

# Agreeing to disagree: Variable subject-verb agreement in immersion French

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The present study examines the variable presence/absence of third person plural marking on French verbs in the speech of French immersion students. The analysis considers both linguistic and social factors that condition variation and compares results with those found for native speakers of French. The principle findings are that agreement marking in the speech of immersion students is comparable to that of native Francophones whose use of French is restricted. The only social factor found to condition variation is amount of French language schooling. Several linguistic factors condition variation. Some of these are also found in restricted native speaker French, while others are particular to the immersion students.

Cette étude porte sur la présence variable des marques de nombre sur les verbes français dans le parler d'étudiants qui suivent un programme d'immersion française. Nous tenons compte des facteurs linguistiques et sociaux qui conditionnent la variation et nous présentons des comparaisons avec le parler des francophones. Les résultats principaux de cette recherche sont que l'accord en nombre se fait à un taux de fréquence qui est similaire à ce qu'on trouve pour les locuteurs natifs. Le seul facteur social qui entre en corrélation avec la variable est la proportion d'instruction en français. Plusieurs facteurs linguistiques exercent une influence significative. Certains de ces facteurs se retrouvent également dans le parler des francophones en situation minoritaire, tandis que d'autres sont particuliers aux étudiants inscrits dans un programme d'immersion française.

This study presents a variationist analysis (cf. Sankoff, 1988) of subject/verb agreement in the third person plural, using data from students enrolled in secondary school French immersion in Ontario. The analysis considers both social and linguistic factors that may influence the use of either the syncretized (without agreement) or nonsyncretized (with agreement) variants and compares the behaviour of this variable in the speech of immersion students to that observed in research based on native speakers of French. In so doing, the study aims to contribute to an understanding of the similarities and differences between the grammars of these two groups of speakers. The principal research questions addressed in this study are: a) do the immersion students use syncretized forms to a greater degree than do native speakers?; b) do the immersion speakers share the same linguistic and social constraints as native speakers whose use of French is restricted (cf. Mougeon and Beniak, 1991)?

### Corpus

The twenty speakers in the present study were grade 9 and 12 students taken from Mougeon and Nadasdi's 1996 corpus of immersion French. All speakers were enrolled in extended French programs where 50% of courses were taken in French from grades 5 to 8, followed by 20% in high school. While they came from various L1 backgrounds, none were native speakers of French and all were from homes where neither parent was a native speaker of French and where French was not spoken. The school setting had thus been and continued to be their primary locus of French usage and learning. Although these students were not from French-speaking homes, they were by no means all from unilingual Anglophone homes. In fact, 51% of our subjects came from homes where a language other than English was used to varying degrees. Of these students, 39% came from homes where a Romance language was spoken and the rest were from non-Romance language homes. There was approximately the same number of grade 9 and 12 students, more females than males, and over half were from middle class families with all but one of the remaining being from lower middle class families. Most of the students had received between 26 and 37% of their schooling through the medium of French. The majority of students never used the spoken French media; however, there were more grade 12 students than grade 9s who did so occasionally. The grade 12 students had also spent more time in Francophone environments and with Francophone families than was the case for the grade 9 students. These stays in a Francophone environment or with a Francophone family took place, for the most part, in Quebec. The average duration of these stays is seventeen days.

### Previous studies of variation in immersion French

Previous research on variation in the spoken French of immersion students has concentrated on alternations involving a contrast between the use of standard/formal versus informal/vernacular variants in students' spoken discourse (cf. Swain and Lapkin, 1990; Tarone and Swain, 1995; Rehner and Mougeon, 1999; Mougeon, Rehner and Nadasdi, 1999). These studies have shown that vernacular variants are almost never used by immersion speakers and that while immersion students do make some use of informal features, such as deletion of the preverbal negative particle *ne* for example, the frequency of such features is much lower than that found in the discourse of native Francophones. This study will focus on a different kind of variable from those examined in previous research on immersion French: a case of morphological variation that does not involve a standard/nonstandard or formal/informal split in the speech of native Francophones.

