



1-1-2003

# The old nous and the new nous: A comparison of 19th and 20th Century spoken Quebec French

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# The Old *Nous* and the New *Nous*: A Comparison of 19th and 20th Century Spoken Quebec French<sup>1</sup>

Hélène Blondeau

## 1 Introduction

Variationist analyses of the personal pronoun system in Montreal French have highlighted a number of changes. On one hand, the replacement of the standard clitic pronoun *nous* 'we' by *on* 'one,' illustrated in (1), is said to be near completion (Laberge 1977). On the other hand, *nous* is also involved in a vigorous change in its strong pronoun function, as exemplified in (2), with the non-standard *nous autres*, literally 'we others,' competing with the strong pronoun *nous*, which is on the rise (Blondeau 2001).

- (1) a. Alors c'est évident que *nous* n'avons pas l'accent.  
'So it's clear that we don't have the accent.' (20th/31/1971)<sup>2</sup>  
b. Dans mon temps *on* connaissait pas mieux.  
'In my time we didn't know any better.' (20th/76/1971)
- (2) a. Il passe pour venir s'asseoir sur le banc en avant de *nous autres*.  
'He walked by to sit on the bench in front of us.' (19th/2)  
b. Je pense que les jeunes *on* a une espèce de vocabulaire à *nous*.  
'I think that we young people have a kind of vocabulary of our own.' (20th/102/1971)

This study examines the trajectory of the two forms of *nous* over the last 150 years by comparing contemporary use of both contexts with that of the 19th century, as instantiated in a new corpus of 19th century spoken Quebec French entitled *Récits du français québécois d'autrefois*<sup>3</sup> (Poplack 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the University of Ottawa's *Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française*. Parts of this work were presented at the Canadian Linguistic Association Meeting, University of Toronto, in May 2002, and the colloquium "Variation, catégorisations et pratiques", University Paris III, in September 2002, where the paper benefited from many helpful comments. I thank Sarah Moretti for her assistance in locating and coding the data on which these analyses are based.

<sup>2</sup> Codes identify century and speaker and, for 20<sup>th</sup> century data, year of interview.

<sup>3</sup> I gratefully acknowledge permission from Shana Poplack to make use of these data which are hosted at the Sociolinguistics Laboratory, University of Ottawa.

This comparison enables us to assess the existence and direction of the changes previously hypothesized.

## 2 Two Variable Contexts

The form *nous* corresponds to different variables depending on its function, as illustrated in Table 1. A first variable context involves the form *nous*, which alternates with *on* as a clitic subject pronoun with a definite reference. An earlier study of this context, in an apparent-time perspective, has shown the widespread usage of the variant *on* in Montreal French (Laberge 1977), illustrating a tendency observed in other varieties of French (Coveney 2000).

Form	Clitic		Strong	
	Subject	Object		
		Direct	Indirect	
Singular				
1st person	je	me	me	moi
2nd person	tu	te	te	toi
3rd person - masculine	il	le	lui	lui
- feminine	elle	le	lui	elle
- neutral	ça/c'	le	en	ça
- indefinite	on/tu/ils	-	-	soi
Plural				
1st person	nous/on	nous	nous	Simple/Compound nous/nous autres
2nd person	vous	vous	vous	vous/vous autres
3rd person - masculine	ils	les	leur	eux/eux autres
- feminine	elles	les	leur	elles/eux autres

Table 1. Paradigm of pronouns in Québec French and the two variable contexts under study

The other variable involves the form *nous* in alternation with its corresponding form *nous autres*. This alternation is part of the more general variation, observed for the entire paradigm of plural strong pronouns, between simple forms that correspond to the standard and compound forms with *autres*. The simple forms (*nous*, *vous*, *eux*, and *elles*) alternate with the compound forms with *autres* (*nous autres*, *vous autres*, and *eux autres*). Although a strong preference for compound forms with *autres* has been observed in ordinary usage (Morin 1982, Dumas 1994), this variable seems to be involved in a recent and rapid change in progress, as was identified for Montreal French. Prior variationist analyses showed that the simple form variant was re-introduced in the speech of the same individuals over time, as

well as in the speech community over the period 1971-1995, under observation (Blondeau 1999, 2001).

