

CHAPTER FOUR

PHONOLOGY

The following are the main pronunciation traits that distinguish Canadian French from the standard pronunciations that are taught in school.

(a) Vowels

1. Opening of high vowels in closed syllables

When one of the vowels [i], [y] or [u] occurs in a syllable that is closed by a final consonant, e.g., *pipe*, *jupe*, *coupe*, lax allophones of these vowels are heard in all Canadian French, both Québécois (which includes the regional forms from Western Canada) and Acadian (from the Atlantic Provinces). Where these vowels are normally lengthened, however, in stressed syllables before such lengthening consonants as [z], [r] or [ʒ], this lengthening prevents the formation of lax allophones.

Gendron notes (1966:42) that the abbé Rousselot had noted a tendency in Parisian speech of 100 years ago, to lax high vowels in stressed syllables before non-lengthening consonants, as also in all unstressed syllables. Since studies show that this is no longer true of modern Parisian, Gendron suggests that this feature of Canadian French may be an archaism, or the further development of an older tendency (Gendron 1966:25, 42).

2. Devoicing of high vowels in internal syllables

The same high vowels, when they occur between two unvoiced consonants in internal syllables, tend themselves to become devoiced, or whispered. For *député*, *constitution*, *écouter*, for example, one hears [depyte, kɔ̃stʰitʰysjɔ̃, ekute], although this feature is rarer with /u/ than with the front vowels.

3. Tendency to diphthongize long vowels

This tendency affects only the mid and open vowels, and normally only in stressed syllables where conditions for lengthening exist: diphthongization is a function of vowel length. In Canadian French vowels are long under the usual conditions: (a) any vowel in a stressed syllable followed by a lengthening consonant such as z, ɛ̃, v, r, (b) any nasal vowel in a stressed syllable that is closed by a consonant.

The nasal vowels are inherently long for historical reasons, and this length persists in stressed, closed syllables. Historically the nasal vowel is formed from two consecutive elements: vowel and following nasal consonant, as shown by the pronunciation [tã:t] of the word *tante*, where historically the vowel [ã] has been formed of the two original sounds [ɑ + n].

Also long in Canadian French, for similar reasons, are circumflex vowels in stressed syllables. The circumflex accent marks the loss of an [s], as when older *paste* and *hostel* became modern *pâte* and *hôtel*. (These words were borrowed into English *before* the change took place in French). What happened was that the /s/ became simply aspiration, heard as [h], which in turn became a mere prolongation of the vowel: *past* > *paht* > *pa:t*. In Canada length is still maintained when these syllables are stressed, whereas this form of long vowel has almost entirely disappeared in France. This is, therefore, another archaic feature of Canadian French.

Because vowel length in Canadian French tends toward diphthongization, *seize* may be heard as [sejz] or even [saez], whereas the diphthong is not heard in *saisir*. Likewise *part* and *sort* may be heard as [paur] and [saur] (or [pɔur] and [sɔur]) whereas diphthongs are not heard in *partir* and *sortir*. Front vowels glide toward [i], and back vowels toward [u], so that *pâte* may become [paut], and *teinte*, *chance*, *monde* may be heard as [tẽit, ʃɔ̃s, mɔ̃d].

This feature is only a tendency rather than a regular phonological development, and the degree of the tendency varies regionally. Educated speakers will also normally resist the tendency, so that one rarely hears strong diphthongization in any kind of formal speech. It is most marked in the speech of the underprivileged classes, for which the pejorative term *joual* is sometimes used, and is consequently a social feature as well as a regional feature.

4. Preservation of back /Â/

The distinction between the two open vowels, front [a] and back [ɑ] is now archaic in France, but still preserved in Canada, the name of the country being itself pronounced [kanadɑ].

The back vowel [ɑ] is typically heard in words ending in -as, -at, -ois, -ar(C), such as *fracas*, *tas*, *climat*, *chat*, *bois*, *mois*, *char*, *lard*, *part*, with the already noted tendency to diphthongization in the last three words.

This vowel is also heard before final [j], [s] or [N] (where N stands for any nasal consonant), as in the following: *bataille*, *grasse*, *Anne*, *montagne*, *réclame*. It is also the normal pronunciation for *â*, so that *tâcher* 'try' and *tacher* 'stain' are still a minimal pair in Canada, whereas the contrast has been almost totally lost in France.

