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Do Cajuns Speak Southern English? Morphosyntactic Evidence

Do Cajuns Speak Southern English? Morphosyntactic Evidence

Sylvie Dubois and Barbara M. Horvath

1 Introduction

Cajun English (CE) is a dialect of English spoken by French/English bilinguals—and to some extent English monolinguals—living in French-dominant rural areas of south Louisiana (Rubrecht 1971, Scott 1992, Walton 1994, Eble 1993). In previous sociolinguistic descriptions of this dialect¹, we have examined how Cajun English fits into the surrounding Southern English dialects. All the characteristics which we have studied as distinctive forms of CE are also well-known variables in other dialects of English throughout the world, but especially in southern American dialects. What we have shown is that the variables have changed dramatically over three generations and that these changes have occurred against a complex and changing social background. We have argued that the origins of the sociolinguistic variables we have studied so far lie within the Cajun community and that these characteristics of CE cannot be attributed solely to interference from French nor as the result of the spread of these features from the surrounding dialect of Southern English. In this paper we focus on morphosyntactic phenomena in order to examine whether CE verbal morphology exhibits the same regional patterns as those described for the South. We report on two verbal features which are frequent in CE and which are also well-known features of White Southern English and of AAVE and have been the subject of extensive sociolinguistic investigation. They are:

- 1) the absence of the present tense morpheme in the third person singular; which we refer to as verbal -S absence
- 2) the absence of the past tense morpheme in weak verbs; referred to as -ed absence

¹ The first author acknowledges the support of the National Science Foundation (SBR-9514831). For background to the Cajun community, see Dubois and Melancon (1997); sociolinguistic descriptions of a number of phonological variables can be found in Dubois & Horvath (1998a, 1998b, 1999). A description of the entire sample and data collection procedures is given in Dubois (1997a).

We have previously reported the intricate patterns of phonological variation associated with age, gender, social network, and the language first learned by the speakers. We have found two important language change patterns, both of which are led by men. The first one is the usual linear age pattern in which some sounds that can be attributed to interference from French in the process of second language acquisition gradually decrease over the generations. An unaspirated variant of (p,t,k), trilled (r), and (h) deletion in stressed positions all follow this path. There is a steady decrease in the occurrence across three age groups so that the Cajun variables are used more frequently by the older and less frequently by the middle-aged and least of all by the younger generation. However, what is perhaps unexpected is that these forms are maintained by middle-aged women raised in French, and by middle-aged men, even those who have English as their first language. Although the trend for the young men is towards the adoption of the standard variants of these variables, they still show a very high rate of nonstandard usage and a significantly different pattern from the women. We have argued that these language change patterns—the maintenance of Cajun forms over time—represent linguistic innovations, the development of endonorms, and that they do not originate from the social process of the spread of variables from one speech community to another. These variables are formed within the Cajun speech community and are passed on from one generation to the next.

The second language change pattern is a curvilinear or v-shaped age pattern in which some linguistic features (heavy nasalization, monophthongization of (ay), and the substitution of the stops [t/d] for the interdental fricatives [th/dh]) move in a direction unlike the linear pattern. The older generation use more of these Cajun variants than all others and the middle-aged dramatically decrease their use. However, the young increase the use of these variants so that the frequency is close to or even higher than the proportion found in the speech of the older generation. We have called this latter process recycling; however, only young men recycle reflecting, we argue, the current situation in which Cajun identity is largely associated with masculine behavior—fishing, hunting, and public displays of Cajun cultural activities². Although these variables also began as changes from below the level of consciousness in the speech of the old generation, their status is quite different in the middle-aged speakers who adopt the standard variants.

² The only exception is the case of /th/dh/ realized as [t/d] for young women who have closed social networks.

2 Data and Sample

The data are taken from the Cajun French/English Sociolinguistic Corpus which includes 120 fluent Cajun French speakers who were born, raised, and still live in their home parish. All the subjects are bilingual and speak English and French fluently. They are divided by sex and age, ranging from 19 to 102 years old and forming three age groups: 19-39 years of age (young), 40-59 (middle-aged), and 60 or over (old).

