indicates the factor has no influence at all on use of *que*. The closer a factor's rating is to 1, the greater its influence on **absence** of *que*. The closer to 0, the greater its influence on **presence** of *que*. So, in Table 1, we can see "occupation" has been selected as significant, with blue-collar and white-collar workers favouring **absence** of *que* with factor weights of 0.63 and 0.58 respectively, whereas a professional favours presence of *que*, with a factor weight of 0.38.

Table 1 gives the results of the variable rule analysis of the social factors, and shows occupation, education, and age (but not sex) to be significant in the absence of *que*.

The factor weights for occupation are as we might expect: the factor "professional" strongly favours presence of *que* with a factor weight of 0.38, whereas the factors "blue collar" and "white collar" favour absence of *que* with factor weights of 0.63 and 0.58 respectively. In this case, the social divisions are clear: there are professionals (who persist in the use of *que*) and everybody else.

Education, divided into three levels, presents an intriguing pattern. I followed Thibault and Vincent's (1990: 19–21) classification of the educational levels of the speakers, which was rather subtle. They identified three levels—low, average and high—the criteria for which were adjusted over time to take account of the huge increase in educa-

Table 1

*Contribution of social factors selected as significant to absence of *que* in the whole data set**

Factor group	N Ø	Total N	%	Factor weight
<i>Education</i>				
low	65	476	14%	.48
average	122	592	21%	.63
high	57	945	6%	.43
<i>Age</i>				
29–33	100	689	15%	.59
35–64	117	960	12%	.46
66–73	27	364	7%	.43
<i>Occupation</i>				
blue collar	86	450	19%	.63
white collar	115	726	16%	.58
professional	43	837	5%	.38
<i>Sex</i>				
women	149	1121	13%	n/s*
men	95	892	11%	n/s
<i>Total</i>	244	2013	12%	
* Overall tendency = 0.102, p = 0.041; n/s = not significant.				

tional opportunities since the 1950s. Thus, a person who completed primary school in the 1930s is classified as average, whereas a person who reached the early stages of university study in the 1970s is also classified as average. Since high levels of education, in other words, tertiary education, coincide almost exactly with professional status (9 out of 10 professionals have a high level of education in my sample), it is probably not sensible to talk of professional status and high educational level as though they were separate factors. Among non-professionals, however, different levels of education have a clear influence on speech habits. Low and average education levels are distributed at random through the blue- and white-collar workers, and, as is clear from Table 1, people of average education, regardless of their occupation, are less likely to use *que* (with a factor weight of 0.63) than are either professionals or people of low education (with factor weights of 0.48 and 0.43 respectively). The statistically significant differen-

Table 2

*Variable rule analysis of social factors significant in the nonuse of *que* in conjunctions**

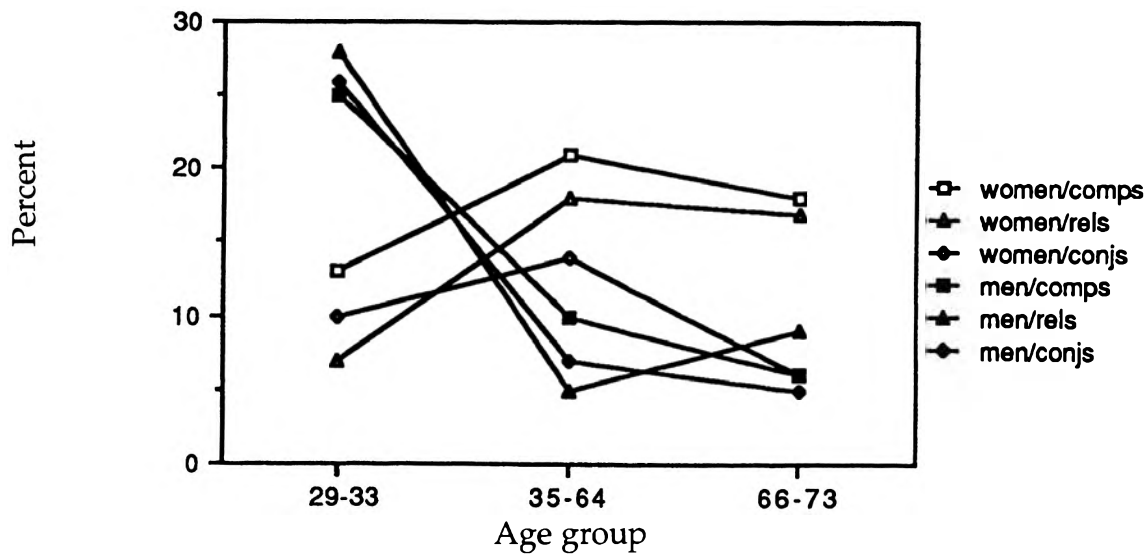
Factor group	N Ø	Total N	%	Factor weight
<i>Occupation</i>				
blue collar	34	210	16%	.65
white collar	38	335	11%	.53
professional	19	322	6%	.38
<i>Age</i>				
29–33	38	292	13%	.58
35–64	43	392	11%	.51
66–73	10	183	5%	.35
<i>Sex</i>				
women	60	544	11%	n/s*
men	31	323	10%	n/s
<i>Education</i>				
low	26	226	12%	n/s
average	40	275	15%	n/s
high	25	366	7%	n/s
<i>Total</i>	91	867	10%	
* Overall tendency = 0.094, p = 0.035; n/s = not significant.				