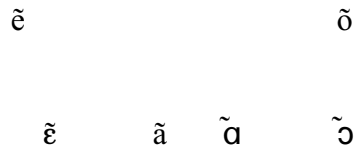
In popular usage in Canada this vowel may also be heard in unstressed syllables not only under similar conditions (i.e., before -s, -r, etc.) as in *passer*, *mardi*, *gazon*, *tailleur*, *châssis*, *nation*, *occasion*, but elsewhere as well, as in *haler* ‘to haul’, written with a circumflex in the *Glossaire* and elsewhere to indicate the pronunciation.

This vowel is always long, in fact, even in unstressed position, so that it may give the impression of a shift of stress in words like *passer*, *mardi*. It is also frequently darkened, or pharyngealized, as to be phonetically indistinguishable from [ɔ̃]; in popular speech, in fact, [ɔ̃] and [ɑ̃] have fallen together before [r], so that pairs such as *port*, *part* and *tort*, *tard* are no longer distinguishable.

5. Chain shift of nasal vowels

As in France the four nasal vowels have frequently been reduced to three by the merger of /œ̃/ and /ɛ̃/.

The three remaining nasal vowels, in comparison with SF, show a frontward chain shift in Canadian French that is best presented in diagram form:



Consequently the standard nasals [ẽ, ã, õ] may be heard in Canada as [ẽ, ã, õ̃]. It should be emphasized that the arrows in this diagram do not represent historical changes, but only the departure from SF norms. In fact it may well be as Gendron (1966:108) suggests, that the Canadian pronunciation is the original one, and that the nasals of SF have undergone a backing chain shift.

Whatever the case, Canadian /ã̃/ is open and suffers some delabialization. Casual pronunciations of the exclamation *Bon!* may even sound like SF *banc*, but normally confusions do not arise as they do with the vowel [ã̃]: the Canadian pronunciation of *du vent* may well sound like *du vin* to a Frenchman. This means that many pronunciations of [ã̃] are quite close to [ẽ̃] leading to confusion between two different phonemes in the different regional pronunciations.

Although [ã̃] is fronted and raised in CF, it is noteworthy that when this vowel is lengthened and diphthongized the off-glide is toward [u] not [i]: *la chance* may be heard as [la fã̃ūs].

6. Variations of [œ]

A great deal of variation, involving much phonetic detail that is beyond the scope of this survey, involves words where the vowel [œ] is found in SF.

Sometimes the less open vowel [e] is heard instead. In this case the spellings with *é* in the *Glossaire* are revealing, such as *mézon* for *maison* and *pére* and *mére*, the transcriptions of the *Glossaire* showing this latter word forming a minimal pair with *mer* ‘sea’. Gendron (1966:61) gives these pronunciations only the briefest reference, indicating that educated speakers feel them to be “unacceptable”.

Sometimes instead, a more open variant may be heard, even passing to [a] or [ɑ̃] in certain circumstances. The pronunciations *varte*, *parcer* for *verte*, *percer* are common in popular speech wherever the vowel is followed by /r/ + consonant. This again is an archaic trait which had been “corrected” in the standard language (the word *marchand* “merchant” is an obvious exception). A similar feature may be noted in English *sergeant*, and in British pronunciations of *clerk* and *Derby*. That this is an archaic feature in English is also shown by nineteenth century pronunciations such as *marchant sarvice* for *merchant service*, and such remnants as *varsity* (from *university*).

Final -et and -ais, -ait may also be heard with a timbre close to [a], so that regionally one hears imperfect and conditional forms of the verb such as *j’éta*, *je sera*. Gendron (1966:66) notes that this was a tendency of popular Parisian speech of the 18th century, and is still found regionally in the Ardennes region. The pronoun *elle* may also be heard as *alle* in CF, and as *a* when the final [l] is lost. All these pronunciations, however, where [œ] is opened to [a] are considered unacceptable for formal Canadian usage, and are only heard in popular and informal usage.

As part of this same variation one might consider the different pronunciations of [wœ] and [wɑ̃] for the spelling of *oi*. As is well known, [wœ] is the original pronunciation, is still heard in popular and rural usage in Canada, and is largely recorded in the *Glossaire*. In most regions, however, [wɑ̃] may be heard in certain words. The words *froid* and *droit*, as noted by Gendron (1966:82), are regularly heard in Québécois as [fret] and [dret]. Many of the words originally pronounced with [wœ] historically lost the labial onglide, however, which is why we have names like *Français*, *François*, *Anglais*, *Danois*, all from an original Latin ending — *iscu(m)*, in some of which [wœ] became [œ], whereas in the others the [wœ] became [wɑ̃]. Consequently Canadian *fret* and *dret* followed one evolution rather than the other, and are also heard regionally in France.

