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*The production of social meaning via
the association of variety and style:
A case study of Liège Belgian French
vowel lengthening*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Drawing boundaries between languages and linguistic varieties¹ or dialects continues to be a vexing issue. However, many sociolinguists do not address this issue, and use terms such as “dialect” or “variety” as if their definition were unproblematic. In the first section of this paper we show why a more accurate usage of these concepts is necessary. In the second section, we propose a narrow definition of the notion of “linguistic variety” and try to integrate it in a model of the relations between varieties and styles. Drawing on research in progress on vowel lengthening in the Belgian French-speaking community we illustrate how speakers draw upon linguistic variation to produce social meaning,

2. PROBLEMS IN DEFINING DIALECTS AND VARIETIES IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS

Linguists often say that a speaker speaks the dialect of his or her group membership and that this practice reveals his or her identity (Chambers 2003:7). Often, however, the linguistic reality of so-called dialects remains vague. In fact, we rarely have a precise definition of what the linguist’s conception of this dialect is, of its boundaries, and specific features. Sociolinguists usually characterise

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¹Throughout this paper, the terms “variety” and “dialect” are assumed to be synonymous, and both contrast with the notion of “style”. See sections 3.2 and 3.3 for a comprehensive description of these concepts.

dialects by a set of linguistic features— mostly phonological and lexical, but also syntactic and sometimes morphological—in a list that is almost never exhaustive. In fact, sociolinguistic studies examine only a few of these features, often independently of the others.

For these reasons, the division of a sociolinguistic space into sub-dialects remains problematic, since there is no absolute criterion that can be used to decide how to circumscribe sub-entities within a major dialect area. To achieve such a division, sociolinguists usually rely on extra-linguistic criteria, for example by associating a set of linguistic variants with a group that is assumed to have sociological relevance.

Another factor to consider is that the linguistic features of a given dialect are more typical than they are specific. For example, although a series of features may be typical in a given dialect in that they extremely frequent, their occurrence is not necessarily specific to that dialect. So when looking at the speech of individual speakers, a single occurrence of a variant cannot be invoked to categorise their speech as belonging to one or another dialect; we in fact need to observe a certain frequency of that particular variant to correctly identify the dialect. But this becomes circular, as there is no absolute quantitative measure that can be used to establish when a speaker uses a sufficient number of typical features, and so is to be considered a speaker of a dialect rather than a speaker of the standard language.

Sociolinguists would generally agree that there are no sharp boundaries between the dialectal level and the standard language level; rather they constitute a continuum. However, sociolinguists seem reluctant to recognise what this implies: current definitions of dialects are such that it is not possible to assign a given speech to a definite position on the linguistic continuum. This means that we can neither categorise speakers as “dialect speakers” nor as “standard language speakers”.

Thus, the lack of definition of dialects and varieties has two major consequences. First, the tendency to associate a dialect with a particular group homogenises the description of the linguistic practices of the group and its members. This is because sociolinguists generally focus on what distinguishes the supposed speakers of the different dialects, and not on the differences within each social group under scrutiny. Second, the social value of the variants tends to be viewed as unambiguous. For example, if a dialect is associated with a low-prestige group, then its features will be low-valued, and expected to be quasi-absent in the speech of middle-class speakers.

Sociolinguists are aware of the existence of so-called stylistic (intra-speaker) variation. However, as the majority of a community tends to speak closer to the standard norm (with more or less success), intra-speaker variation is traditionally seen as resulting from different degrees of attention paid to speech (Labov 1972, 2001), or from efforts to attain the intended norm.² On this view, one would

²For discussions about speech styles, see Eckert and Rickford (2001a).

predict that non-standard variants found in the speech of middle-class speakers would appear only as a result of errors or from lack of attention.

This is undoubtedly true for many linguistic communities at the macro-linguistic level. Even mainstream sociolinguistic theory generally admits the existence of dialect-oriented practices among middle-class speakers (Labov 1972:1–42; Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999). But since such practices often relate to marginal situations, for example with insular communities, they may be seen as the exception confirming the rule.

Nevertheless, the main problem in our view is that this concept of varieties and styles masks the possibility for speakers to adjust, to remodel the social value and social meaning of linguistic variation. A priori, this concept excludes a creative use of marked linguistic features by speakers in order to produce meaning, namely to index their social identity.

The difficulty with the notion of variety comes from the fact that it refers at the same time to a social construct, shared by naive speakers and linguists, whose function is to draw homogenous categories (the standard variety, the regional variety) and to a practice described by linguists, which is by nature infinitely variable.³ In keeping with the perspective sketched by Eckert (2000), and continued by others (Irvine 2001; Moore 2003), we attempt to articulate practices with representations, and varieties with styles, in order to better analyse the social meaning of variation

3. TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE UNDERSTANDING OF VARIETIES AND STYLES

The problems raised by the definition of linguistic varieties have led some linguists to reject this notion, particularly within French sociolinguistics, where concepts such as *français populaire* ‘working-class French’ or *français des jeunes* ‘adolescents’ French’ are considered useless or misleading (Gadet 2003:14–17, 79ff.). Beyond the epistemological problem of the scientific validity of these concepts, we may wonder whether it makes sense to speak of dialects and varieties, given the difficulties mentioned above.

Although we refuse to associate speakers with varieties, we claim that these varieties are meaningful to the speakers, within their *imaginaire linguistique* (Houdebine 1997, 1998). We will restrict our usage of the term variety to designate shared social constructs, and not concrete linguistic practices.

3.1. Varieties as abstract speech models

We hypothesise that linguistic varieties are abstract speech models and thus have the status of social constructs. This means that they constitute particular social

³Some linguists are, however, aware of this ambiguity and try to distinguish the two exceptions when speaking about a given variety (see e.g., Fabricius 2000).