### The variable

The variable under study concerns the alternation between explicit third person plural verbal forms and syncretized verb forms devoid of plural marking. While a great many French verbs are homophonous in the third person singular and plural, a number of frequent and irregular verbs explicitly mark person in the third person plural by means of a morphological alternation. This can take the form of complete suppletion, as in the case of *être*, for example *il est/ils sont*, vowel denasalization with presence/absence of final consonant, e.g. *il vient/ils viennent*, change in final vowel quality, e.g. *il va/ils vont*, the adding of a final consonant, e.g. *il dit/il disent* or a combination of these last two processes, e.g. *il sait/ils savent*. Examples from our corpus which illustrate both the nonsyncretized (i.e., standard) and syncretized variants are given in (1) and (2).

(1) *Nonsyncretized variant:*

Tous les parents *disent* quelque chose que les enfants n'aiment pas.  
'All parents say something that children don't like.'

(2) *Syncretized variant:*

Les personnes . . . dit que . . .  
'People . . . say that . . .'

### *Previous studies of third person plural syncretism in L1 French*

As discussed in Mougeon and Beniak (1995), syncretism in the third person plural has been analyzed in a number of studies concentrating on native speakers of European French (cf. Bauche, 1920 and Frei, 1929), and Canadian French (cf. King, 1994). In all of these studies, the syncretized variant is relatively rare, except after the relative pronoun *qui* or the personal pronoun *ils*. For example, Mougeon and Beniak (1995) report that in the speech of unrestricted speakers,<sup>1</sup> the syncretized variant is rare (2% of tokens) and occurs exclusively in the above-mentioned linguistic contexts, i.e. after *qui* or *ils*. Furthermore, it is particularly the relative pronoun that gives rise to the syncretized variant. On the other hand, speakers whose French language use is restricted make greater use of the syncretized variant (19%) and do not follow these same linguistic constraints. In other words, these latter speakers use the syncretized variant in all linguistic contexts. And, unlike what we find with the unrestricted speakers, syncretism is much more likely to occur with low frequency verbs in the speech of restricted speakers. According to Mougeon and Beniak (1995, p. 54), third person plural syncretism in the speech of restricted speakers results from imperfect mastery of French verb forms due to infrequent use of French.<sup>2</sup> In light of these findings, we can make several predictions regarding immersion speakers' use of these forms. For example, given that they use French even less frequently than Mougeon and Beniak's restricted speakers,<sup>3</sup> we can expect

to find an even higher incidence of syncretism in their speech. This seems likely given the tendency of L2 speakers to regularize complex morphological structures. Alternatively, it may be that for the structure in question the amount of exposure received is sufficient to produce frequencies of subject-verb agreement that are in line with those of restricted native speakers. This would not be a surprising result given Nadasdi, Mougeon and Rehner's (2001) findings regarding the alternation of *je vais/je vas* in immersion French. This study shows that immersion speakers rarely regularize the first person singular form and that the speakers have not experienced a great deal of difficulty in mastering the irregular 1sg *vais* form. Our results will help shed light on the relative complexity of subject-verb agreement in the third person plural in comparison with the *je vais/je vas* alternation.

#### ***Previous studies of third person plural syncretism in L2 French***

One study that has examined third person plural agreement in L2 French is Harley's (1986) study of early and late immersion students. Harley reports that immersion students scored significantly lower than the Francophone comparison group. The highest levels of agreement were found in the late immersion speakers. However, even in this group syncretized forms were found in 70% of occurrences. Since in Harley's study no distinction was made between frequent verbs and infrequent ones, comparisons between her findings and those of the present study will be difficult.