ce between the low and average levels strongly suggests the occasional absence of *que* is not the result of an ill-educated misuse of the language, but is rather an option which has developed within a systematic grammar distinctive to Quebec—an option which most professionals disdain to exercise.

Are these variable uses of *que* stable, or are they changing over time? Recordings like those in the corpus can be used to provide linguists with a "frozen moment" which potentially contains within it data on how language use has altered. By comparing particular variant forms used by younger speakers with those used by older speakers, it is possible to identify changes which have occurred between the times in which the speech habits of the different generations were laid down⁸.

Figure 1

The interaction between sex and age in three clause types (frequency data)



I grouped speakers into three age categories: 29-33 (young adults who have begun their working careers), 35-64 (adults who are establishing or who have consolidated their position in society), 66-73 (adults who have retired and no longer have any direct contact with the workplace) based on the classifications in Thibault, 1983: 27-28. Table 1 shows age was also a significant factor, with younger adults favouring absence of *que*, and older speakers favouring presence of *que*. This appeared to contradict my hypothesis about the variable use of *que* being stable. However, when I tested the data on each construction formed with *que* separately, I found age was selected as significant in the nonuse of *que* in conjunctions only, as Table 2 shows.

Conjunctions are clearly behaving differently from the other two constructions. As we can see from the frequency data in Table 3, the clearest case is the common expression *parce que*, which accounts for 68% of all conjunction tokens (593/774), although all conjunctions conform to the same pattern.

For *parce (que)*, there is a very clear division between the oldest age group with only 6% nonuse, and the other age groups, with 13% and 15% nonuse. This difference becomes even more marked if we add data on *parce (que)* from a further

12 speakers aged between 15 and 25, who were recorded for the first time in 1984. Among this group, use of *parce* stands at 14% (42/291). The low figure for the oldest age group may be an aberration. If it is, then the variable use of *que* in conjunctions is a case of stable variation after all. However, if the figures are accurate, then we may be witnessing the birth of a case of stable variation.

Table 3

Rates of nonuse of que according to age and type of conjunction

Age group	<i>Parce (que)</i>		Other conjunctions	
	Ø/total N	%	Ø/total N	%
29-33	30/205	15%	8/87	9%
35-64	34/272	13%	9/120	8%
66-73	7/116	6%	3/67	4%
Total	71/593	12%	20/274	7%

According to these figures, when the oldest age group acquired their speech habits during the 1920s, absence of *que* in conjunctions was uncommon, perhaps exceedingly so. But by the next generation, nonuse had established itself as a distinc-

Table 4

*Contribution of linguistic factors selected as significant to absence of que in the whole data set**

Factor group	N Ø	Total N	%	Factor weight
<i>Following phonological context (see note 10)</i>				
obstruent	215	834	26%	.82
sonorant	24	954	3%	.25
pause	5	225	2%	.25
<i>Complexity of following utterance</i>				
simple	166	1139	15%	.56
complex	78	874	9%	.42
<i>Complexity of preceding utterance</i>				
simple	213	1563	14%	.54
complex	31	450	7%	.38
<i>Total</i>	<i>244</i>	<i>2013</i>	<i>12%</i>	