### 3 The Data

To further extend our knowledge about the historical scope of both phenomena, we expand the time span of previous analyses by looking at data from a newly available corpus that represents the spoken language of the 19th century. The corpus *Les récits du français québécois d'autrefois* (REFQUA), hosted at the University of Ottawa's Sociolinguistic Laboratory, comprises audio recordings from 47 native francophones born between 1846 and 1895, and collected by folklorists between 1940 and 1950 in various rural areas in the province of Quebec<sup>4</sup>. Based on the premise of the relative stability of individual grammar over time, an assumption underlying the notion of apparent time (Labov 1972), we consider those data from elderly informants to be representative of 19th century speech.

For the modern period representing 20th century speech, I refer to previous results based on analyses of Montreal sociolinguistic corpora, which were collected after 1970 from a representative sample of the community. For the comparison concerning the clitic subject, I refer to Laberge's results (1977) based on the *Sankoff-Cedergren* corpus collected in 1971. For the comparison concerning the plural strong pronouns, I refer to previous results (Blondeau 1999, 2001), based on the three corpora of Montreal French collected in 1971, 1984, and 1995: *Sankoff-Cedergren* (Sankoff et al. 1976), *Montréal-1984* (Thibault and Vincent 1990) and *Montréal-1995* (Vincent, Laforest, and Martel 1995).

### 4 Strong Pronominal Forms

If we examine the variation between the simple and compound forms of the plural strong pronouns, our real-time comparison shows an increase in simple forms over time, as illustrated by the general rate of usage. This indication of change reveals that rather than giving way to compound forms with *autres* such as *nous autres*, the use of simple forms such as *nous* has increased dramatically during the period under analysis. Figure 1 presents the rate of usage of 65 speakers divided into three groups according to their date of birth. In order to control for the age effect, here we limit our comparison to speakers who were over 45 years of age at the time of the interview.

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<sup>4</sup> These audio recordings include folk tales, legends, and personal interviews selected from the Roy (1955) and Lacoursière (1971) collections (Poplack 2001).

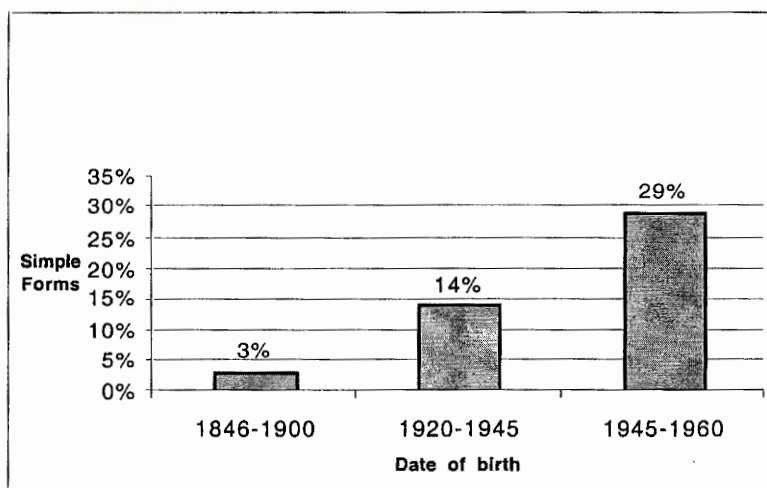


Figure 1. Rate of use of simple forms by speakers aged 45 at time of interview

It is obvious that speakers born in the 19th century made very little usage of simple forms—only 3% of the relevant contexts. On the other hand, speakers born after 1945 use simple forms 29% of the time, in nearly a third of the strong pronominal contexts. This tendency indicates a clear and consistent increase in the distribution of the variants. Furthermore, the extension of the variability enables us to examine the constraints governing the variation at different periods, a crucial test in order to understand the phenomenon under observation.