#### ***Linguistic Factors***

The primary linguistic factors to be considered in the present study are: a) type of subject and b) verb frequency. As mentioned, those few cases of syncretism found in the speech of unrestricted Francophones occurred after *ils* and *qui*. Our study will provide additional information regarding the role of this factor by considering L2 data. We hope to determine whether or not the same qualitative difference which distinguished the occurrence of syncretism in restricted and unrestricted Francophone speech obtains in the immersion speakers' French. For the second linguistic factor group, i.e. verb frequency, we use Mougeon and Beniak's (1995) division which places *avoir*, *être* and *aller* in the category of frequent verbs (37%, 34%, and 9% respectively). The category of infrequent verbs includes all other verbs having two morphologically distinct forms for the third person singular and plural, for example, *dire*, *venir*, *devoir*, etc. (none of these verbs constitute more than 4% of tokens). Given that this factor exercised a significant effect for restricted Franco-Ontarians (cf. Mougeon and Beniak, 1995), we anticipate that it will also influence the variable in the speech of immersion students. In our analysis of linguistic factors, we have also examined environmental elements not controlled for in Mougeon and Beniak's (1995)

study. The first factor we considered was the presence of an element intervening between the subject and the verb, as in (3).

- (3) Ils *ne* veut faire rien.  
 ‘They don’t want to do anything.’

The hypothesis underlying the inclusion of this factor group is that agreement will occur less frequently when the subject is not immediately adjacent to the verb since the link between the two elements has been broken.

The fourth linguistic factor group considered allows us to ask the following: does the presence of an overt plural marker on the subject lessen the likelihood of marking this same information on the verb? Or, on the other hand, is there a priming effect such that marking of overt plurality on the subject increases the likelihood of marking plurality on the verb? In the category of subjects containing an overt plural marker we include all lexical subjects preceded by an article (*des* or *les*) or a quantifying adverb, such as *beaucoup*, *plusieurs*, etc. We have also included cases where a subject pronoun is pronounced /ilz/, as is sometimes the case in our corpus, before consonants as well as vowels (ex. 4).

- (4) [ilzvapaʁle]  
 Ils vont parler.  
 ‘They will speak.’

This factor group was considered in Mougeon and Beniak’s original (1991) study of third person plural syncretism. Their inclusion of this factor group stems from the functionalist hypothesis that syncretism “might be blocked or at least significantly reduced when plurality is not overtly marked in the subject, failing which, singularity rather than plurality would be conveyed” (1991, p. 110). Although this factor group did not have a significant effect on the variable in Mougeon and Beniak’s study of Francophones, we have included it in our analysis since it may be relevant for second language speakers.

### ***Social factors***

As mentioned, previous sociolinguistic analyses of the spontaneous spoken French of immersion students have concentrated on variables that had been shown to correlate, in the speech of native Francophones, with sex and SES (socio-economic status). The results of these studies reveal that students display patterns of sex and/or social class stratification that are comparable to those of Canadian Francophones. The explanation proposed by Mougeon and his associates is that students infer the sociostylistic value of the variants on the basis of their teachers’ usage (i.e. what they prefer and use in class, what variants they reinforce, what variants they self-correct in their speech or in that of their students and what variants are used in teaching materials). While there is no evidence that the syncretized and nonsyncretized variants are distributed

according to a vernacular/standard split, there is reason to believe that social factors may play a role in the immersion corpus since sex/gender has often been cited as an important variable in SLA studies. For example, if we consider the various studies that have found that girls score higher than boys in measurements of L2 achievement (cf. Burstall, 1975; Boyle, 1987) we might expect to find higher rates of the nonsyncretized variant among female students, which would constitute evidence of greater mastery of French morphology by these latter students. It needs to be pointed out, however, that results concerning sex differences and SLA are often conflicting (cf. Ellis, 1994; Ehrlich, 1997). There also exist a number of studies that suggest no difference between the two, or that it is boys who have the advantage (cf. Buegel and Bunk, 1996). The vast majority of studies that have found differences in either direction concentrate on test data. One goal of the present study is to contribute to the findings in the area of sex/gender difference in SLA by examining results from the spontaneous L2 production of male and female immersion students.