* Overall tendency = 0.066, $p = 0.001$. Factor groups not selected as significant, with percentage absence of *que*: preceding phonological context (obstruent 12%, sonorant 13%, pause 3%), following syntactic context (pronoun 16%, other 5%), and type of construction (completive 14%, relative 12%, conjunction

tive Montreal French variant, and has remained stable ever since. The reduction of *parce (que)* to *parce* is a feature of Canadian French in general (cf. Martineau's 1985 study of *que* in Ontarian French), but is not widely attested in other varieties of French (e.g. Wartburg, 1958, who notes only two dialectal forms of *parce* in France).

The data suggest the use of *parce* (and nonuse of *que* in other conjunctions) was triggered in a generation of speakers who acquired their speech habits during or shortly after the Second World War.

The variant may well have come into use as the more casual manners of the period influenced speech habits. The practice, once adopted, may well have been legitimated by the nationalist enthusiasm of the Révolution tranquille during the 1960s. If these historical events gave people "permission" to use this distinctively Canadian

variant, then its purely linguistic rationale is clear enough. The optional absence of *que* in other grammatical constructions was already well established. It was reasonable, then, for *parce (que)* and other conjunctions to fall into line by declaring their *que* to be expendable.

The fourth social factor I examined was sex. As Table 2 shows, this factor was not retained as significant by variable rule analysis in any of the three clause types. However, when I examined the data from women and men separately, I found some sex-specific patterns, some of which can be no more than impressions. Figure 1 shows in graphic form the percentage of nonuse of *que* in the three constructions—completives, relatives, and conjunctions—for both women and men in the three age groups. Two main tendencies emerge from the graph. First, older women tend to favour absence of *que* to a greater extent than their male counterparts. Second, young men also favour absence of *que*. Indeed, they favour absence more than any other group, and to a statistically significant degree⁹.

In Western industrial societies, there is evidence to show women tend towards a greater use of prestige varieties. Less normative behaviour is more common among men, or at least, is associated with more masculine values (e.g. Labov, 1990). One explanation for this situation is commonly proposed: women tend to use "correct" language to counteract their lack of prestige and status in society (Trudgill, 1974). But this principle is far from universal. As Cameron & Coates (1986) have pointed out, there are situations in which women have established resilient nonstandard or vernacular norms of their own. My own work suggests Montreal women are more likely to identify with the popular québécois practice of not using *que* than they are to use the prestige form. This tendency to support a norm which is in opposition to prestige speech habits is particularly marked among the older groups of women for two constructions, completive clauses and relative clauses.

The young men display the highest rate of nonuse of *que* in all three clause types. This is consistent with the general principle according to which young men in particular tend to favour nonstandard or covert norms. We could see the behaviour of the older women and the young men as expressing some kind of solidarity with each other, as the two groups most likely to stand outside male workplace career structures. They also con-

trast with each other. For the young men, use of the vernacular signals values associated with being male—toughness or aggression, whereas for the older women, the social significance of the vernacular is different, perhaps associated with the private, domestic sphere. Here, the continuation of *québécois* tradition or identity has been less handicapped by the normative pressures which operate in many male-dominated places of work.

To sum up, speakers with professional status, reinforced by a high level of education, are sensitive to the prestige norm. Given their loyalty to *que*, they act as a conservative force, resisting change. Other speakers are the main source of variation, young men in particular, and, to a certain extent, older women. These groups identify with other norms within the speech community. As we have seen, these two broad groups, professionals and everybody else, have each remained stable in their use of the variation over the period covered by the corpus, apart from a shift from *parce que* to *parce* which appears to have taken place among non-professional speakers sometime in the last fifty years. The social patterns of the variation—the question of who uses or doesn't use *que*—are now clear. Let's turn to the internal linguistic factors, the factors within the language itself, which either influence or resist change.

Analysis of linguistic factors

I used variable rule analysis to test the influence of certain linguistic factors on variable use of *que*. I analysed the data on *que* on completives, relatives, and conjunctions separately, and together. Table 4 shows the three linguistic factor groups which were statistically significant in nonuse of *que* for the whole data set. The factor groups in order of importance are: following phonological context¹⁰, complexity of following utterance, and complexity of preceding utterance.