#### 4.1 Variation in the Strong Pronominal Context in the 19th Century

Despite the rarity of simple forms in the 19th century, there was room for variation, as illustrated in (3), in a context involving the three different grammatical persons. Particularly interesting is the fact that (3b) shows the inherent variation in the speech of one speaker, where both variants appear in the same linguistic function.

- (3) a. On avait pas cet avantage-là *nous*, ils en font plus *eux autres*.  
 (19th/50)  
 'We didn't have that advantage then, they make more [them].'

- b. Je vas aller au bois avec *vous* bûcher du bois avec *vous autres*.  
(19th/23)  
'I'm going to the woods with you to chop some wood with you.'

Table 2 shows the results of a variable rule analysis<sup>5</sup> of linguistic factors<sup>6</sup> for the 19th century data. Of all the factors considered, the only factor that significantly influences the variation is the *presence of a preposition*.

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Corrected mean:	.028
Total N :	704
Preposition	
Presence	.59
Absence	.45
RANGE	14

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Table 2. Variable rule analysis of linguistic factors contributing to the choice of the simple form of plural strong pronouns: 19th century

Although the difference in terms of relative weight, assessed here by the range, is relatively slight, it seems that simple forms are favored when the pronoun appears with a preposition. No other linguistic factor is selected as significant for the 19th century. Of particular interest, and contrary to the prescriptivist claim, is the fact that a factor related to referential contrast is rejected by the variable rule analysis. Indeed, grammar books which often condemn the use of the compound form might only consider the form appropriate when it is used to contrast two groups of people with a purpose of emphasis (Grevisse 1986). However, as our analysis has demonstrated, referential contrast was not part of the picture in the 19th century. Indeed, it would be difficult to associate any emphatic effect with the use of compound forms, due to the fact that they largely dominate the variation spectrum for that period. Consequently, for the 19th century, we already have to reject any association of the compound forms with emphasis due to referential contrast.

Otherwise, if we exclusively examine the pronouns appearing with a preposition, we can hypothesize a lexical effect of the preposition on the

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<sup>5</sup> The calculations in all variable rule analyses were carried out using Goldvarb 2., a logistic regression application for the Macintosh (Sankoff and Rand 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Factors not selected as significant : referential contrast, position, double marking.

forms' distribution. As illustrated in Table 3, there is an association between some prepositions and the simple form.

Preposition	N	%
Total N	593	4 <sup>7</sup>
Chez	355	100
Parmi	3	33
Entre	20	20
De	44	5
Avec	116	4
Pour	32	0
À	18	0
Sur	5	0
Autres	28	0

Table 3. Rate of usage of simple forms with prepositions: 19<sup>th</sup> century

With the exception of the preposition *chez*, (4), which generates a categorical use of simple forms, only two other prepositions, *parmi* and *entre* (5), are found with simple forms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, many other prepositions are categorically associated with the compound forms with *autres*, which was the norm at that time.

- (4) Puis là monsieur, ce chapelet là a disparu *chez nous* dans la maison quand ils ont fait le ménage dans la maison. (19th/5)  
 'Then, Sir, this rosary was lost at our house when they cleaned the house.'
- (5) Il y en a quatre d'*entre eux* qui rentraient à toute vitesse dans le trou. (19th/44)  
 'There were four of them that went back in the hole at top speed.'

For the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no other linguistic effect on the distribution of the forms. In short, for this period, it seems that an assessment of categoricity could easily apply, confirming Morin's view regarding Quebec French (1982). This leads to the interpretation that in 19<sup>th</sup> century Quebec French, the modifier *autres* was lexicalized as an integral part of the strong pronouns.

<sup>7</sup> The preposition *chez* is not included in the calculation of %.