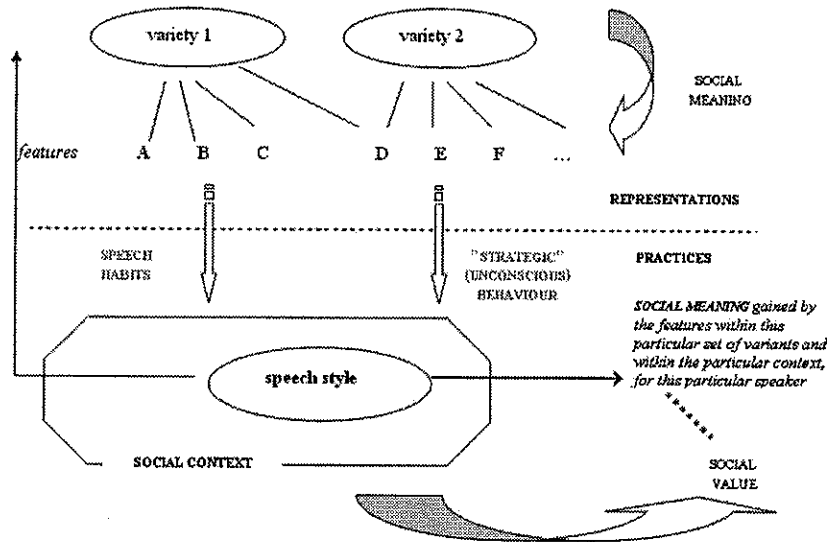


Figure 1: Relations between varieties and styles.

representations (Doise 1986, 1993; Flament 1994), which the French sociolinguistic tradition calls *représentations linguistiques* (Francard 1998; Moreau et al. 1999), and are thus part of the speaker's *imaginaire linguistique*. Through these linguistic representations, speakers associate social groups or social categories with several speech models, and this association gives them a particular social meaning, which may therefore be projected onto the variants associated with those speech models (see Figure 1).

Not all the speech models have very clear contours in the *imaginaire linguistique* of speakers. Models may, for example, correspond to formal speech, awkward speech, or baby-talk. They are thus more or less precisely defined, more or less commonly evaluated within a community and, as with any other social representation, partly shared and stable, and partly variable. From this point of view, linguistic varieties are relatively well-defined speech models, associated with particular groups, which are differentiated on a social or geographic basis.

We can try to make this clearer with an example. There is something known as “the variety of French spoken in Belgium” in the *imaginaire linguistique* of French-speaking Belgians (Hambye and Francard 2004; Moreau 1997). This variety is associated with social meanings and values. Even if the representation of this variety has no precise and stable linguistic content, we think that speakers sometimes refer to this representation when they elaborate their speech style and when they interpret and categorise the style produced by an interlocutor. Further,

we assume that the features that are taken as typical of this variety (e.g., the use of *septante* instead of *soixante-dix* for ‘seventy’), carry a social meaning linked to the value associated with this variety.

3.2. Speaking as a process of stylisation

At the level of linguistic practices (see Figure 1), speakers do not select varieties as pre-formed entities: rather, they produce styles by combining bundles of variants partly through habitual behaviour but also through more strategic and creative—albeit mainly unconscious—speech activity (Dittmar 1995:113). In our view, the occurrence of marked variants in a speech style is determined by a speaker’s interaction with others together with his or her social goals and purposes. Speakers adopt ways of speaking that are able to produce the effects they desire, such as signalling familiarity, distance, or contributing to the construction of their identity. To achieve this, speakers draw upon different variants and the social meaning these variants carry.

The meaning of variants depends on their association with speech models (e.g., varieties) in the speaker’s *imaginaire linguistique*,⁴ and of the particular context of the interaction. Speech styles are indeed always produced in the particular social context constituted by an interaction between several speakers with all its parameters: identities and roles of the speakers, material and symbolic stakes, or environment (Goffman 1959; Gumperz 1982; Roulet et al. 2001). In different contexts, the meaning and the value of linguistic variants may differ.

The meaning of a variant can not be reduced to the meaning inherited from an association with a variety within the *imaginaire linguistique*. Such an association only gives a more or less important part of this meaning, as a variant can be associated with several types of linguistic practices. Furthermore, we make a distinction between the social meaning and the social value attributed to a style in a given context. The legitimacy of a style is neither stable nor unambiguous, but always contextually determined. Finally, we should note that not all the variants associated with a given variety have the same power of significance, following different factors such as overt social stigmatisation, saliency, etc.⁵

This view, close to the notion of “linguistic variation as social practice” (Eckert 2000), is in fact quite different from mainstream sociolinguistic theory. Sociolinguistic studies have revealed that socially or regionally marked features appear mostly in casual speech. Social and stylistic differentiations are thus often represented on a single axis: for every speaker, the more vernacular speech is also

⁴Irvine (2001:22) gives a very clear explanation of the fact that the meaning of styles is “ideologically mediated”, as its interpretation relies on a partly shared understanding of the social and linguistic world.

⁵Labov (1972) pointed out this difference with his distinction between marker, indicator, and stereotypes.

the more (socially, regionally) marked; and the lower a speaker is on the social hierarchy, the more “dialectal” is his or her speech style (in comparison to the same speech style for a higher class member). There is, thus, a strong link between styles and dialects in sociolinguistic theory (Eckert and Rickford 2001b).

Even if this is generally true, sociolinguistic theory should allow more space for linguistic practices producing social meaning precisely by going against this pattern. We hypothesise that a speaker may use certain marked variants in very formal situations or reserve them only for very precise events within an interaction, in order to produce a particular meaning. In this perspective, changes in attention paid to speech are clearly not the only factor explaining stylistic variation (Eckert 2001). This means that on the level of interaction, a decrease in the frequency of marked variants will not always be caused by an increase in attention paid to speech or vice-versa. We postulate that speakers may also produce non-standard variants because they spontaneously and unconsciously adapt their speech to the style that seems appropriate to them, and meaningful in the particular context of an interaction.

Finally, we note that speech styles contribute to the construction of the representations of varieties. Though imagined boundaries between varieties are not wholly determined by the reality of linguistic practices, they are not purely independent of them. The social meaning of a variant is not simply gained from the group that quantitatively uses it the most: it also results from a stereotypical association that is informed by the effective distribution of variants in the linguistic community. This means that there is room for both a subjective and an objective description of the varieties, that is, for a study of the perception and the representations of the varieties and for the objective description of the variable practices of a group. Note that this description will not allow us to define a variety, but will inform us as to which features are likely to be typical of the group in its totality, or of certain sub-groups within it, which are subject to change.