In addition to examining sex and social class, we will consider the role of extra-scholastic contacts with native speakers. The corpus used for the present study controls for this variable since students have indicated the number of days, weeks, etc. spent in a native French-speaking environment. Since the variable has been shown to correlate with verb frequency in the speech of restricted Franco-Ontarians (the greater the verb's frequency, the more likely it will give rise to the nonsyncretized variant), it can be hypothesized that speakers having more contact with native speakers, and hence who receive a greater amount of input, will use the syncretized variant less often than those who have less contact with native speakers.

### Results

**Table 1:** Use of syncretized (without agreement) and nonsyncretized (with agreement) third person plural verb forms by French immersion speakers

	Number	Percentage
Syncretized variant	118	19%
Nonsyncretized variant	490	81%

Results for the general distribution of the variants are presented in Table 1. As we can see, the syncretized form is relatively rare in the spoken discourse of French immersion students. In other words, these speakers do not have a great deal of difficulty with subject-verb agreement. This is true in general terms, and also in comparison with native Francophones since the frequency of the syncretized variant in the immersion corpus is close to that found in the Ontario French corpus, where it accounts for 12% of all tokens. In fact, one finds fewer syncretized forms in the immersion corpus than one does in

the speech of Franco-Ontarians living in the minority language community of Pembroke where this variant accounts for 27% of all tokens (cf. Mougeon and Beniak, 1995)!

The results presented in Table 1 suggest that the frequency of use of forms with third person plural agreement in Immersion French is similar to that found in native speaker French, particularly when considering the speech of Francophones whose language use is restricted. This interpretation of the data is based on the assumption that third person plural forms are evidence of third person plural agreement. Such an assumption is unproblematic in native speaker French, but poses some problems in the case of interlanguage data. As pointed out by Corder (1967) and Gass and Selinker (1994), L2 speakers are capable of producing target-like forms which do not necessarily reflect knowledge of a particular target language rule. We will therefore consider the validity of this assumption by revisiting the data and examining not only third person plural, but other verb forms as well.

Closer scrutiny of the data suggests that while many students do have distinct forms for third person singular and plural, this is not always the case. Consider the data in (5) from speaker 33.

- (5) Quand ils ont fait la confirmation . . . il[z] *doivent* aller au . . . au église pour deux années toutes le[z] dimanches.  
 ‘When they have done confirmation they must go to church for two years every Sunday.’

At first blush, this excerpt suggests that speaker 33 has mastered the rule of plural agreement for the verb *devoir* since the plural form *doivent* is used (and not the singular *doit*). However, other data from the same speaker reveal that this may not be the case. Consider the data in (6), also taken from speaker 33.

- (6) a. Je *doive*<sup>4</sup> parler parce que j’ai une amie qui parle seulement l’italien alors quand je l’ai à la maison je *doive* parler l’italien à lui.  
 ‘I have to speak because I have a friend who only speaks Italian so when I have him at the house I must speak Italian to him.’
- b. Si tu peux, tu *doives* donner d’argent pour faire les recherches.  
 ‘If you can, you must give money to do research.’
- c. Elle se *doive* trouver un autre travail.  
 ‘She has to find herself another job.’
- d. Alors il va mourir alors une autre personne l’a tué après il *doive* aller à un autre place comme un autre pays.  
 ‘So he is going to die so another person killed him, after he must go to another place, like another country.’
- e. Maintenant nous sommes finis et nou[z] *doive* fait un examen.  
 ‘Now we are finished and we must do an exam.’

Each of these examples contains an anomalous verb form that is homophonous with the third person plural. They suggest that the speaker has a single finite form for the verb *devoir*, a pattern not found in any variety of L1 French. These data are important since they suggest that those cases where the student pronounced *ils doivent* may not be *bona fide* examples of third person plural morphology. As such, they should be excluded from quantitative analysis for third person plural agreement.

A similar problem is found in the interview of speaker 35 (ex. 7).

- (7) C'est comme de[z] enfants . . . ils *vendent* des drogues et toute ça et ils va à l'école . . . ils *battent* avec les autres personnes et . . . le directeur directrice de l'école elle . . . quand l'école est fini elle va à une restaurant et elle comme *vende* le[z] drogues et tou[t] ça.