#### 4.2 Variation in the Strong Pronominal Context in the 20th Century

The fact that the scope of the variability of rate of usage has changed in the 20th century requires that further issues be addressed concerning the constraints on variation. With respect to extra-linguistic constraints, we refer to our previous results based on variation among 30 speakers who were interviewed twice, in 1971 and 1984 (Blondeau 2001). This analysis showed a clear association with social class and sex. Simple forms were associated to a greater extent with the upper levels of the social scale and with women. A stylistic effect was also at work: the degree of formality, operationalized by the topic, was also among the significant factors. Simple forms were associated with topics related to formality, such as school and language (6), while, in contrast, more informal topics, such as family and personal tastes (7), tended to disfavor the use of simple forms. For the 20th century, the social and stylistic pattern of the variation corresponds exactly with the definition of a sociolinguistic marker as set out by Labov (1972).

- (6) Topics associated with FORMAL style: 20th century
- a. School  
Les gens font rarement des études par *eux-mêmes*.  
(20th/87/1984)  
'People rarely study by themselves.'
  - b. Language  
On est pas forcés de mal parler devant *eux*. (20th/38/1971)  
'We are not forced to talk badly in front of them.'
- (7) Topics associated with INFORMAL style: 20th century
- a. Family  
J'espère qu'*eux autres* ils seront jamais gênés de dire "Ça c'est mon père." (20th/2/1984)  
'I hope they'll never be embarrassed to say "This is my father."'
  - b. Tastes  
La danse les femmes *eux autres* ils vont danser puis tu trouves ça naturel. (20th/52/1971)  
'As for dance, women, they dance and it seems natural.'

For purposes of comparison with 19th century data, we should mention that there was no particular association of the simple forms with stylistic variation in the 19th century. For example, formality is not a characteristic of the few tokens of simple forms, as illustrated in (8). These tokens seem rather to occur randomly across the data.

- (8) a. Quand même qu'il y avait des punaises on restait là *nous*.  
(19th/16)  
'Even though there were fleas we would sit there.'
- b. En dessous du solage elle les entendait parler en dedans *eux*.  
(19th/1)  
'Under the basement, she heard them talking inside [them].'

Otherwise, the analysis of the 20th century data indicated that the year of the interview was another significant factor. This result showed that a change was occurring within a very short period of time, with the same speakers using more simple forms in 1984 than they had in 1971. Again, the rapid progress of the simple form leads us to the crucial question of the linguistic constraints at each of those two periods.

	1971	1984
Corrected mean :	.058	.168
Total N :	624	761
Preposition		
Presence	.64	.59
Absence	.45	.47
RANGE	19	12
Grammatical Person		
1st person	.53	.58
3rd person	.47	.41
2nd person	.00	.00
RANGE	06	17
Double marking		
Absence	.64	[ ]
Presence	.37	[ ]
RANGE	27	
Factors not selected as significant		
Position	x	x
Referential contrast	x	x
Double marking		x

Table 4. Comparison of linguistic factors contributing to the choice of the simple form of plural strong pronouns: 20th century for 30 speakers in 1971 and 1984 (adapted from Blondeau 1999).

Table 4 gives a comparison of the linguistic factors constraining the variation in 1971 and in 1984 among 30 speakers who were interviewed at those two points in time. Paralleling the results for the 19th century, for both years the analysis rejects the influence of the factor related to referential contrast. This strongly confirms that emphasis, the only aspect that grammarians have pointed out in their justification of the use of compound forms, has never had any impact, whether in the 19th century, or the 20th century.

Otherwise, as in the 19th century data, the presence of a preposition significantly influences the choice in favor of the simple form. This is the case for both interview years—1971 and 1984—and it should be interpreted as paralleling the conditioning of the variation in the 19th century data.

In addition, an analysis limited to occurrences with a preposition shows that the lexical effect of the preposition that was hypothesized for the 19th century is confirmed for the 20th century. Table 5 presents the results<sup>8</sup> of a variable rule analysis for this linguistic context only.