4. A CASE STUDY: THE USE OF VOWEL LENGTHENING AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN LIÈGE

In the remainder of this paper, we present a small case study to illustrate these points. The study is aimed at testing the following hypothesis: even if it is true that regional or social varieties are less prestigious than the standard variety, this does not imply that every non-standard feature in a speech style carries negative meaning and low value. These meanings and values are co-constructed by the speaker and the hearer(s) within the framework of an interaction.

4.1. The variables: Vowel lengthening in final or penultimate position

We chose to analyse two phonological variables situated at the prosodic level of linguistic organisation: vowel lengthening in final position and vowel lengthening

in penultimate position. Vowel lengthening seems to be closely tied to regional variation in Belgium and it has been stigmatised for many years by grammarians. Among them, Louis Remacle (1969) clearly states that vowel lengthening is frequent in the Belgian French-speaking community, and produces a very bad impression:

Pour caractériser en général la manière dont les Wallons prononcent le français, on peut dire qu'ils "wallonnent", ou, en d'autres termes, qu'ils parlent avec une lourdeur pâteuse. Or, s'ils produisent cette mauvaise impression, sans doute est-ce d'abord parce qu'ils articulent tous les sons d'une façon relâchée, et notamment parce que, comme nous venons de le voir, ils donnent souvent aux voyelles un timbre douteux et terne. Mais c'est surtout parce qu'ils allongent indûment trop de voyelles. Allongez une voyelle, vous ralentissez d'autant votre débit; allongez-en beaucoup, vous rendrez inévitablement votre parole traînante et lourde. Ce n'est pas tout: du fait qu'on attribue à plusieurs syllabes une durée excessive, on est amené, semble-t-il, à dire la phrase avec une modulation particulière, naturellement différente de la bonne, et cette nouvelle incorrection est d'autant plus regrettable qu'elle affecte toute la chaîne parlée du langage. (Remacle 1969:70)⁶

Of course, such a moral characterisation of Belgian French pronunciation as being “not good”, “dull”, or “lax” reflects an ideological judgment and cannot be taken for granted as a reliable phonetic description. Nevertheless, it draws attention to one specific aspect of Walloon pronunciation—namely, vowel lengthening—and the negative social meaning associated with it, at least in the 1960s. For these reasons, short vowels are postulated to be associated with standard French, while long vowels (in certain contexts, see below) are postulated to be associated with regional varieties of French. The local “accent” of Liège, a French-speaking city in the eastern part of Belgium, is known to be one of the most typical and resistant in the Walloon region, and we can expect vowel lengthening to be an important feature of Liège’s linguistic variety. Contrary to the standard pattern, many inhabitants of Liège and its suburbs lengthen final and/or penultimate vowels,⁷ outside the phonetic conditions allowing unmarked lengthening in standard French (see section 4.3).

⁶ In order to characterise the ordinary way Walloons pronounce French, we can say that they ‘wallon’, that is, they speak in a woolly and clumsy style. If they produce such a bad impression, it is because they firstly articulate all the sounds in a lax way and because they often give the vowels a doubtful and dull timbre. But it is especially due to the fact that they improperly lengthen too many vowels. As soon as you lengthen a vowel, you decrease your speech rate. As soon as you lengthen too many vowels, you inevitably make your speech drawling and dull ... and you say the entire sentence with a particular modulation, naturally different from the ‘good’ one ... [authors’ translation]

⁷We always consider vowels within the domain of the intonation group (IG). We refer to Lengthened vowels in Final position as “Lf”, and to Lengthened vowels in Penultimate position as “Lp”.

Vowel lengthening is a complex matter, not only in French. The (subjective) perception of a vowel as categorically long or short does not directly correlate with objective vowel duration. Vowel lengthening depends on many factors, including

- i. the intrinsic duration of vowels (open or nasal vowels tend to be longer than closed or oral vowels; see Fónagy 1992);
- ii. the incidence of the consonantal context⁸ (Fónagy 1992; Delattre 1966:105–119);
- iii. the variation in speech rate (vowels are longer when speech rate decreases; Zellner 1998); and
- iv. the location of the vowel within the IG (syllable duration decreases in relation to its distance from the last accented syllable in the group; Astesano et al. 1995 in Zellner 1998:31).

These articulatory and prosodic constraints clearly interact in order to determine the objective duration of vowels. Furthermore, the prosodic constraints create paralinguistic differences in duration that are not consciously perceived by the hearers, but processed at an unconscious level in order to distinguish suprasegmental constituents (such as words or prosodic phrases) or stylistic effects (such as emphasis) (Fónagy 1992).

In this study, we tried to neutralise the cases where lengthening was due to phonetic context, emphasis, or continuative contour. Instead, we took into account only the contexts where vowel lengthening was unpredictable and where the occurrence of a (extra) long vowel would be noticeable and perceived as long by the hearers. We consider our approach to vowel lengthening as an auditory approach, backed with acoustical analysis (see section 4.3) for discussion of the doubtful cases.

4.2. The data

To test our hypothesis, we analysed data from a small sample of speakers from Liège. Four young adult speakers aged 21 to 24 were recorded by two interviewers for one hour. The first part of the interaction, a guided conversation (GC), was close to a classic sociolinguistic interview, using reading tasks and answers to a questionnaire, and was conducted by a non-intimate acquaintance of the informants. The second part was a non-guided conversation (NGC) between the informant and a friend.⁹ Both interviews are of equal length.

⁸See Grammont's well-known rule stating that accented vowels in French are lengthened when followed by voiced fricatives [v, z, ʒ] and the liquid [ʀ].

⁹These data come from the survey on French pronunciation in Belgium led by the Centre de recherches VALIBEL and are part of the international research project *Phonologie du*

Table 1: Sample of speakers

Social Scale	Age	Studies	Profession	Father's profession	Mother's profession
WM	21	High school	Electrician	Electrician	Nurse
MM	24	University	University researcher	Bank clerk	Secretary
MF	23	University	French teacher	Policeman	Seamstress
UF	24	University	Lab researcher	Engineer	Physiotherapist

The sample of speakers includes two men and two women. We consider that two of the four speakers represent two poles on the social scale, that is a working-class male (WM) and an upper-middle-class female (UF). The two other speakers are situated roughly in-between: a middle-class male (MM) and a middle-class female (MF). However, the middle-class group is not completely symmetric since the middle-class female has been highly mobile: she studied at the university and is now a teacher of French, whereas her parents did not complete secondary school. The social mobility of the middle-class male is also significant, although to a lesser extent (see Table 1).