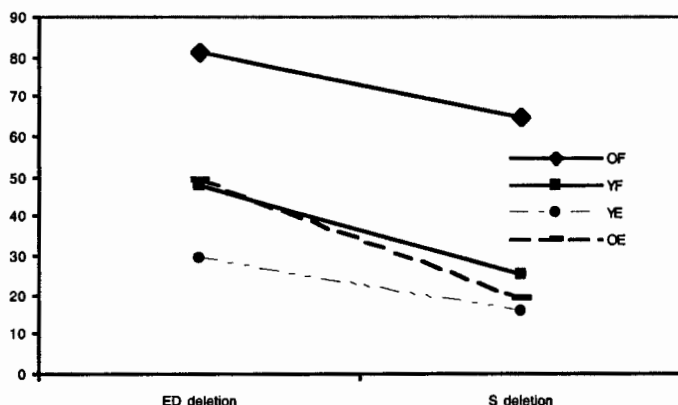
In order to examine several morphosyntactic variables, a pilot study of a subsample of eight men and eight women from the three age groups was undertaken. Along with verbal morphology, we investigated the nonstandard distribution of the definite article (*I speak the French*); the use of double pronouns (*Me I went to the store.* or *I went to the store me.*); and nonstandard use of a selection of prepositions (*I've been married with my wife during twenty years.*). While nonstandard forms were found to be frequent in the speech of old and young men, among the women it was only older speakers from close-knit social networks who used the forms at all and even then the frequency was extremely low. Since this result was similar to our previous results (Dubois & Horvath 1999) with respect to the women in the sample, we decided to select a subsample consisting only of old and young men in order to investigate whether some aspects of the verbal morphology of Cajun English are distinctive within the region or whether they behave like Southern English in general.

Therefore, the subsample used for our study includes 16 male speakers and is taken from the first interview in English, lasting 45 minutes³ and conducted by a native English speaker from southern Louisiana. Basic descriptive statistics were calculated using Statview and variable use analyses were carried out using Goldvarb. Four social factor groups were included in the analyses: age (old and young); language learned first (French or English); amount of formal education (high school and below and college), and the four speaker groups category representing a combination of age and which of the two languages was learned first (Old/French first, Young/French first, Old/English first, Young/English first).

Figure 1 of the two morphosyntactic variables shows the percentage of -ED absence and verbal -S absence for the four groups studied. Clearly, the

³ The English interview was originally designed as a warm-up session for the next two extensive interviews in Cajun French. The speakers were asked to describe their childhood and their parents' social history. Because of the interview structure, speakers used the present tense less often, except when in narratives and reported speech.

old Cajuns who learned French first use the CE variants of the variables at a higher rate than any of the other groups. There is a split between the old Cajuns with French as their first language and the other speakers. For both variables the young speakers with English as their first language are closest to Standard English.



Graph 1: Percentage of occurrences of -s and -ed deletion according to the four categories of speakers. OF: old, French first; YF: young, French first; YE: young, English first; OE: old, English first.

Table 1 shows the effect of education on the use of the variables. The education factor group was statistically significant as determined by Goldvarb. Within all groups for both variables, speakers with less education use the CE variants much more than those who had received more education. There is no doubt that these variables would have been and continue to be subject to correction at school.

Variables	OFF	YFF	YEF	OEF
-ed absence				
High school or below	92	52	43	63
College	69	44	26	34
Verbal -s absence				
High school or below	95	24	27	29
College education	47	26	12	11

Table 1: Effects of education on -ED and verbal -S absence, by speaker group.

3 Verbal -S Absence (The Absence of 3rd Person Singular Present Tense Marking)

We considered only the absence of verbal -s in the 3rd person singular present tense⁴, which is reported to be the grammatical person least likely to be absent. To state it another way, verbal -s usually marks the 3rd person singular and for many researchers it is the presence of verbal -s for the 3rd person plural that has been of interest. (Godfrey & Tagliamonte 1999:101) From the substantial number of dialects graphed by Godfrey and Tagliamonte, one can see that verbal -s absence ranges between 0% and 95%; however, an important pattern that emerges is the difference between the dialects spoken by people of African descent and the others: the latter have a much lower rate of verbal -s absence (below 30%). The overall rate of verbal -s absence in CE is 32%, which mirrors the frequency found in White dialects of English. However, the quantitative gap between the Old/French first speakers and the other Cajun groups is very important⁵. The Old/French first group shows an absence rate of 65%, which is more consistent with the African descent usage.