Preposition	
Corrected mean:	.193
N total	600
Chez	1
Entre	.77
De	.58
À	.52
Pour	.44
Avec	.37
Autres	.61
RANGE	40

Table 5. Variable rule analysis of linguistic factors contributing to the choice of the simple form of plural strong pronouns with preposition in the 20th century

As was the case for the 19th century, *chez* is categorically associated with simple forms, and the preposition *entre* strongly favors simple forms (9). On the other hand, the preposition *pour* (10) is associated with compound forms.

- (9) Un *d'entre eux* vient de se marier. (20th/87/1971)  
'One of them just got married.'

<sup>8</sup> Factors not selected as significant: morphological category, referential contrast, position, double marking.

- (10) Ça *pour nous autres* quelle signification ça l a se cracher dans les mains? (20th/52/1971)  
 'What does it mean to spit in your hands?'

Otherwise, and back to Table 4, it is interesting to notice that the increase in simple forms seems to follow a particular path. In 1971, the linguistic factor linked to the double marking structure was associated with strong forms, as illustrated in example (11). In contrast, this factor was no longer significant in 1984.

- (11) Là les Québécois ils vont penser *eux autres* que tu es un des leurs hein puis là la police va se revenger. (20th/52/1971)  
 'Then the Quebecois they will think they/them that you are one of theirs and then the police will take revenge.'

In addition, it seems that the morphological category of the person, a slightly significant factor in 1971, increases in importance in 1984, suggesting a hypothesis that the change lies in part of this factor group. As illustrated in (12), the use of simple forms is more likely to appear with the first person. This shows that a new *nous* is on the rise as the "leader" in the emergence of the simple form.

- (12) *Nous* on va utiliser le terme exact. (20th/102/1984)  
 'We are going to use the exact term.'

In short for this variable, the change in progress hypothesized due to the difference in the rate of usage was investigated in terms of its linguistic conditioning for each of the period under analysis. The presence of a preposition, a significant factor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, continues to be influential for the modern period. In addition, for both centuries, there is a parallel rejection of the factor linked to referential contrast. However, the variability has evolved in such a way that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new factors are emerging as significant on the variation, as is the case with the morphological category of the person, which increases in strength over the time period under study.

## 5 Variation Between the Clitic Subject Pronouns *Nous* and *On*

As we now turn to the other variable under analysis, we find that the situation differs drastically. The use of *on* with a definite meaning is a well-known phenomenon in many varieties of French and has been documented

for some time. However, if the scope of the phenomenon is now fairly well documented in space, its scope in time remains unclear. The variationist study by Laberge, who pioneered the analysis of clitic subject variation, showed that for the 20th century, *on* is the normal way of expressing the first person plural with a definite meaning. She observed that the use of *nous* was restricted to only 1.06% of the 1971 data. Interestingly for our purposes, she pointed out that the age of the speaker played a significant role in the variation. The fact that older speakers used *nous* more often than younger speakers was interpreted by Laberge, within the apparent-time framework, as a change in progress within the speech community.

Real-time data for the 19th century are relevant in order to verify whether the age factor, from which Laberge inferred a change in progress, was a clear indication of a real-time change. Surprisingly, our analysis of the distribution of the variants for the 19th century data reveals that *nous*, in this variable context was already an "old" variant. Indeed, it occurred in less than 0.25% of the relevant contexts (Table 6). This means that already at that time, *on* clearly dominated the variation spectrum. Consequently, it is not possible to consider the 19th century as a prior stage in the process of this change. Indeed, it seems that *nous* was already vestigial at that time, meaning that the completion of the change was probably far advanced even in the middle of the 19th century. The rate of usage was extremely low, even slightly lower than that identified by Laberge. Therefore, the situation seems relatively stable between the two periods. Instead of a change in progress, we are looking at much more stability than was expected from an apparent-time perspective. Unfortunately, the rarity of the *nous* variant in the 19th century limits the possibility of a variable rule analysis and restricts our comparison to the rate of usage alone. Other real-time data might be necessary in order to investigate the linguistic constraints influencing the variation.