4.3. The method

The study is aimed at correlating the distribution of the variants (long or short vowels in final and/or penultimate position) with the degree of formality of the speech event. We presume that the guided conversation was clearly perceived by the informants as more formal than the non-guided one. However, we also analysed the distribution of the variants in relation to the different sections of speech (formal or informal) occurring within each conversation.

4.3.1. Coding the type of speech sections within each interaction

For the guided and non-guided conversations of each speaker, we assigned each portion of speech a section label. We were inspired by Labov's decision tree and used the same categories, sometimes redefining them (Labov 1972, 2001). The following kinds of sections were labelled as "formal sections" (FS):

- response (the first utterance that follows the speech of the interviewer);
- language (every section where the topic is language); and
- opinions (generalised opinions).

And we labelled as "informal sections" (IS) the following sections:

- narrative (every *personal* narrative);

français contemporain (Durand, Laks, and Lyche 2002; see infolang.u-paris10.fr/pfc/). The guidelines mentioned above are common to all the recordings of this project (see Durand and Lyche 2003).

- groups (every section of conversation with someone other than the interviewer);
- kids (every section where the subject is the speaker's childhood); and
- tangents (every extended body of speech that deviates from the last topic and is introduced by the informant).

Several sections from both the guided and the non-guided conversations did not enter into any category. Following Baugh's (2001) arguments, we did not label these sections as "formal", as Labov proposes, but rather, we labelled them as "residual sections" and made a distinction between "formal residual sections" (FRS) from the guided conversation, and "informal residual sections" (IRS) from the non-guided conversation.

4.3.2. *Coding the variants of the variables*

To quantify the variation of the variables—vowel lengthening in final (Lf) and penultimate (Lp) position—we considered every Intonational Group in the speech of our informants. Spoken French can be divided into intonation groups (IGs), with each IG made up of a sequence of unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable.¹⁰ An IG may also contain a secondary accent on the first or second syllable; in standard French, the secondary (initial position) accent does not lengthen the syllable bearing it, as reported by Mertens (1987:85): "dans la totalité des cas, la syllabe porteuse de l'accent initial est brève". In our study, we want to maintain a clear distinction between lengthening and prominence. Although non-final prominence has been frequently reported for both standard and non-standard French (often referred to as "melodic initial accent", "emphatic initial accent", or "secondary accent"), this feature is not associated with vowel lengthening, but rather with pitch excursion and/or an increase in intensity (Di Cristo 2000:40; Simon 2004:17).

Using *Praat*¹¹ software, we created as many intervals as there were Intonation Groups in the speech of our informants. For every IG, the duration (long vs. short) of the last two vowels was coded.

The coding of the intervals was made by the authors, with every interview being first coded by one and then revised by the other. The aim was to identify and to

¹⁰The internal structure of IG in French is as follows (see Mertens 1993), with optional constituents put in brackets: IG → (NA) (AI) (NA) AF (appendix), where NA = unaccented syllables; AI = initial accent; AF = accent in final position; appendix = sequence of unaccented syllable uttered at a low-pitched level. That means that the AF position may include both the accented syllable and a (series of) post-accentual syllable(s). See the "quoi" appendix in example (3).

¹¹This is free software for computer-assisted phonetic analysis developed by Paul Boersma and David Weenink at the University of Amsterdam; see www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/.

quantify the vowels perceived as long, that is, the vowels whose lengthening was salient (marked), and thus could have an effect on the interlocutor. Three prosodic parameters were taken into account to determine if the vowel under observation was perceptually short or long: vowel length, vowel intensity, and vowel height. Analyses were carried out with Praat, so that we were able to establish acoustic correlates for the perception of the lengthening.¹² In every case, the salience of lengthening is higher when the intonation curve (F0) is dynamic (i.e., when a rising-falling contour appears during the production of the vowel).

The different realisations that were not considered marked were the following:

- i. short final and penultimate vowels;
- ii. grammatically conditioned phonological lengthening of the final vowel (the gender opposition between masculine and feminine forms, e.g., feminine *je suis née* [ne:] versus masculine *je suis né* [ne]);
- iii. length contrasts that distinguish minimal pairs (e.g., *mettre-maître*, *patte-pâte*, *renne-reine*, see Warnant 1997);
- iv. lengthening of the final vowel due to a rising intonation contour (e.g., projecting continuity or indicating the construction of a list); and
- v. lengthening of the final vowel due to phonetic constraints (see the above-mentioned rule for vowel lengthening in French).

Each example is followed by a figure, presenting the matching prosogram.¹³ Example (1) comprises two Intonation Groups, with parentheses in the French transcription indicating the boundaries of each IG. The second IG being is with an appendix (*quoi tu vois*). Although the last vowel /a/ [pa] in the first IG is objectively long (260 ms), it is neither salient nor perceptually long because its lengthening correlates to a rising contour indicating continuity. The final vowel /E/ in the second IG is short and is coded as such.

¹²We give approximate measures for vowel lengthening. These values are purely indicative, as coding was primarily done on a perceptual grounds. A final vowel was considered to be long if it was recorded for longer than 150 milliseconds (ms) for an oral vowel and 200 ms for a nasal vowel; a penultimate vowel was coded as long (a) when presenting an increase in intensity and being longer than 130 ms for an oral vowel (160 ms for a nasal vowel), or (b) when longer than 100 ms for an oral vowel (130 ms for a nasal vowel) and also clearly longer than the final vowel, or (c) when longer than 100 ms and followed by an extra lengthened final vowel.

¹³The prosogram (see Mertens 2004; bach.arts.kuleuven.ac.be/~piet/prosogram/) provides a semi-automatic transcription of prosody, based on phonetic alignment and on a model of F0 perception. On the diagram: X-axis = time (in s). Y-axis = perceived pitch (in ST, relative to 1 Hz); dotted grid lines = 2 ST apart. The vertical dotted lines show segmentation boundaries. Intensity (thin line) and F0 (thick line) on a ST scale, are added for validating the results.