'It's like some kids . . . they sell drugs and all that and they go to school . . . they fight with other people and . . . the principal of the school she . . . when school is over, she goes to a restaurant and she like sells drugs and all that.'

As was the case with speaker 33, speaker 35 provides little evidence of an agreement rule for the verb *vendre* (or *aller* for that matter).<sup>5</sup> In Standard French, *vendre* presents distinct forms in the third person singular and plural since the former ends with a nasal vowel while the latter ends with a voiced dental consonant (*il vend/il vendent*). As such, the target-like *ils vendent* should be excluded from our analysis.

**Table 2:** Results from Table 1 revised to exclude forms where presence of number agreement is questionable

	Number	Percentage
Syncretized variant	118	20%
Nonsyncretized variant	474	80%

Table 2 contains revised figures, after having excluded verb forms for which there was no evidence of a singular/plural distinction. These figures were obtained by removing third person plural forms which were homophonous with the singular in the interview of a given speaker, for example *il doivelils doivent*, *elle vende/elles vendent*, *il peuve/lils peuvent*, etc. The criterion used for this was that if there was no evidence in other verbal persons of the standard singular form (in the first, second or third person, e.g. *je pars*, *tu dois*, etc.), the third person-like plural form was excluded. While the general percentages have not greatly changed, the revised table does exclude 16 occurrences that were previously considered instances of third person plural agreement. All the cases of excluded instances involved infrequent verbs. Immersion students never use suppletive third person plural forms with singular subjects, that is, the corpus contains no occurrences such as *\*je sont*.



*Linguistic factor results***Table 3:** Use of syncretized forms according to verb frequency

Verb frequency	N	Total	Percentage	Factor effect
High	33	458	7%	.333
Low	85	134	63%	.915
Totals	118	474	20%	

Let us now consider the results according to verb frequency presented in Table 3. Verb frequency is an important conditioning factor for the variable: frequent verbs are unlikely to give rise to the syncretized variant while infrequent verbs show a high incidence of syncretism. The immersion speakers therefore follow the same rule as the restricted Franco-Ontarians, and differ from unrestricted Franco-Ontarians since this factor is only selected as significant for the former group. It is also worth noting that immersion speakers evidence the same level of syncretism with frequent verbs in comparison with restricted Franco-Ontarians since both groups of speakers syncretize 7% of frequent verbs. On the other hand, the results in Table 3 suggest that in the case of infrequent verbs, the immersion students slightly “outperform” the restricted Franco-Ontarians from Pembroke. Mougeon and Beniak (1995) report that these speakers use the syncretized variant in 65% of occurrences whereas as the immersion speakers only use it in 63% of tokens with infrequent verbs.

**Table 4:** Use of syncretized forms according to subject type

Subject type	N	Total	Percentage	Factor effect
Lexical NP	47	191	25%	NS
<i>Ils</i>	57	323	18%	NS
<i>Qui</i>	14	74	19%	NS

Let us next consider the role of type of subject on the variable in immersion French. These results are presented in Table 4. Results for subject type show that, once again, immersion students resemble restricted Franco-Ontarians since this factor group is not a significant predictor of variation for either group (cf. Mougeon and Beniak, 1991). Unlike the unrestricted speakers, immersion speakers are not more likely to syncretize with subject relative pronouns. In other words, the vernacular linguistic constraint that operates in the speech of unrestricted Francophones does not apply in their French.

Let us now consider the results for explicit plural marking on the subject presented in Table 5. As mentioned, this factor did not exercise a significant effect for any of the Franco-Ontarian students considered in Mougeon and Beniak’s (1991) study. However, it does influence variant choice in the

**Table 5:** Use of syncretized forms when plurality is explicitly marked on the subject

	N	Total	Percentage	Factor effect
Overt plurality	62	219	28%	.608
Nonovert plurality	56	373	15%	.436

immersion corpus.<sup>6</sup> These results support the functionalist hypothesis originally entertained by Mougeon and Beniak: subjects which do not explicitly mark plurality are less likely to give rise to the syncretized variant. It would appear then that while the immersion students do mark plurality in the clause, they tend not to do so redundantly.

