

The Department of French & Italian
presents a PhD dissertation defense

Martin Maillot

On Sociolinguistic Variables in
Curated Speech: A Study of
Stylistic Variation of Liaison,
Schwa and Ne among
Contemporary French
Politicians



Friday, January 28, 2022

2:30 pm

Via Zoom

Please notify Prof. Barbara Vance (bvance@indiana.edu) if you would like to attend.

Abstract:

This dissertation examines stylistic variation in the speech of French politicians. Using a variationist approach inspired by the Phonologie du Français Contemporain project (PFC), I provide a quantitative analysis of the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors influencing the production of three markers of stylistic variation in French – liaison, schwa, and the negative particle ne – in a corpus of speeches and interviews given by sixteen French politicians during the period 2012-2019. This study also explores the idea that variation in political speech may be attributed to linguistic manipulation.

The three linguistic elements show considerable variation in the corpus, and the conditioning of variation is similar to what has been reported for spontaneous, less formal, speech. Results indicate that politicians produce higher levels of formal variants than what is generally expected in spontaneous speech, and that the more formal variants are more frequent in the speeches than in the interviews and that the contrast between speeches and interviews is clearer for schwa and ne than for liaison. Age emerges as the extra-linguistic factor having the strongest influence on the choice of variants, followed by medium, political affiliation, and sex. While there is considerable variation among politicians in relation to the effect of formality on their speech, similarities are observed for speakers who have similar political affiliation, as well as some individual variation.

To account for this individual variation, I use a multifaceted sociolinguistic approach mobilizing elements from the attention-to-speech, audience design, and speaker design models. Some politicians display greater levels of stylistic variation than others, indicating that they are especially attentive to style and formality. Moreover, stylistic ‘deviations’ represent clear instances of manipulation of the linguistic variables. This manipulation is designed – consciously or not – to enhance one’s performance in the greater game of political chess.

Committee:

Julie Auger, French & Italian, Co-Chair
Barbara Vance, French & Italian, Co-Chair

Kevin Rottet, French & Italian
Stuart Davis, Linguistics