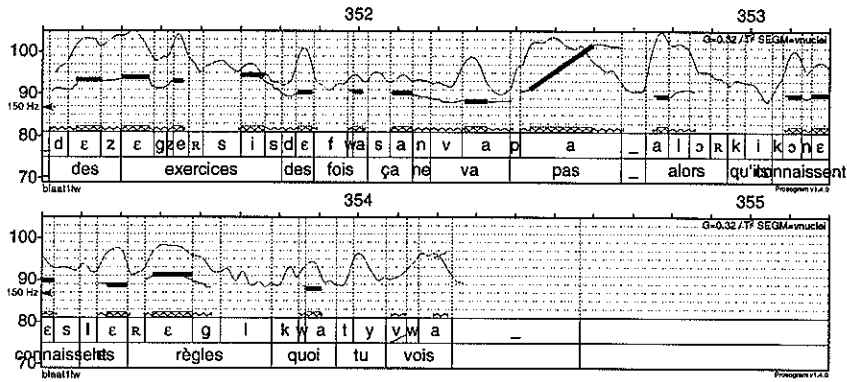


Figure 2: Prosogram of example (1).

- (1) (des exercices des fois ça ne va pas) (alors qu'ils connaissent les règles quoi tu vois)
 'for the exercises sometimes it doesn't work although they know the rules you know'

As mentioned earlier, we wanted to only take into consideration vowel lengthening occurring in unpredictable environments, that is, being salient (marked) from the hearers' point of view.

The first salient (marked) variant corresponds to a lengthening of the final vowel outside the above-listed environments:

- (2) (je crois qu'ils ont étudié)
 'I think that they have studied.'

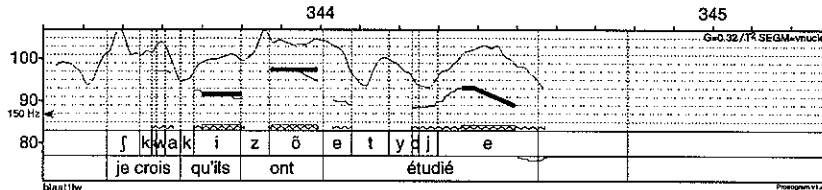


Figure 3: Prosogram of example (2).

In (2), vowel lengthening of the final syllable of the IG [dje] does not correspond to a rising contour, but to a regionally marked falling contour. Consequently, vowel length (255 ms) may be considered salient.

The second salient variant consists of a lengthening of the penultimate vowel only. Due to the fact that vowel lengthening never takes place in penultimate position in standard French, this variant is of particular salience.¹⁴ In (3), the

¹⁴Penultimate lengthening has been reported by several authors. Carton (1991) studied this phenomenon in different northern varieties of French. More recently, it was observed

penultimate syllable [vrɛ] is 170 ms long and is realised with an increase in intensity, as indicated by the thin grey line marking intensity on the prosogram. The last (nasal) syllable [mã] was not perceived as a marked (long) variant.

- (3) (là je crois que je m'énervais aussi vraiment quoi)
 'and then I think that I became really nervous you know'

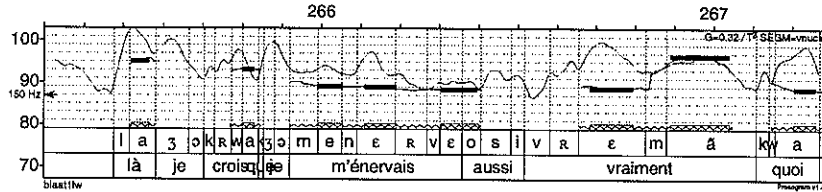


Figure 4: Prosogram of example (3).

A third variant combines a partial lengthening of the penultimate vowel with a lengthening of the final vowel (both the penultimate and the final vowels have then been counted as marked). In example (4), the values for penultimate and final vowel duration are respectively 170 and 230 ms.¹⁵

- (4) (les exercices qu'ils font à la maison)
 'the exercises they do at home'

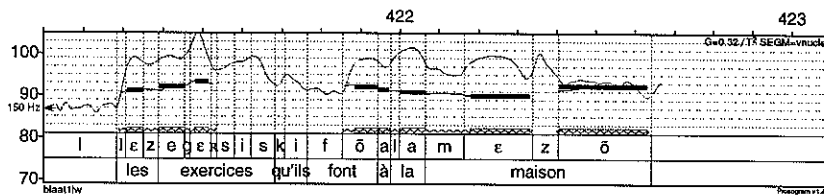


Figure 5: Prosogram of example (4).

Our variants, like many linguistic variants, do not correspond to discrete categories on the phonetic level. It is only our perception that discriminates between so-called long and short vowels. So, as always, there remain cases where the categorisation of a given vowel is unclear. This poses a serious problem for the sociolinguistic analysis of phonological variables; one solution is to conduct a detailed acoustic analysis. But this limits the number of informants we are able to

in the French of urban suburbs and linked to a possible influence of the rhythmic patterns of rap music (see Duez and Casanova 1997:65). In our view, this phenomenon may still be considered as marked, as it appears in clearly non-standard linguistic practices.

¹⁵Examples (3) and (4) both involve dissyllabic words (*maison*, *vraiment*). As a reviewer points out, this could mean that the Intonation Group is not the only relevant unit here, and that word prosody should also be taken into account.

analyse: in this case, there were about 700 occurrences of the variables for each speaker. So, the more phonetically accurate the analysis is, the less statistically valid is the sample of speakers. For the purposes of this study, we elected to stay close to the phonetic data and privileged a micro-oriented ethnographic analysis.

5. RESULTS

We first present the results in terms of a traditional correlationist method for quantitative analysis (section 5.1). Then, in the framework of an interactive, qualitative analysis, we propose other ways of explanation for our data (section 5.2).

5.1. Quantitative analysis

As expected, the global pattern of results follows the predictions of sociolinguistic theory. There is indeed a correlation between the rate of non-standard variants in the speech of a speaker and his or her social class: the working-class male (WM) produces more lengthened vowels than the three others, while the upper-class female (UF) produce fewer lengthened vowels than any of the other informants.¹⁶ When comparing the two types of conversations (guided and non-guided), we see that marked variants are also more frequent in the non-guided (NGC) than in the guided (GC) conversations¹⁷ (see Figure 6). The results also confirm Labov's observation (1972:239, 242) that there is less social differentiation in formal situations.

