

# Minority language speakers' discourse and morphosyntax: error or variation?

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## INTRODUCTION

- Francophone speakers living in a minority linguistic context in Canada are constantly exposed to the English language, which poses a challenge for the preservation of minority languages.
- The number of exogamous families in Ontario has increased from 56.5% in 1991 to 69.5% in 2016, resulting in a growing number of English-dominant students in French-language schools.
- Difficult to determine whether bilingual children who struggle to acquire the language of instruction (French) and attend French-language schools in a minority context have difficulties related to second language acquisition or if they actually have DLD.
- A relatively recent term used in the Irish context as well as in the context of other minority languages is "new speaker."
- The new speakers (sequential bilinguals), bring a new dimension to the classroom dynamics.
- The native French speakers, each with a different linguistic variety, and the new speakers intertwine and each undertake their own journey towards this new way of speaking, which approaches the variety taught in school, namely standard French.

O'Rourke et al. (2018) define new speakers as individuals who are minimally or not at all exposed to a minority language at home or in the community, but who acquire it through immersion programs, bilingual education, revitalization projects, or as adult learners.

## OBJECTIVES

- Analyze the conversational language samples of 20 children from a linguistic minority background over a five-year interval in order to identify linguistic differences and variations, both between linguistic groups and between the two time points.
- This exploratory study was conducted to better understand the existing issues, without necessarily providing conclusive results.

## METHOD

- The language samples in this study come from research conducted by Robillard et al. (2013, 2016).
- 40 samples were selected: 20 = children aged 61.20 months (SD = 6.26) in kindergarten (time 1), and 20 = same children at the age of 123.35 months (SD = 6.28) in 4th grade (time 2).
- 11 boys and 9 girls; 15 French-dominant and 5 English-dominant children.
- These children were enrolled in French-language elementary schools in the city of Greater Sudbury, Ontario, Canada.
- The language samples were recorded at various times during the 2011-2012 school year for time 1 (kindergarten) and at the end of the 2016-2017 school year for time 2 (4th grade).



- The Systematic Analysis of Language Transcripts (SALT) (Miller & Chapman, 1984-2002) software program was utilized to analyze syntactic and morphological components. The codes from the French adaptation of the SALT software were used (Thordardottir, 2005).
- In total, 22,682 utterances were coded and analyzed.
- The language samples were transcribed by research assistants trained for this purpose. These samples were then transcribed again by two other research assistants to verify transcription accuracy. The transcriptions from both groups were consistent 82% of the time.



## RESULTS

- There was a great deal of variability among the participants.
- No clear pattern emerged based on linguistic dominance or the language spoken by the parents, especially in 4th grade.
- The differences noted in kindergarten were mainly related to the fact that some children had a limited vocabulary in French.
- All participants produced more utterances in English in 4th grade than when they were in kindergarten (even though they are in a French school).
- A t-test was used to verify if the mean results differed between the two time points. See table 1.0.
- We classified utterances that did not correspond to standard French into seven categories to provide a general overview of the participants' productions (Table 2.0). The most common variations were as follows: 1) incorrect verb tense, 2) words in incorrect order, 3) word omissions, 4) preposition at the end of a sentence, 5) incorrect agreement in gender, number, and person, 6) incorrect auxiliary verbs, and 7) anglicisms. Scan QR code for detailed examples of each categories.

Table 1.0 t-test results of linguistic variables taken at the two data points

| Linguistic variable                       | Kindergarten (M, SD) | 4 <sup>th</sup> Grade (M, SD) | t(20) | p      |
|---|----------------------|-------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Word Order Errors                         | 2.60 (2.91)          | 0.70 (0.85)                   | 2.80  | < 0.05 |
| Gender Agreement Errors (Noun-Determiner) | 4.10 (5.17)          | 0.15 (0.36)                   | 3.95  | < 0.05 |
| Gender Agreement Errors (Adjective)       | 1.15 (1.60)          | 0.05 (0.22)                   | 1.10  | < 0.05 |
| Mean Length of Utterances (Words)         | 3.88 (0.117)         | 4.39 (0.130)                  | -0.51 | < 0.05 |
| Mean Length of Utterances (Morphemes)     | 4.76 (0.166)         | 5.09 (0.163)                  | -0.33 | < 0.05 |

Table 2.0 Examples of utterances produced by 2 participants in JK and 4th grade according to the seven categories of variations.

| Participant          | Verb tense                             | Incorrect word order   | Word omissions                         | Preposition at the end of a sentence | Incorrect agreement in gender, number, and person | Incorrect auxiliary verb        | Anglicism                                    |
|----------------------|--|------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--|
| P7 FD F/F - JK       | Je faire une suite difficile pour toi. | Regarde pas même à ça. | Pourquoi tout le monde regarde à moi ? | Madame j'ai besoin de.               | Je va faire un animaux.                           | Moi j'ai à la fin de la liste.  | La super super super colle qui peut snapper. |
| P16 AD A/A - Grade 4 |  |                        | Il a dit où mettre.                    | C'est le plus que je parlais de.     | Je pensais on était fini.                         | Madame comment on le shut off ? |  |

## CONCLUSION

- This study demonstrates that the conversational speech of children from a minority linguistic background in Northeastern Ontario is characterized by several linguistic variations, even after six years of exposure to standard French variety at school.
- The productions of French-dominant children are very similar to those of English-dominant children.
- The variations observed resemble several variations produced by monolingual and bilingual children with developmental language disorders.
- Standard French can serve as a target within French-language school boards; however, each student will reach their own new speakerness at their own pace, depending on their exposure to this variation and their motivation to learn and use it.
- Let us stop measuring the linguistic competence of new speakers and native speakers from minority linguistic backgrounds based on standard variations. Instead, their competence should be assessed relative to the regional variation.

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