19 <sup>th</sup> century	20th century
0.25%	1,06%

Table 6. Rate of clitic *nous* usage in 19th and 20th centuries

A second aspect that Laberge noted is that *nous* constitutes a stylistic resource in contemporary Montreal French. She proposed this interpretation after analyzing the social and stylistic distribution of the variants. She pointed out that the *nous* users were highly educated and had a higher position on the linguistic market scale index. She was also able to correlate a higher usage of *nous* in the formal context, that is, nearly 5%, compared with only 1% in the informal context. Is there a similar distribution for the 19th century? All of the rare occurrences of the clitic *nous*, illustrated in

(13)—precisely 8 out of 3,292 relevant contexts—come from only three speakers. Of these occurrences, 5 of the 8 were from a woman 88 years old at the time of the interview. The other 3 occurrences come from two men. Otherwise, a qualitative observation of the tokens in question does not seem to involve a similar stylistic association with formality, as was identified for the 20th century by Laberge.

- (13) a. *Nous* allons embarquer. (19th/4)  
 'We are going to board.'
- b. *Nous* avons trouvé une petite bête, elle avait une grande queue. (19th/4)  
 'We found a small animal, it had a big tail.'
- c. Elle faisait tique taque, tique taque, il dit, *nous* l'avons tuée. (19th/4)  
 'It was making "tic tac" noises, he says, we killed it.'
- d. Il dit, *nous* avons pas d'argent. (19th/4)  
 'He says, we don't have money.'
- e. Il dit *nous* vous payerons, il dit, avec de la viande. (19th/4)  
 'He says we are going to pay you, he says, with meat.'
- f. Dans trois jours, *nous* nous marierons et la noce commencera. (19th/44)  
 'In three days, we are getting married and the honeymoon will start.'
- g. Finalement il a accepté. Il lui a fait réponse, *nous* avons peu de provisions. (19th/53)  
 'He finally accepted. He answered him, we don't have enough provisions.'
- h. *Nous nous* vivons de chasse et de pêche. (19th/53)  
 'We live off hunting and fishing.'

The preceding example seems to be randomly distributed, without a clear association with formality. Again, as was the case for the other variable under study, the 19th century data does not show a large stylistic differentiation. We might therefore consider that neither of the two variables presented a clear pattern of stylistic variation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With respect to the variation between the clitic subject pronouns *nous* and *on*, our comparison has shown a relative stability between the two periods, at least in terms of rate of usage. However, despite its relative stability, the rare variant seems to have acquired a highly formal status during the 20th century. This finding matches what Poplack and St-Amand observed for the negative particle *ne* over the same time span (2002).

## 6 Conclusion

Our comparison of two sociolinguistic variables in the pronominal system, which involve a similar form, has highlighted the importance of supplementing apparent-time data with real-time analysis. Consistent with Hermann's real-time re-analysis (1929) of the Charmey apparent-time classic study of change, our real-time analysis of two linguistic changes in Quebec French shows that one in fact involves stable variation over the period under analysis, while the other shows a spectacular increase in the variant presumed to be receding.

As we have demonstrated, the variable which involves the plural strong pronouns is clearly in a process of vigorous change, not only in terms of rate of usage, but more interestingly in relation to its linguistic conditioning. Although a paralleling of the linguistic conditioning emerges for some factors between the two periods, other linguistic factors have emerged as potentially favoring the use of the simple form in the modern period. In addition, the extension of the variability is embedded in the social context, which has favored the development of the variable as a highly productive sociolinguistic marker in the community.

On the other hand, what seems to emerge is the fact that in the other variable context of the clitic subject pronouns, the alternation *on/nous* corresponds rather to a stable sociolinguistic variable, at least in terms of rate of usage. In short, our results show that the clitic *nous* was already vestigial in the 19th century, occurring in less than 1% of the relevant contexts. This mirrors the contemporary situation, suggesting that the extremely rare use of the clitic *nous* is not the result of a recent change. Furthermore, the variable was not involved in the 19th century in the same stylistic pattern as Laberge observed for the 20th century. The stability in terms of rate of usage seems to have evolved in such a way that one rare variant has acquired some sort of highly formal status.

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