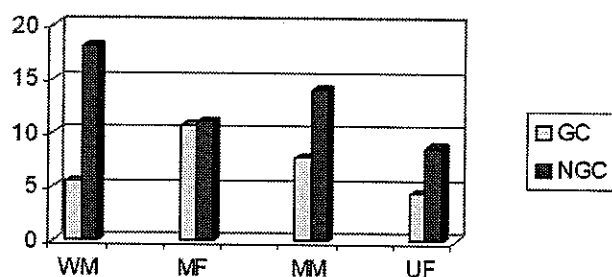


Figure 6: Percentage of non-standard variants realised by each speaker for the two conversations.

¹⁶The results for each speaker are given in the appendix. The differences between speakers are statistically significant for both variables in the guided conversation WHAT IS 'p' REPRESENTING ($p < 0.05$) and only for the Lp variable in the non-guided conversation ($p < 0.001$). The results of the chi-square tests are given when significant ($p < 0.05$). Statistical significance is not at issue in this study, as the results are mainly illustrative and should be confirmed with data from a larger sample.

¹⁷Differences between the conversations are however only significant for WM ($p < 0.01$ for the Lf variable; $p < 0.001$ for the Lp variable) and MM ($p < 0.01$ for the Lp variable).

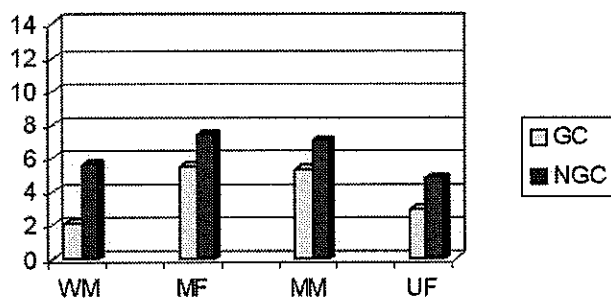


Figure 7: Percentage of Lf variants realised by each speaker for the two conversations.

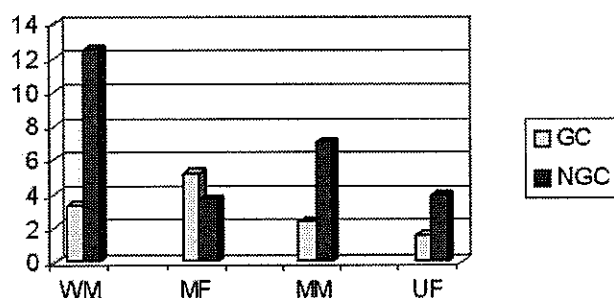


Figure 8: Percentage of Lp variants realised by each speaker for the two conversations.

However, the data show two unexpected results. First, the working-class male (WM) has the highest degree of contrast between the more formal and the more informal conversation. Second, there is almost no difference between the middle-class female's (MF) two conversations. These results have to be explained by distinguishing the analysis according to the two variables and the different speech sections.

It appears that final (Lf) and penultimate (Lp) vowel lengthening are not subject to the same pattern of variation. The distribution of the final vowel lengthening (Lf) contrasts between speakers and types of conversation, WM's case excepted (see Figure 7).

In contrast, the distribution of the penultimate vowel lengthening (Lp) is far more clear-cut: the differences between speakers and between conversations are more distinct. In this case, it is MF who seems to present an unexpected pattern with more lengthened vowels in the guided conversation (see Figure 8).

Several factors may explain the difference between the two variables. The control over the Lp variant may be more manageable than the control over the Lf variant, because of the saliency of the penultimate vowel lengthening, which

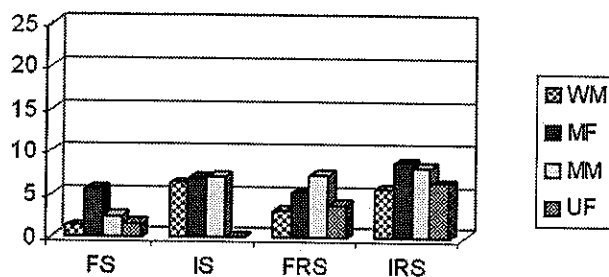


Figure 9: Percentage of Lf variants realised by each speaker for the four section types.

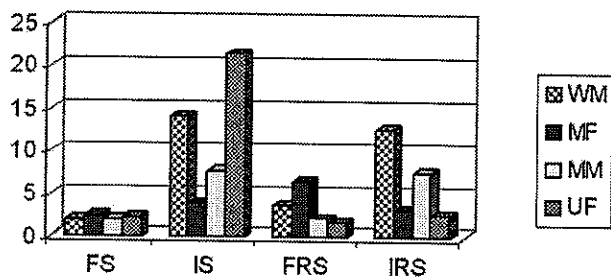


Figure 10: Percentage of Lp variants realised by each speaker for the four section types.

is prohibited in the standard (prescriptive) variety of French. This difference in saliency between Lf and Lp may create a difference in social meaning and degree of stigmatisation, with the Lp variant being potentially perceived as more marked than the Lf variant.

Looking at the distribution of variants within the different types of speech (formal, informal, and residual sections) confirms this analysis. The Lf variant seems to be less marked than the Lp variant: in the speech of three of our speakers (WM, MM, UF), the frequency of the Lf variants is clearly low only in the formal sections (FS), with little differences between the other speech types (see Figure 9), whereas the frequency of the Lp variants is low in formal sections (FS) and residual formal sections (FRS) but very high in the residual informal sections (IRS) and particularly high in the informal sections (IS) (see Figure 10).¹⁸

¹⁸Statistical analysis shows that the differences between speech sections are significant with both variables for WM (Lf: $p < 0.01$ and Lp: $p > 0.001$) with the Lp variable for MM ($p < 0.01$) and UF ($p < 0.001$). The fact that there is no occurrence of the Lf variant in UF's informal sections is simply due to the fact that these sections are extremely rare. It makes the high rate of Lp variants in IS more remarkable.

