

DEPARTMENT OF FRENCH AND ITALIAN

SOCIOPRAGMATIC VARIATION IN YES/NO AND  
*WH*-INTERROGATIVES IN HEXAGONAL FRENCH:  
A REAL-TIME STUDY OF FRENCH FILMS FROM 1930-2009

DISSERTATION DEFENSE: KELLY FARMER

FRIDAY, JULY 3, 2015 AT 10:00 AM IN SASSAFRAS ROOM, INDIANA MEMORIAL UNION



This dissertation examines usage and diachronic change in the yes/no and *wh*- interrogative system in Modern Hexagonal French. Using the variationist methodology, I analyze a total of 3,988 yes/no interrogatives and 2,484 *wh*- interrogatives collected from a corpus of 60 French films spanning 1930 to 2009 and explore the social, linguistic, extralinguistic, and pragmatic variables that govern dependent variant selection throughout time. Results indicate that both yes/no interrogatives and *wh*- interrogatives experience significant change within the 80-year period under investigation, and change in both systems is shaped by the (progressive) loss of pronominal inversion.

Within the yes/no interrogative paradigm, the loss of pronominal inversion entails a significant change in the expression of diaphasic variation (i.e., variation according to style or register) and diastratic variation (i.e., variation according to social groups), resulting in: (a) statistically significant increases in the usage of rising intonation across all variables (though these increases occur within and across variables at different moments in time) and (b) a trend of increased usage of *est-ce que* in more formal settings by the 21st century. Within the *wh*- interrogative paradigm, the loss of pronominal inversion also spurs change in the distribution of different variants in connection to stylistic level and social structure; however, in contrast to yes/no interrogatives, the change attested is much more dramatic. Whereas working-class usage of nonstandard interrogative forms is shown to be stable throughout time, usage by middle- and upper-class speakers shows an increasing preference for nonstandard forms. Additionally, in the post-inversion system, interrogatives pattern differently such that certain *wh*-words prefer certain *wh*-constructions and usage of the nonstandard interrogatives increases at different rates. Specifically, there is a marked increase in the usage of fronting (post-1960), which is then followed by a robust increase in the usage of *wh*- in situ (post-1980).

Though the changes that occur are found in the speech of actors and actresses, not naturalistic speech, we interpret these findings as mirroring changes in the actual system. Thus, this dissertation not only makes significant contributions to our knowledge of 20th and 21st century interrogative usage in Hexagonal French but also helps to legitimize the use of nontraditional data, and media in particular, in studies of language change.



IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO ATTEND, PLEASE CONTACT THE GRADUATE SECRETARY, CASEY GREEN,  
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