My findings on the significance of the following phonological context differ from those of G. Sankoff et al (1971) who found a preceding and following sibilant was the most favourable context. My data show that the preceding phonological context is not a significant influence¹¹. Also selected as significant were complexity of preceding and following utterances. Simple utterances—whether preceding or following—favour absence of *que*, whereas complex utterances (for example, those including a subordinate clause) favour presence of

que (cf. Martineau, 1985, a more limited study of *que* in Ontarian French). Consider the following example:

(1) *Il me semble qu'à des moments donnés dans sa vie on a envie de tout jeter en l'air puis de se dire bon bien "je recommence" ou "je fais d'autres choses" ou... [117-84-221]12*

It seems to me that at particular moments in your life you want to chuck everything in and say to yourself right well "I'm going to start again" or "I'm going to do something else" or...

The utterance preceding *que* is simple—*il me semble*—while the following utterance is a complex one, made up of a time expression—*à des moments donnés dans sa vie*—and a verb—*on a envie*—followed by two complements—*de tout jeter en l'air* and *de se dire bon bien*—*"je recommence" ou "je fais d'autres choses" ou...* Complex utterances need more "lubrication". In such cases, *que* is used to facilitate the movement between clauses. In the example above, the speaker uses *que* to indicate the beginning of a complicated subordinate clause as an aid to the listener, who is trying to follow what is being said.

In summary, the general examination of the linguistic trends in the data showed certain phonological and discourse factors within the language—a following obstruent, and simple preceding and following utterances—tend towards absence of *que*.

I then made a deeper analysis of the three expressions *disons (que)*, *je pense (que)*, and *parce (que)*. They occurred frequently in the corpus, and with an fairly high absence of *que*: in 28%, 15%, and 12% of cases respectively, they were used without *que*. These expressions function not only as part of a sentence (linguists have reservations about using the word sentence in relation to spoken language, but let's allow the expression for the moment), but also as "discourse markers", linking "chunks" of talk. To take an example, at the sentence level, the conjunction *parce que* is typically used to mark a causal relation between a main and a subordinate clause (e.g. *j'ai mangé une pomme parce que j'avais faim*). At the level of discourse, however, *parce que* can function as a discourse marker, introducing utterances which are subordinate to the main thrust of a narrative:

(2) *Mais celle qui achetait les corsets celle qui était en charge des corsets qui étaient très gros dans ce temps-là parce que les madames portaient des...*

des corsets bien c'était elle qui achetait c'était elle qui voyait les vendeurs. [67-84-213]

But the person who used to buy the corsets, the one who was in charge of the corsets, which were very big then—because ladies used to wear corsets—we'll she was the one who did the buying, she was the one who saw the salesmen.

In this example, the speaker brings in an “aside”, introduced by *parce que*, to remind her listener this was a time when women wore corsets. The speaker then signals her return to the main narrative by using a second discourse marker, *bien*.

To establish the functions of these flags, I paid particular attention to three criteria: the meaning or grammatical function(s) of the expression, the relationship of the expression with preceding and following utterances, and its position within larger chunks of speech, such as turns at talk (see Schifffrin, 1987; Vincent, 1983). In what follows, I concentrate on *je pense (que)*.

In formal or written language, the expression *je pense (que)* is often used to express the degree of a speaker's commitment to a following proposition (technically known as epistemic modality). In English, equivalent expressions such as “I think” have been variously described as representing the degree of certainty speakers may attach to what they are saying (Halliday, 1973), or marking a personal point of view (Stubbs, 1983).

But *je pense (que)* is also used in conversation to flag shifts in discourse, as the following examples show. When two speakers are taking turns at talk, *je pense (que)* may occur at the beginning of a turn, mid-turn, or at the end of a turn. To illustrate some of its different uses, let's look at some examples of *je pense (que)* used at the beginning of a turn.

(3) A: *Pourquoi... Pourquoi les gens parlent différemment les uns des autres?*

B: *Bien ça dépend peut-être de leur... Je pense ça dépend de leur éducation. Puis surtout du milieu d'où ils viennent... [38-84-307]*

A: Why... Why do people speak differently from each other?

B: Well maybe it depends on their... I think it depends on their education. And especially on their background...