In our view, the results show that the Lp variant is both more stigmatised than the Lf variant but also more valued when speakers need to express particular social meaning in informal situations. We could explain the increase in Lp variants in informal sections (IS) and residual informal sections (IRS) by a decrease in the speakers' attention paid to speech. The problem with an "attention-paid-to-speech" explanation is that it does not explain why, for all three speakers, the increase in Lp variants in informal sections is higher than the increase in Lf variants. Nor does it explain why the frequency of Lp variants is higher in upper-class female's (UF) speech than in the speech of the others in informal sections, while the attention she pays to her speech is supposed to decrease. In contrast, we can explain these facts if we interpret the increase in Lp variants as, for example, the result of the speakers' wish to reduce interpersonal distance, or to show involvement.

We can also explain the unusual patterns of the working-class male (WM) and the middle-class female (MF) in this framework. In our sample, WM is clearly the speaker who is the most conscious of and the most sensitive to the gap between his speech and the norm. Even if he is not a member of the social class that is supposed to present the highest linguistic insecurity (the lower middle-class following Labov 1972:122–142), there are numerous signs showing that he viewed the interview situation as very formal and serious, so we can assume that he felt the correctness of his speech was at stake during the interaction. This could thus explain why he seems to control his speech more than the others in order to reach a more standardised French, with regards to the Lf variable. However, this global attitude does not prevent him from using Lp variants frequently in informal sections and residual informal sections, particularly with the familiar interlocutor — exactly as the upper-class female (UF) does — in order to produce social meaning.

The speech of the middle-class female (MF) reflects an opposite experience. MF was not at all impressed by the formality of the interview and as the interviewer of the guided conversation was more familiar to her than he was to the other speakers, she may have wanted to reduce the formality of the situation. This could explain why there are no significant differences between the formal and informal sections concerning her use of the Lf variant, and only a slight increase during informal sections and the residual informal sections. MF also adopted a style signalling — and therefore creating — an informal interaction, which could explain the high rate of Lp variants in the residual formal sections (FRS). But this still does not tell us why the frequency of the Lp variant is so low in the informal sections (IS) and residual informal sections (IRS), in comparison to the frequency of the Lf variant in the same sections and to the frequency of the Lp variant among the other speakers. We have not found any satisfactory explanation for this fact.

Even though, in certain contexts, the speech of our informants presents similar rates of the regional variants under scrutiny, it would be an oversimplification to say that they speak the same variety of French. Rather, it is more accurate to say that all the informants draw upon the meaning gained by the variants, namely

through their association with a regional variety, to elaborate their speech styles and to produce social meaning. The low prestige of the Lp variant does not prevent its usage from being highly frequent, especially when speakers need to express the meaning carried by a regional variant, in order to achieve conversational and social goals.

5.2. Qualitative analysis

Vowel lengthening is considered a regional feature typical of the Walloon area. In speakers' representations, the social meanings attributed to that feature range from "(standard-)Belgian" (in the widest *francophonie* context) to "Liègeois" (in the more specific Belgian context), through to "non-standard" or "intimate". A regionally marked speech occurs not only in situations where speakers adopt their vernacular while not attending to their speech, but it also appears in situations where speakers adopt an elaborate style, different from their more spontaneous speech, all the while paying a lot of attention to the construction of the style and of the social meaning it carries.

We now turn to the analysis of an example of that stylisation process (ex. 5). It comes from the formal (guided) conversation involving the middle-class female (MF). Typical for MF is her upward social mobility: while her parents did not complete secondary school and come from working-class families, she studied at university and became a French teacher. During the formal interview (questionnaire), MF is asked to speak about her parents' professions. Her father is a policeman and the interviewer asks MF whether her father's professional orientation was a vocation for him, or not (lines 1–7). When answering, MF first rejects the suggestion that her father had the inclination to become a policeman (line 8) and then she elaborates a complex sequence in order to explain that he actually started his career "by accident" (lines 9–11). Finally, she goes back to her father's childhood in order to explain why he did not go to secondary school. She alternatively adopts a style very close to standard French (when she says *je sais pas si c'était vraiment une vocation*, line 8) and a regionally marked style, in the remainder of the conversation.

(5) *How my father became a policeman*¹⁹

- 1 L0 et ça lui est venu enfin // c'est passé comment
'and it came // well how did it occur?'
- 2 enfin tu sais tu sais d'où ça lui est venu
'well do you know do you know where it did come from?'
- 3 si c'était l- un vieux
'whether it was l- an old'
- 4 L1 cette en/ -l l'envie de
'this de/ -l the desire for'
- 5 à mon avis c'était pas vraiment une v/
'in my opinion it was not really a v/'
- 6 c'est ça que tu l- demandes?
'that's what you are l- asking for?'
- 7 L0 oui -l
'yes' -l
- 8 L1 → euh la voc/ oui je sais pas si c'était vraiment une vocation //
'er the voc/ yes I am not sure it was really a vocation //'
- 9 je crois que je sais pas très bien comment ça s'est fait
'I think that I don't really know how it occurred'
- 10 je crois que c'est par une connaissance // qui avait fait ça
'I think that it as been via an acquaintance // who had done that'
- 11 et alors il s'est dit pourquoi pas /
'and then he said to himself "why not" /'
- 12 à la base euh enfin en fait il a jamais étudié //
'at the beginning / er in fact he has never studied //'
- 13 il a il a fait ses primaires
'he went he went to primary school'
- 14 et puis je crois
'and then I think'
- 15 qu'il a fait deux deux a/ deux années d/ seulement
'he went for two two y/ years only t/'
- 16 de s/ en l- secondaire <L0> m -l
'to s/ l- secondary school <L0> m -l'
- 17 et je crois qu'il était pas vraiment mauvais
'and I think that he was not too bad'
- 18 mais il était un peu **pourri** quoi
'but he was somewhat lazy you know'
- 19 et ses parents ne le poussaient **pas** non plus
'and his parents weren't supporting him either'

The way MF alternates standard and regional style cannot be explained by an adaptation to the audience (the interviewer), nor by a modification in the speech

¹⁹The transcript applies conventions from VALIBEL corpora (valibel.fltr.ucl.ac.be): L0 = interviewer; L1 = interviewee; / = short pause; // = longer pause; l- = beginning of the overlap; -l = end of the overlap; **pourri** = lengthened vowel within the bold-faced syllable.

activity (formal interview); these parameters are therefore not responsible for the style switching. We would like to suggest that this is an instance of stylisation: the speaker creates styles in a dynamic way, in order to fit with the interaction and the social meaning she wants to convey. The utterance *je sais pas si c'était vraiment une vocation* (line 8), is produced with a standard French flavour; furthermore, MF elaborates a kind of *phonostyle* (Léon 1993) suggesting affectation or distance towards the interviewer's suggestion. This utterance clearly contrasts, from a pragmatic point of view, with the subsequent elaboration: MF first reacts as if she wants to keep distant from the topic at hand, pretending not to know anything precise about it, but she progressively shifts to a more emphatic stance.