(b) Consonants**7. Palatalization and Assibilation**

In both Québécois and Acadian palatalisation of dental plosives /t/ and /d/ takes place before the high front glides (or semi-vowels) [ɛ] and [j]. A frequent result of this palatalization is to produce affricates [tʃ] and [dʃ] (IPA [tʃ] and [dʃ]) so that the word *diable*, because of its back [ɑ] and the reduction of the consonant cluster is pronounced [jɑb], somewhat like the English word *job*. Gendron (1966:119) quotes the following words as common examples: *Dieu, diable, diablement, chaudière, indien, tiens, moitié, pitié, tabatière, amitié, quantième, chrétien*. Examples of [tɛ] becoming [tʃɛ] are rarer, but it does occur in words such as *tuile, etui*.

Since this palatalisation causes the point of articulation of /t/ and /d/ (normally dental in French) to be backed, this backing movement may be prolonged to the point where the palatalized [tʃ] and [dʃ] start to merge with palatalized [k] and [g] as these latter are fronted. It then becomes very difficult for the ear to distinguish palatalized [t] and [d] from palatalized [k] and [g]. This fact explains the considerable number of spellings in *qui-* and *gui-* (or *ghi-*) in the *Glossaire*, for example *Dieu* spelled *Ghieu* and *Diable* spelled *Guiâbe*. One also finds *étui* spelled *équi*, and these spellings may also be found in folk songs (e.g., *chanquier* for *chantier* “woods camp for lumberjacks”) and in narrated discourse in novels, especially those from the “Ecole du Terroir,” founded in 1902, the same year as the Société du parler français. In *La Terre du huitième* (Adolphe Nautel, 1942), for example, one finds (p.63), for “Tiens, diable du diable...” the following: “Quins, guabe de guabe, si c’est pas le nouveau commis.”

In Acadia a quite different palatalization also occurs: /k/ and /g/ are palatalized before all front vowels except /a/. This means that *qui, quel, curieux, coeur* are heard as [tʃi, tʃɛl, tʃyʁ, tʃɛr], and *Guillaume, guerre, aigu, gueule* are heard as [tʃijom, tʃyʁ, eʃy, tʃɛl]. This palatalization, which closely parallels the historical palatalization of velars that took place in Late Latin-Early Romance, is probably the most marked feature of Acadian folk speech. It is not used in formal style.

There is also a marked assibilation of /t/ and /d/ before high front vowels in Québécois. This is rare in Acadian, although the young seem to be imitating it as a feature which identifies them as Canadian. This assibilation is such a pronounced feature of Québécois that it is heard in formal speech, though seldom if ever in the very strong forms that may be heard in the folk speech. The resulting affricates are heard as [tʃ, dʃ], so that *tu étudies* is heard as [tʃy etʃydʒi]. This assibilation takes place before the open and voiceless allophones of these

vowels as well, so that *constitution* may be heard as [k[≥]st^sit^sysj[≥]], and *étiquette* as [et^sf^kɛt].

8. Reduction of final consonant clusters

Gendron mentions (1966:137) that a major difference between the French of Canada and that of France shows up in kymographic studies: Canadian vowels are generally longer, while Canadian consonants are generally shorter. When this fact is put in perspective, it is not surprising that in Canadian French there is a tendency on the one hand toward diphthongization of the vowels, matched by a tendency on the other hand to reduce or eliminate consonants.

Certain consonant clusters of French are complex, and liable to reduction in rapid speech, in allegro forms. Any native speaker of French, in counting *un deux trois quatre cinq* at speed, will normally lose the /r/ in *trois* and *quatre* which will be heard as [tw^Å kat] in this sequence. All sequences of plosive consonant plus liquid consonant in final position are similarly reduced in informal style in Canada in such words as *table*, *mettre*, *cidre*, *peuple*, *encre*, *tigre*, *siècle*, *règle*. Other less frequent clusters are also reduced, so that *artiste* may be heard as *artisse*, for example.

The continuous consonants, such as /r/ and /l/, if given insufficient length, also tend to disappear from other positions. Between vowels /l/ of the article may disappear, in phrases such as *à la*, reduced to a single vowel in *à' maison*, for example. The same consonant tends to disappear where it precedes a plosive, as in *résultat*.