(4) A: *Est-ce que vos parents habitent à Montréal?*

B: *Oui. <oui> Il y a seulement que ma mère... mon père est décédé.*

A: *Ça fait combien de temps qu'ils restent...*

B: *Ah... ma mère je pense que... ça doit faire... 40 ans qu'elle habite à Montréal. [6-84-3]*

A: Do your parents live in Montreal?

B: Yes. <yes> There's only my mother... my father has passed away.

A: How long have they lived...

B: Ah... my mother I think that... it must be... 40 years that she's lived in Montreal.

(5) A: *Est-ce qu'il est arrivé un événement depuis que vous habitez là... comme un vol, un feu ou... un accident quelconque là?*

B: *Non.*

A: *Non?*

B: *Non. Je pense que... on a défoncé une fois chez nous et puis... on a... un système qui avertit le... le poste de police alors... il y a pas de... Je pense bien que les... les cambrioleurs ont pas trop de chances. <humhum> [75-84-67]*

A: Has some event happened since you've been living here... like a robbery, a fire or... some kind of accident?

B: No.

A: No?

B: No. I think that... someone broke into our house and... we have... a system which alerts the police station so... there's no... I expect that the... the burglars don't have much of a chance. <uhhuh>

In these examples, *je pense (que)* is used in several ways: (a) to introduce an opinion or personal point of view (example 3); (b) as a marker of uncertainty (example 4); and (c) as an introductory phrase which simply marks the beginning of a turn (example 5). In example (3), *je pense* not only introduces a personal point of view, but also allows the speaker to “restart” after her opening utterance has stalled. Example (5) is particularly striking: here *je pense (que)* simply begins a turn at talk. There is no implication of doubt or uncertainty about the proposition it introduces.

The tendency to use *je pense* rather than *je pense que* has consequences for the structure of Montreal French. The link—the *que*—between a

main clause containing an epistemic expression (one which conveys the speaker's level of commitment to what they are about to say) and a subordinate clause appears to be weaker than the link between other main verbs and a following subordinate clause. (Cf. Thompson & Mulac, 1991, who argue convincingly for the reanalysis of 'I think' in English as a 'unitary epistemic phrase'.) In my data, these expressions show a certain amount of autonomy, and this is further evidence of the weak link. For example, *je pense*, along with similar expressions such as *je trouve* 'I find', can appear at the beginning, middle or end of an utterance, to comment on the whole proposition: *je pense je suis en retard* or *je suis en retard, je pense*.

Is there any evidence for the use of *je pense* (without the *que*) being on the increase? Among my sample of speakers, 15% of tokens (19/129) of *je pense (que)* appeared without the *que*, and variation was stable with no significant differences across age groups. However, I made an additional comparison with the group of twelve young speakers aged between 15 and 25. Among this group, rate of absence of *que* with *je pense (que)* was much higher, at 34% (28/83). There could be several explanations for this difference. For example, the latter interviews may have been less formal, and these young adults may have felt more relaxed and used a more informal language. But this might be evidence of sustained period of stable variation which is being disturbed by the beginnings of a change. In this case, pressure is being exerted from within the language in the direction of change.

Conclusion

As this study has shown, in the grammar of Montreal spoken French *que* is often an optional element. In many situations it is used indifferently: apparently for most speakers it is often an almost unconscious variation. But as we have also seen, Montreal speakers may choose to use the word where clarity of meaning, phonological context, or desire to assert professional status require it. The speakers who stand out as unusual in the Montreal speech community are those who always use *que*. In my sample, there are only two such speakers, one a judge, and the other a doctor in his late thirties. Ironically, by their linguistic behaviour, these speakers serve to highlight the secure place of the "optional *que*" in the grammar of the community from which they wish to stand apart.

As we have seen, variable use of *que* in Montreal French is a case of stable variation. Stable variation is a dynamic, not a static, condition. In the case of variable use of *que*, this dynamism is created by opposing pressures from both outside and within the language. On the one hand, I have highlighted the influence of occupation on variable use of *que*, with professionals forming a tightly knit group of speakers who rarely omit *que*. This group maintains the pull towards the prescriptive language and presence of *que*. On the other hand, I have shown certain phonological factors and discourse factors tend in the opposite direction towards absence of *que*. The result is a state of real or apparent equilibrium.