The affected style (line 8) borrows features from standard French, and adds phonetic features contextualizing a precise attitudinal meaning (distance).²⁰ Such a distance (and imagined disagreement) could certainly not be conveyed by a style drawn upon regionally marked features. However, she does adopt a regionally marked style in what we still consider a formal section (see lines 18–19). We hypothesise that, by alternating styles, MF intends to express distance regarding the idea that her father was predisposed to be a policeman, and then she tries to express this in another and less formal context, better suited to the explanation under construction. Although regional markedness is not compatible with the way MF enacts affectation (distance), it can nevertheless be exploited within a formal situation (such as an interview led by someone you do not know) for conveying more personal information. The stylisation is aimed to accommodate her intentions both in construction of the answer, and in her relation to the interviewer (the appraisal she expects he could make about her family's social situation).

6. CONCLUSION

What we propose here is a provisional model that should be improved and tested through further empirical research. In addition, several questions remain unanswered: what are the constraints over the formation of speech styles (co-occurrence, consistency)? What kind of psycho-social mechanisms govern the elaboration of common linguistic representations? How can we identify the social meaning effectively suggested by a given speech style?

The model, although provisional, does present two major advantages. First, it allows us to consider how linguistic variation both at the micro-social level and at the macro-social level — mediated by the relation of the *imaginaire linguistique* to ideology — is shaped by social and interactive meaning, the construction of the speaker's identity, and the relations of power. Second, it affords a better understanding of the processes that redefine marked variants within styles, and so provides a more fluid and nuanced analysis than does the rather rigid sociological framework of traditional sociolinguistic theory.

²⁰We clearly hear a kind of iconically suggested lips pursing.

Consequently, varieties and styles are no longer conceived as referring respectively to inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation. Rather, “varieties” are linked to social representation, while “styles” are linked to effective practices. In particular, varieties constitute the common background for interpreting the meaning of the marked features of distinctive styles.

The results of the quantitative analysis lend support to an alternative hypothesis about the usage of marked variants by middle-class speakers: the social meaning carried by the marked (non-standard) variants can be positively valued in a situation where the speaker adopts an elaborate style. In this case, variation cannot be explained by the attention-paid-to-speech model. In our view, the speaker has a representation of the socially acceptable behaviours he or she may adopt in a situation, and then of the relative legitimacy of the speech styles he or she may produce. Styles are a concrete way for speakers to put into practice their representations of the sociolinguistic space they inhabit.

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Appendix: Detailed results for each speaker²¹**WM: Working-class male**

WM	IG (N)	Lf (tokens)	Lf (%)	Lp (tokens)	Lp (%)	NS (%)
GC	424	9	2.1	14	3.3	5.4
NGC	518	30	5.6	65	12.5	18.1
FS-GC	185	1	0.5	3	1.6	2.1
IS-GC	43	2	4.7	4	9.3	14.0
FRS	196	6	3.1	7	3.6	6.7
FS-NGC	61	2	3.3	2	3.3	6.6
IS-NGC	226	15	6.6	34	15.0	21.6
IRS	231	13	5.6	29	12.6	18.2
Excluded NGC	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.0
FS-TOTAL	246	3	1.2	5	2.0	3.3
IS-TOTAL	269	17	6.3	38	14.1	20.4

MF: Middle-class female

MF	IG (N)	Lf (tokens)	Lf (%)	Lp (tokens)	Lp (%)	NS (%)
GC	381	21	5.5	20	5.2	10.7
NGC	474	35	7.4	17	3.6	11.0
FS-GC	100	6	6.0	3	3.0	9.0
IS-GC	14	1	7.1	0	0.0	7.1
FRS	267	14	5.2	17	6.4	11.6
FS-NGC	27	1	3.7	0	0.0	3.7
IS-NGC	274	19	6.9	11	4.0	10.9
IRS	161	14	8.7	5	3.1	11.8
Excluded NGC	12	1	0.0	1	0.0	0.0
FS-TOTAL	127	7	5.5	3	2.4	7.9
IS-TOTAL	288	20	6.9	11	3.8	10.7

²¹IG: number of intonation groups; NS: percentage of non-standard variants; Excluded NGC: number of occurrences of the variable excluded from the percentages because of speaker's intentionally faking a popular accent. See sections 4.2–4.3. for the other abbreviations.

MM: Middle-class male

MM	IG (N)	Lf (tokens)	Lf (%)	Lp (tokens)	Lp (%)	NS (%)
GC	379	20	5.3	9	2.4	7.7
NGC	327	23	7.0	23	7.0	14.0
FS-GC	168	5	3.0	4	2.4	5.4
IS-GC	28	1	3.6	1	3.6	7.2
FRS	193	14	7.3	4	2.1	9.4
FS-NGC	40	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
IS-NGC	141	11	7.8	12	8.5	16.3
IRS	146	12	8.2	11	7.5	15.7
Excluded NGC	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
FS-TOTAL	208	5	2.4	4	1.9	4.3
IS-TOTAL	169	12	7.1	13	7.7	14.8

UF: Upper-class female

UF	IG (N)	Lf (tokens)	Lf (%)	Lp (tokens)	Lp (%)	NS (%)
GC	272	8	2.9	4	1.5	4.4
NGC	231	11	4.8	9	3.9	8.7
FS-GC	83	1	1.2	1	1.2	2.4
IS-GC	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
FRS	189	7	3.7	3	1.6	5.3
FS-NGC	53	1	1.9	2	3.7	5.6
IS-NGC	14	0	0.0	3	21.4	21.4
IRS	159	10	6.3	4	2.5	8.8
Excluded NGC	5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
FS-TOTAL	136	2	1.5	3	2.2	3.7
IS-TOTAL	14	0	0.0	3	21.4	21.4