We examined two linguistic constraints: following environment (consonant, vowel, or pause) and the type-of-subject constraint (noun, pronoun, relative clause). The literature is clear on these points: the phonetically expected result is that 3rd p. sg. present tense absence will be least frequent with a following vowel and most frequent with a following consonant, with pause often patterning like a vowel. Because of the very high rate of verbal -s absence (65%) for the Old/French first speakers, neither the phonological nor grammatical constraint seems to have any effect on verbal -s absence. For all of the other speakers who have a rate below 25%, the expected pattern for following environment is found, as illustrated in Table 2.

⁴ The forms *have/has* and *do/does* were not included in our analysis. We also excluded the verb 'say' which appears almost categorically in our corpus as an unmarked discourse marker introducing reported speech. The rate of verbal -s absence would have been even higher if we had considered this form.

⁵ Age and language learning factors were not significant but GoldVarb found the speaker category factor to be highly influential (Old/French first: .86, Young/French first .39, Old/English first .32, Young/English first .30, Input .28, Significance 0.01)

Verbal -s Absence	%	Following Environment			Type of Subject		
		188	C	V	P	no	pr
Cajun Speaker Groups							
Old/French first (51)	65	78	48	80	61	68	67
Young/French first (56)	25	42	11	(3)	33	15	50
Young/English first (49)	16	25	6	(2)	24	13	(1)
Old/English first (32)	19	25	14	(2)	29	11	29
All Speakers (GoldVarb)	32	66	36	36	not significant		
English spoken in Texas							
White Folks (elderly)	43				27	58	
Young White	10				57	71	
Black Folks (elderly)	70						
Young Black	91						
Young white speakers in Mississippi	10						
Hyde County English							
Old and young	NO						
White speakers							
Old and young	86						
Black speakers							
Samaná English	44	47	39	55	45	45	29
Devon English, UK	14	17	5	37	14	9	38

Table 2: Third person singular present tense (verbal -s) absence in Cajun English. Data from Texas are taken from Bailey, Maynor, & Cukor-Avila (1989:293-4). Mississippi results are from Wolfram (1974, as cited in Bailey et al. 1989:293). Calculated percentages in Samaná English and Devon English are from Poplack & Tagliamonte (1989:66) and Godfrey & Tagliamonte (1999:106), respectively. no: noun; pr: pronoun; rel: relative clause.

The data for the type-of-subject constraint is sparse and this factor group was found not to be statistically significant by Goldvarb. Godfrey and Tagliamonte (1999:106) also found this constraint not to be significant. Nevertheless, we can report that our percentage results do show the same tendency found by Bailey et al (1989:293-4) for the third person singular in both Black Folk Speech and White Folk Speech, i.e., a pronoun subject favors an uninflected form more than a noun phrase does.

Bailey et al (1989:295) note in their Texas study that verbal -s has come to function primarily as a person/number agreement marker for young Whites—perhaps under the pressure of standardization—as it has in mainstream varieties. In their data verbal -s was rare in the plural and in the singular it was absent only 10% of time—paralleling what Wolfram found for White children in Mississippi. They suggest that for young Blacks in Texas, the noun phrase/pronoun competition with the person/number agreement marker has also disappeared but for very different reasons; it has disappeared as the verbal -s has disappeared for third singular contexts. This seems to suggest the following to us in our aim to interpret our findings: with a very high degree of verbal -s absence, the factors constraining absence lose their potency and the main process that is happening is the disappearance (non-appearance) of the morpheme—another kind of levelling perhaps. This may explain our findings for the Old/French first speakers. All of the other Cajun speakers maintain a moderate rate of verbal -s deletion and may also be under the standardizing effects that the young White Texans are experiencing.

