

ABSTRACT

Perception vs. reality: language attitudes in an English-French contact context

Maine's Upper Saint John River Valley, located along the U.S. border with French-speaking New Brunswick, Canada, is a region with a population possessing a strong sense of pride in its French Acadian heritage, strong social networks with friends and family just across the river in Canada, and a great number of bilingual individuals (some 85% of the population). However, despite the presence of factors presumably facilitating the acquisition and maintenance of French, including intense contact with the language and the recent implementation of a bilingual immersion program, there is a growing number of young semi-speakers and monolingual English speakers throughout the region.

As part of a larger study examining French language use and language loss among youth in the Valley, this paper looks at the role of language attitudes from two contrasting perspectives, as represented by two separate tasks. First, young speakers were asked, in the context of an oral interview task, to assess their own ability to recognize the different varieties of French encountered locally (Valley French, regional Canadian French, Standard Canadian French and European French); subjects were also asked to report attitudes toward these varieties of French. Then, in the context of a separate listening task, subjects were asked to identify a number of recorded samples according to provenance, and, as per a matched-guise methodology (cf. Lambert et al. 1960) to judge the speakers according to the criteria of appearance, intelligence, sociability and likeability. Similarly, speakers were asked to attempt to translate the samples heard into English, and their ability to do so was contrasted with their self-assessed ability to understand French.

In accordance with the finding of earlier sociolinguistic research, this study found that male and female subjects generally did differ from one another with regard to the prestige attributed to local prestige varieties when self-assessment was used as a measure; however, when subjects were tested in the context of a listening task, these groups were less dissimilar. Moreover, an individual's self-assessed language attitudes and ability in French were often found to conflict with the results of the listening task. In general, interview subjects, regardless of ability, exhibited great difficulty in identifying the provenance of the different accents they heard, and indeed, their assessment of these speakers may be based on what they believed they heard. Finally, as was found in Lambert et al. (1975a, 1975b, 1976) and Giles et al. (1976), this study found that subjects may be negatively oriented toward Standard Canadian French, which serves as the local standard for the broadcast media and French-language instruction – a state of things that may have important implications for French language maintenance efforts in the Saint John Valley.

References

Lambert, W. E., R.C. Hodgson, R.C. Gardner and S. Fillenbaum. 1960. Evaluational Reactions to Spoken Language. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 60: 44-51.

Lambert, W., H. Giles and Omer Picard. 1975a. Language Attitudes in a French-American community. *Linguistics* 158: 127-52.

_____. 1975b. Language Attitudes in a French-American Community. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 4:127-152.

Lambert, W., H. Giles and G. Albert. 1976. Language Attitudes in a rural community in Northern Maine. *La Monda Lingva-Problemo* 5: 129-44.

Giles, H., Taylor, D.M., Lambert, W.E. and Albert, G. 1976. Dimensions of ethnic identity: An Example from Northern Maine. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 100, 11-19.