**Table 6:** Use of syncretized forms when an element separates the subject and verb

	N	Total	Percentage	Factor effect
Separating element	44	122	36%	.647
No separating element	74	470	16%	.461

Results concerning the role of elements intervening between the subject and the verb are presented in Table 6. Like the presence of an explicitly plural subject, the presence of an element separating the subject and the verb, for example an object pronoun, or the negative particle *ne*, promotes the syncretized variant. In other words, when there is a rupture of the link between the subject and the verb, the likelihood of agreement decreases. This factor group was also considered in Mougeon and Beniak (1991), however it was not shown to exercise a significant effect on the choice of variant. This suggests that the constraint in question is particular to the immersion students' interlanguage. It should be pointed out, however, that Mougeon and Beniak did not consider this factor group separately for each level of language restriction. It may indeed have been found to exercise a significant effect when only the restricted speakers were considered. As shown by Mougeon and Nadasdi (1998), subgroups within the Franco-Ontarian speech community do not all share the same linguistic constraints (cf. Mougeon and Beniak, 1995).

### ***Social factor results***

Only one social factor exercises a significant independent effect on variation, namely French medium instruction. Results for this factor group are presented in Table 7. Initially, subjects were divided into three categories of French medium instruction: 0–25%; 26–37%; and 38%–100%. While the factor group was selected, the division between the latter two levels was not significant and, consequently, they were collapsed into one category. These results

**Table 7:** Use of syncretized forms according to amount of French language instruction

	N	Total	Percentage	Factor effect
Less than 25% French instruction	37	132	28%	.660
More than 25% French instruction	81	460	18%	.453

suggest that syncretism greatly increases below a certain threshold of French language instruction/exposure. While amounts above the 25% threshold do not seem to influence the variable, those below it do. This is particularly true for infrequent verbs (Table 8).

**Table 8:** Cross-tabulation of the effect of level of instruction and verb frequency on verbal syncretism

	Frequent verbs	Infrequent
Less than 25% instruction	111/101 (11%)	26/31 (84%)
Greater than 25 % instruction	22/357 (6%)	59/103 (57%)

As revealed in Table 8, it is the infrequent verbs that cause the greatest difficulty for those having low levels of French language instruction. It needs to be borne in mind that there is nearly perfect overlap between frequency and morphological complexity. The frequent verbs are, for the most part, the suppletive verbs *avoir* and *être*. The third person plural of these verbs does not involve a complex morphological rule applied to the singular form. Rather, the singular and plural forms are distinct and no doubt learned as separate lexical items. The infrequent verbs, on the other hand, all involve some type of morphological process which relates the singular and plural forms. It may well be this factor and not the verb's frequency that is at work here, but this is difficult to disentangle given the overlap between frequency and morphological complexity.

Students' extracurricular exposure to French was also considered but this factor was not found to have a significant effect on the variable. This suggests that the few weeks of extra exposure to French in Francophone settings are insufficient to have a positive effect on the mastery of subject-verb agreement although this factor has been shown to have some positive impact on the acquisition of informal variants, for example the use of *on* vs. *nous* (see Mougeon et al., 1999). This result can perhaps be explained in reference to the fact that the variable under study is not salient from a sociostylistic standpoint. It is thus not affected by extracurricular exposure to French.

As concerns sex and L2 variation, we can conclude that for the present variable at least, sex does not seem to be a relevant factor when considering spontaneous oral discourse. The fact that sex and social class were not selected

for the present variable, but have been often found to correlate with variables having a standard and nonstandard variant, suggests that the sex difference is not one of proficiency. Previous studies using the same corpus have found sex to correlate with the use of standard features when the French to which students are exposed contains both a nonstandard and a standard feature, with the standard feature being most prevalent in the input, usually in the speech of classroom teachers (cf. Mougeon et al., 1999). Our results suggest that this is not the case when one of the variants is found categorically in the input, as would be the case with the nonsyncretized form of the third person plural variable.<sup>7</sup> Further evidence for this claim is provided by Nadasdi, Mougeon and Rehner's (2001) study of non-native future variants which also show no significant correlation with sex.