4 -ed Absence (The Absence of Past Tense Marking in Weak Verbs)

The many studies of the deletion of word final /t,d/ have consistently shown that when these sounds mark the past tense, they have the lowest rate of deletion, i.e., this context is the least likely one for /t,d/ to be absent. A number of environments have been shown to affect the deletion of -ed; for our study we considered only weak verbs⁶, whether the past tense morpheme was realized phonetically as [t], [d] or [əd], and whether there was a consonant, vowel, or pause in the following environment. The rate of deletion averages 56% and it ranges from 29% to 81%. Again the Old/French first speakers behave quite differently compared to all other speakers⁷.

⁶ No weak verbs in narrative or quoted speech were included. The absence of inflection may indicate either verbal -s absence if the speaker uses present tense or -ed absence if he uses past tense. We did not include embedded forms such as *used to/usta* and *wanted to/wanna*, as well as the verb *start* when used as a modal (I start call him) which is usually not marked. Words beginning with an /h/ which was deleted (*here/ere*—very frequent in CE) were coded as vowel initial words.

⁷ Like verbal -s absence, only the speaker categories was found to be significant (Old/French first .80, Young/French first .34, Old/English first .24, Young/English first .41; Input 0.59,; Significance 0.00).

The results of Goldvarb analysis displayed in Table 3 indicate that both of the independent linguistic factors were significant and that the expected results were found, except perhaps for the overall rate of deletion which is quite high compared to other dialects of English. Deletion is also most favored when followed by a consonant and is disfavored by both a following vowel or a pause. Deletion is most favored in weak verbs marked by a [d], then by verbs marked by a [t] and is strongly disfavored when a weak verb is marked by [əd].

Deletion of the past tense marker *-ed* has been found consistently in all dialects of American English, and Rickford remarks that it, along with verbal *-s*, has not been implicated in the divergence hypothesis⁸, apparently because the rate of deletion for AAVE is similar to that found in Standard English. Feagin (1979:81-82) did not study /t,d/ deletion for weak verbs in Alabama; presumably it was not remarkably different from reports of deletion in Standard English. For six speakers in Palo Alto, for instance, Rickford (1999:273-4) reports a deletion rate of 31% on weak verbs marked by a [t] or [d] and only 2% for verbs marked by [əd]. Robert Bayley's study of Tejano English in San Antonio (1994:310) is the only study we have of *-ed* deletion in the region; he finds an overall deletion rate of 25% and constrained by the usual order for following environment, except for the effect of pause.

When we compare a large number of vernacular English dialects, as reported by Wolfram and Schilling-Estes (1998:253), with the Cajun English⁹ (bottom of Table 3), we see that the rate for CE is much higher than the rate for Standard English or AAVE and that this fact is constant across age groups and regardless of which language was learned first by the speakers. Further, the rate remains very high, even when followed by a vowel. The old CE speakers, regardless of which language they learned first, are not affected by the usual phonological constraint. The Old/English first speakers delete the morpheme much less (41%) than the Old/French first (81%) but when they do, they follow the old French speaker linguistic pattern. The most obvious point of comparison is with Native American Pueblan English or, to a lesser extent, Vietnamese English, both of which have had ... recent access to another language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes 1998:167-68). The young

⁸ The hypothesis that AAVE is diverging from Standard English.

⁹ The rate for [əd] was excluded for comparative purposes resulting in the higher percentage figures presented on the table.

CE speakers behave phonologically like other ethnic working class speakers: there is more absence before a consonant.

<i>-ed</i> Absence	%	Following Environment			Phonetic Realization		
		340	C	V	P	[d]	[t]
Cajun Speaker Groups							
Old/French first (116)	81	88	73	75	91	91	43
Young/French first (69)	48	62	31	67	58	54	8
Young/English first (68)	29	67	33	0	39	32	17
Old/English first (87)	49	56	52	0	73	44	27
All Speakers (GoldVarb)	56	67	33	23	.70	.57	.16
Tejano English							
Older speakers	24	57	26	34			
Younger speakers	25	74	21	49			
AAVE Palo Alto					t/d %	ed%	
Six core speakers					31	2	
<i>/t,d/</i> deletion in verbs							
		Followed by consonant			Followed by vowel		
Old Cajun, French first		98			82		
Young Cajun, French first		83			33		
Young Cajun, English first		63			38		
Old Cajun, English first		73			62		
Southern Anglo working class		16			10		
Appalachian working class		67			5		
Southern A.A. working class		50			36		
Italian-American working class		39			10		
Puerto Rican working class		78			23		
Native Am. Pueblan English		92			81		
Vietnamese English		93			60		