9. Loss of final /r/

Final /r/ was lost historically, along with other final consonants, but largely restored in Standard French by the 17th century. Residual pronunciations remain, however, where final -r is not pronounced: all infinitives of the type *aimer*, for example. The equations *sous/dessous* and *sur/dessus* shows us that Canadian *sus* (or *su'*) is the original pronunciation of *sur*, to which the /r/ has been restored in SF.

Many other words show the same historical loss of final /r/: many words in the *Glossaire* that have normal spellings in -oir and -eur are reported as ending in [w^ɛ] and [ɛ^ɛ] respectively. Gendron, doing field work in the Gaspé region in the 1950's reported (1955:10): *battwé*, *coulwé*, *épisswé*, *ourisswé*, *razwé*, *salwé*. These are, respectively, *battoir* (an Old French name for a laundry beater), *couloir* (OF for a "strainer", *tamis* in SF), *épissoir* "splicer", *ourdissoir* "wrap beam (of a loom)", *razoir* "razor", *saloir* "salting tub".

Because pronunciations such as *chanteu'* for *chanteur* belong to the folk speech and consequently tend to be considered vulgar, such pronunciations may also take on a pejorative force: *chanteu'* may be used by an educated speaker in a derogatory fashion. The same is true of other words having the agentive suffix *-eur*.

10. Aspirated /h/

One of the curiosities of Standard French is that there are two *h*'s, a so-called aspirated *h* and a so-called unaspirated *h*, neither of which is in fact aspirated or indeed heard at all. As a phoneme, /h/ has entirely disappeared from Standard French, leaving behind certain traces, phenomena relating to elision and hiatus.

The /h/ is still very much alive in Canada, however, except in formal and semi-formal style, where it will normally be suppressed as being a regional element, not an element of Standard French. In ordinary conversations on the street, in shops and houses, however, it is heard. Standard French indicate the presence of the so-called "aspirated *h*."

Historically it is quite clear that /h/ disappeared early from some words, not from others, and that those *h*'s that disappeared early left no trace either in French or Canadian speech, so that the usual rules of elision and liaison apply, exactly as if there were no *h* in the spelling: *l'homme, des hommes* [l^om, dez^om].

The remaining instances of /h/ later disappeared from Standard French but remained regionally, not only in Canada but also in provincial France, and may still be heard. Although this /h/ has disappeared from Standard French, the normal elision and liaison are not allowed, but the word boundaries are treated as if a consonant were in place: *la hache, des haches* [laaâ, deaâ], pronounced [lahaâ, dehaâ] in Canada.

11. Saintongais *ch* and *j*

In the western provinces of France, especially in the région of the former province of Saintonge, the fricatives [â] and [ë] may be heard pharyngealized, with a sound approximating [h], whether voiced, partially voiced, or unvoiced.

This same pronunciation occurs allophonically in certain regions throughout Québec and Acadia. Charbonneau (1957) examined it in detail at Assomption, about 25 miles to the north of Montréal, and it is a known feature of Beauce County on the south bank of the St. Lawrence, (see Morgan 1975:26–27). Charbonneau notes (1957:76) that it is also heard "dans les environs de Québec, dans la Gaspésie, la Beauce, la Baie des Chaleurs et le comté de Portneuf." It may also be heard in the Acadian speech of the Maritime Provinces and of the Bay St. George area of Newfoundland. As Charbonneau notes, however, this is

a purely rural pronunciation that is not heard in the cities and that disappears progressively “chez le jeune homme transplanté dans un autre milieu où ce parler est considéré comme désuet ou ridicule.”

12. Syllabification of liquids after obstruents

This is a phenomenon that is typical of Acadian speech, is found also in Québécois, especially where there is Acadian influence, as in certain areas from Beauce County south towards Montreal. It is also heard in *français populaire* in France (Guirand 1965:109).

In Canadian French, and also in *français populaire* in Europe, the liquids /r/ and /l/ are normally dropped in final position when they occur after plosives: *quatre* and *trouble* are heard as [kat] and [trub]. When, however, they occur after plosives before semi-vowels or schwa, they become syllabic, often giving the impression of having a preceding vowel: *bleuet*, for example, frequently becomes *bluet*, pronounced [blyɛ], and in Acadian this will become [blyɛ], which sounds to the French ear like [bɛlyɛ]. The syllabic form of [r] also sounds somewhat like [ɑr], so that *brouette* “barrow”, pronounced [brwɛt] in Acadian, may be heard as [bɔrwɛt]. Where there is a following schwa this vowel is deleted, so that *brebis* “sheep” is heard as [brbi] or [bɑrbi], *grenier* “granary” as [grnje] or [gɑrnje] and *capablement* as [kapalma] or [kapabɔlma].