### Conclusion

The first finding of our study is that third person plural syncretism in the immersion corpus is similar to what is found in the speech of restricted Franco-Ontarians (20% and 19% respectively). This is true for both frequent and infrequent verbs. One key difference, however, is that a number of speakers in the immersion corpus use forms that are homophonous with the third person plural for other grammatical persons (e.g. *je doive*).

Our analysis of linguistic factors affecting this variable has shown that immersion speakers share no linguistic constraints with the unrestricted Francophones. We have also found that they share the constraint of verb frequency with the restricted Francophones and that they alone are influenced by the factors of overt plural marking on the subject and the presence of an element separating the subject and the verb. The findings concerning linguistic factors are summarized in Table 9.

**Table 9:** Summary of third person plural syncretism along the French language proficiency continuum

Linguistic factor	Immersion	Restricted franco	Unrestricted franco
Subject type			X
Verb frequency	X	X	
Subject plurality	X		
Separating element	X		

As concerns social factors, our results show that neither SES nor sex exercises a significant effect on the variable. While some studies have found sex-related differences involving an alternation between L1 and interlanguage forms, our study differs in that it is based on spontaneous L2 speech and not test data. The only social factor that was selected is level of French language

education. Our results show that students having received less than 25% of their schooling in the target language have considerably higher levels of syncretism, particularly with infrequent verbs.

Given that few social factors correlate with subject-verb agreement, the present variable is a special case that differs from other variables studied using the same corpus of immersion students (cf. Mougeon, Nadasdi and Rehner, 2001). Subject-verb agreement is not a “classic” case of variation involving a salient vernacular variant that alternates with a standard form. This may help explain the absence of a quantitative difference between the immersion students and the restricted Franco-Ontarian students. In other words, the case of variation under study is symptomatic of a developmental lag in the mastery of the third person plural distinctive forms and not of learning a vernacular variant.

## Notes

I would like to thank Raymond Mougeon for his helpful comments on a previous version of this article. I would also like to thank Amy Gerald for helping code the data.

- <sup>1</sup> While all speakers studied by Mougeon and Beniak are native Francophones, they can nonetheless be divided according to their language use patterns because they reside in localities where Francophones are a minority and are bilingual in English. Three categories are distinguished: a) unrestricted speakers, i.e. those who make almost exclusive use of French; b) semi-restricted speakers, i.e. those who use English and French to a similar degree; and c) restricted speakers, i.e. those who use English more frequently than French.
- <sup>2</sup> Our reason for not considering the syncretized variant as a nonstandard or vernacular form is that while this variant does occur in some nonstandard varieties, the contexts in which it occasionally occurs are very different from those in which it is used by the immersion students.
- <sup>3</sup> That is, those speakers whose use of French is limited or restricted to a small number of conversational domains. See note 1.
- <sup>4</sup> One explanation for these subjunctive-like forms may be that students’ acquisition of the subjunctive, which in many cases is homophonous with third person plural, has led them to generalize to the indicative. The fact that *devoir* is a deontic verb may further contribute to the confusion since such verbs are often associated with the subjunctive, e.g.  *falloir*.
- <sup>5</sup> One must still bear in mind that in many cases the immersion students do evidence a rule of third person plural agreement by adding a consonant to the open syllable of the third person singular form.
- <sup>6</sup> A factor effect is the product of regression analysis. A number greater than .500 favours application of a rule, a number less than .500 disfavors it.
- <sup>7</sup> We have confirmed the absence of syncretized forms in the input using Allen et al.’s (1987) corpus of immersion teachers’ speech as well as by consulting the teaching materials used by the students.

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