Table 3: *-ed* absence in Cajun English. Tejano English Data in Texas are taken from Bayley (1994:310). Palo Alto data are taken from Rickford (1999:273-4). */t,d/* deletion rate in other dialects are taken from Wolfram & Schilling-Estes (1998:253).

5 Summary and Discussion

Our initial aim was to find a place for Cajun English within its region by comparing the behavior of two verbal markers in CE with similar studies of Southern English. We can sum up our results in two different ways. First let us consider the results in terms of the speaker category:

- Old CE (French first) has the highest rate of all Southern dialects for the absence of verbal *-s* (65%) and *-ed* (81%). For Old CE (French first) the direction of the hierarchy of the constraints on these verbal processes is the same as for Southern English but the effects are weak because of the high degree of use.
- Although the Young CE (French first) rate is considerably lower than the Old CE, it continues to be the highest rate of all Southern dialects for verbal *-s* and *-ed* absence; the same constraint hierarchy as other Southern dialects was found.
- The linguistic behavior of Cajuns who learned English first is inconsistent. They have a higher rate for verbal *-s* deletion and *-ed* deletion (compared to Mississippi and Texas speakers who are young and White); they have a comparable rate for *-ed* (compared to Black Southern dialects). For both old and Young/English first speakers of CE, the expected constraint hierarchy was found.

The comparative approach has shown us that the Cajun English spoken by the old people, the earliest variety of CE that we have, is linguistically constrained like other Southern English dialects; the quantitative differences, however, are dramatic. Not only is the rate higher when compared with Southern English, it is also very high compared with other CE speakers. In fact there is little variation in the use rate (around 75%) for the old CE speakers whose first language was French across the two variables we have reported on here and also across many other variables we have studied, e.g. unglided tense vowels, monophthongal /ay/, unaspirated /p,t,k/, the dental stop realizations of /th,dh/, etc. The consistency in actual rates is puzzling.

There is a methodological issue to consider before we can be satisfied with our findings. If Old/French first speakers were simply learning Southern English, why did they deviate so much from the model? Because we began our study by wanting to see how CE fits in with Southern English, we chose variables that are both well researched and clearly associated with Southern English. But if we were to describe what we know to be characteristic of early CE without reference to other dialects, we would have chosen another dependent variable for our study: the deletion of final consonants at

the ends of words, and verbal *-s* and *-ed* absence (along with deletion of [t,d] in monomorphemes) would have been among the independent variables, i.e., they would have been seen as variable constraints on word final consonant deletion in CE.

When we widen the study of English inflectional morphology more generally, we find absences in a number of other places, nominal plural *-s* also has a very high rate of absence, for instance. And there is final [s,z] absence in monomorphemes. This same can be said for [t,d] deletion; not only does it occur in bimorphemic words but there appears to be a very high rate of deletion in monomorphemes as well; we have examples in VC contexts (*seafood* pronounced /sifu/) as well as in consonant cluster contexts. Moreover, we have noted the deletion of final /k/ in *New York*, the variable absence of the final consonant [z] in *Larose*, the name of the community in which the speaker has lived his whole life, and even the absence of /ʃ/ in *fish*. Table 4 gives more examples of this type.

Consonant	Words
/t/	<i>together</i>
/l/	<i>school</i>
/d/	<i>old, hand, food, wide</i>
/k/	<i>work, New York</i>
/v/	<i>twelve</i>
/ʃ/	<i>fish</i>
/s/	<i>across, house, fence</i>
/z/	<i>Larose</i>
/n/	<i>nine</i>
/f/	<i>life</i>
/θ/	<i>north, late, rent</i>

Table 4: Examples of word final consonant deletion in the speech of old Cajuns who learned French first

Given this approach to variability in CE, we are able to consider the possibility that early CE is not just quantitatively different from the Southern English dialects in its region, it is also qualitatively distinctive. Furthermore, the uneven pattern among the other Cajun English speakers is an important reflection of the distinctive origin and development of CE, even though the

study of some individual morphosyntactic variables may point to a different conclusion.