This is not to imply that the system contains some inbuilt mechanism which will ensure continued stability; in a situation where variation appears stable, there might be fine-grained tendencies to vary which can exert pressure on the linguistic system. One such area is discourse flags, in particular *je pense (que)*. I have presented evidence to suggest a younger generation of speakers aged 15–25 are more likely than the preceding generations represented in my core sample to say *je pense* rather than *je pense que*. There is no way of predicting when language will change. In this particular case of variation, the opposing pressures from within and without the language may continue to maintain a balance for some time. But already small signs of movement are there.

Notes

- 1 My warmest thanks go to Pierrette Thibault, Diane Vincent, and David Sankoff for allowing me to consult the Montreal corpora of spoken French, housed at the Université de Montréal.
- 2 In their justification for setting up the first Montreal corpus in 1971, D. Sankoff, G. Sankoff, Laberge & Topham (1976:88-89) state as their objective:

Nous voulions contribuer à une meilleure compréhension du français parlé au Québec en considérant ses aspects propres non comme des erreurs ou aberrations ou encore en termes de mélange non structuré d'anomalies grammaticales, mais en tant qu'éléments d'un système cohérent partagé par tous les membres de la communauté.

We wanted to contribute to a better understanding of spoken French in Quebec by considering its particularities, not as errors or aberrations or even in terms of an unstructured mixture of grammatical anomalies, but as elements of a coherent system shared by all the members of the community.

- 3 The terms "omit" and "omission" suggest a failure to adhere to a prescriptive form. To avoid these terms, I have used the oppositions presence/absence, and use/nonuse in this article wherever possible.
- 4 The data on *que* were collected from the first 400 hundred lines of each interview, and a total of 2013 tokens (instances of use or nonuse of *que*) were used in the final analyses.
- 5 For the 1971 corpus, the socio-economic status of speakers was measured by a "linguistic market" score allocated to each speaker. The linguistic market index (see D Sankoff & Laberge 1978) is a measure of social position, and represents the relative importance of the so-called standard or "legitimated" language in the socio-economic life of the speaker. Examples of occupations which would require the legitimated language without necessarily implying high socio-economic status are receptionists and telephonists, alongside people like lawyers and television presenters. The index had not yet been allocated to speakers in the 1984 corpus at the time of writing my thesis.
- 6 I adapted the classification used by the creators of the 1984 corpus (see Thibault & Vincent, 1990: 88–89), identifying three occupational groups—"professional": liberal professions, heads of business, university-educated employees, "white collar": technicians and foremen, white-collar workers, and "blue collar": blue-collar workers, people with no stable employment or unemployed.
- 7 The level of significance is 5%, in other words, there is only a 5 in 100 chance that the pattern found by the program in the data is random.
- 8 This is known as "apparent time" data. Of course, some cases of variation between older and younger speakers are manifestations of "stable age grading": as younger speakers age and become the older generation themselves, they take on the speech habits of the older generation.
- 9 In separate variable rule analyses of the data from men and women, age was selected as significant ($p = 0.044$) only for men, with the following results: age 29–33: factor weight of 0.79; age 35–64: factor weight of 0.48; age 66–73: factor weight of 0.31.
- 10 "Obstruent" refers to stops (/p/, /b/, /t/, /d/, /k/, /g/), fricatives (/s/, /z/, /f/, /v/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/) and affricates (/tʃ/, /dʒ/); "sonorant" refers to vowels, glides (/j/, /w/, /r/), nasals, and liquids (/l/, /r/).
- 11 I tested the conclusions of G. Sankoff et al in two ways. First, I classified preceding and following phonological contexts using their division of sibilant (defined as the sounds /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/), consonant, and vowel. When I ran my data through the variable rule program, preceding phonological context was not selected as significant. I made a further analysis, setting up a linguistic factor group

that combined preceding and following phonological contexts. This was to test explicitly Sankoff et al's claim that absence of *que* was due primarily to the reduction of consonant clusters, particularly in the context of a preceding and following sibilant. The results showed that, although a preceding and a following sibilant was a favourable context, the one factor that all the favourable contexts shared was a following sibilant or consonant, thus proving the dominance of the following phonological context.

- 12 The number in brackets refers to speaker, year of interview, and page of transcription. In the examples, a series of three dots represents a pause; angled brackets < > refer to the listener's responses during the speaker's turn; A refers to the interviewer, and B to the informant.

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