A proposition worth considering is that early CE grammar contains some very general principles that are phonological in origin but which have morphological consequences. The first principle might be to ignore consonants at the ends of words; then, perhaps under the pressure of standardizing forces such as the schools or extensive contact with native English speakers as happened during the Second World War, a subsequent principle begins to constrain the avoidance of word final consonants by the following phonological environment so that consonants are 'ignored' more when followed by a word beginning with a consonant and 'ignored' less when followed by a vowel or a pause. For subsequent generations of speakers who become increasingly open to standardizing pressures, the morphological patterns of English become more like the regional varieties and are subject to the same or similar conditioning factors.

As we have shown, the CE spoken by Young/French first speakers is similar to the CE of the Old/French first speakers, even though they have a lower rate of verbal *-s* and *-ed* absence. However, their rate is higher when compared particularly to the Young/English first speakers but also when compared to the Old/English first speakers for verbal *-s*; and the rate is higher for both variables compared to White Southern dialects in general. It is important to make it clear that the old CE speakers are very fluent speakers of English—there is no hesitancy in their speech as you might find with first-generation immigrants. They speak daily to their children and grandchildren and others (sometimes to a French-speaking spouse) in English with no decrease in fluency. Old/French first speakers speak English as a vernacular, not a second language.¹⁰

The primary way in which Cajun English differs from a variety of English as a second language is in the social setting of this speech community. The particularities of this setting have an impact on the linguistic development of the dialect. First of all, the French in Louisiana are the founder population. French is currently under threat but until quite recently French had been vigorous for hundreds of years in this place—especially in the rural areas of south Louisiana. English entered these communities not through the settlement of English speakers in these towns but through government edicts demanding that English be the sole language of education. This was followed by the decrease in institutional support for French and an increase in institutional support for English. But as many of the old people remind us,

¹⁰ We would like to thank Gillian Sankoff who suggested that CE is a vernacular at NWAV-28 in East Lansing.

French was the language of the playground and the language of the community at the time early CE was being used. The old people who faced English first, especially those men who as young boys did not have much schooling or whose schooling was interrupted because they had to work to help support their families, did not learn English as well as some women in their age cohort (Dubois & Horvath 1999). Nevertheless, their experiences during the Second World War and the increased support for English in their communities, along with their children's better learning of English, meant that the use of English became widespread in the communities.

When English was added to the linguistic repertoire of these close-knit speech communities; all of the speakers became bilingual. The dialect of English they speak is a community dialect; the way they speak English is part of their identity as Cajuns as we have shown. As we see with the Young/French first speakers, the Cajun way of speaking English is passed on from generation to generation. We believe that the origins of CE are not to be found in the surrounding region¹¹ nor is it a matter of classic language interference that disappears from the community after a single generation.

We are aware that CE changes as it joins the dialect region. Cross-generational evidence suggests that CE is moving further in the direction of Southern English quantitatively, although the movement across a number of variables is uneven. Our study of /ay/ monothongization shows the phonological conditioning of the young gradually coming to mirror Southern English. In our present study, the constraint hierarchy for Young/French first speakers duplicates the expected English hierarchy for some variables.

We believe that our description of Cajun English as a dialect of English with its own history is replicated in a number of other American speech communities. Unlike the migrant experience, large communities of speakers who come to English not by moving, not by being swamped by native English speakers, but by institutional decree can develop ways of speaking English that are their own innovations. Among such groups would be the speakers of Tejano English and other southwestern US dialects, varieties of Native American English, Inuit English, and many other colonial Englishes the world over.

¹¹ We are currently gathering data among Louisiana African-Americans who speak Creole French first, Isleños who have Spanish first, and White Southern English-speaking individuals with no French ancestry in order to address the issues of linguistic convergence.

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