13. Ouisme in Acadian

Because of an ancient chain shift in French, Old French /o/ was raised to /u/ (spelled *ou*) in closed syllables, so that Old French *cort*, *boche* became Middle French *court*, *bouche*. Regionally this same shift occurred elsewhere, especially before *m* and *s* giving such regional pronunciations as *houme* and *grousse* for *homme* and *grosse*, a phenomenon known as *ouisme*. This *ouisme* was resisted in Ile de France, so that it did not become a feature of Standard French.

The feature was brought to Canada and is a typical feature of Acadian folk speech. It is such a persistent feature of the French of the Atlantic Provinces that Micmac, the Algonkian language spoken in this area shows this pronunciation in words borrowed from French: Micmac has *Nuel* and *Punane* for “Christmas” and “New Year”.

14. The reflex of Romance strong /r/ in Acadian

In all the Romance languages there is an interesting evolution of single *r* and double *rr* of Latin words, often giving rise to two different phonemes, which we may call a weak and strong *r*. Where this happened, initial *r* often came to be

pronounced strong (as in Modern Spanish and Portuguese) even when spelled with single *r*.

This pronunciation was also typical of Gascon, the Gallo-Romance dialect bordering on Spain and sharing certain other features with Spanish. According to Bourciez (1967:269c) this strongly rolled initial *r* had, by the tenth century, brought about the development of a prothetic vowel, in this case *a*, so that the word for river (cf. Spanish *rio*) was heard as *arriu*.

This pronunciation of initial *r* may also be heard in Acadian, in such words as *l'arroi* = *le roi*.

Further reading

Charbonneau, R. "La spirantization de /j/," *Revue de l'Association Canadienne de Linguistique* 3:14–19 and 71–77 (1957).

Gendron, J.D. *Tendances phonétiques du français parlé au Canada*, Presses de l'Université Laval (1966).

Hull, A. The "Structure of the Canadian French System," *La Linguistique* 1:101–106 (1966).

Morgan, Raleigh. *The Regional French of County Beauce, Quebec*, Mouton (1975).

Walker, Douglas C. 1984. *The Pronunciation of Canadian French*. University of Ottawa Press.

EXERCISES

1. From Gendron, *Tendances Phonétiques*, pp.13–22, find the following information:
 - a) What symbols does Gendron use for IPA [u] and [y]? For [ʃ] and [ʒ]? For [j] and [ɥ]? For [ɲ]?
 - b) Who suggests an English influence for open I, Y and U in Canadian French, and what arguments does Gendron bring against him?
 - c) Does the language of Brunswick, Maine, resemble Acadian or Québécois?
 - d) Where, in Québec, does one find I, Y, U before a lengthening consonant?
 - e) In Gendron's discussion of high vowels in unstressed syllables, find two examples each of the occurrence of I, Y, U.

2. Examine in Gendron 1966:22–25 the comparison with the pronunciation of Rousselot and find the following information:
 - a) What was the date of publication of Rousselot's book that is referred to here?
 - b) Rousselot's description represents the pronunciation of (i) what place, (ii) what era?
 - c) What, in Rousselot's pronunciation, was the effect of a mute *e* added to a final vowel, as in *finie*?
 - d) Indicate one of the ways that Rousselot's pronunciation resembled Canadian pronunciation of high vowels, rather than that of modern Parisian.
 - e) Does Gendron conclude that the opening of high vowels in Canadian French is a new element or an archaism? On what does he base his conclusion?

3. Note the phonetic transcriptions in the *Glossaire*, and from these transcribe the following words into IPA symbols:

a. chéti	d. dur	g. jouser
b. chuille	e. chigneux	h. juger
c. revoir	f. jville	

What phonetic alphabet did the editors of the *Glossaire* adopt? What modification did they make?

4. Transcribe the following as they might be heard in normal Canadian speech, as in a television interview, for example. Pay careful attention to phonetic detail.

a) capucin	étiquette	pois
injustice	coûtume	partiras
	du moins	

5. How might the following be heard in popular speech in Canada? (As in a conversation at a hockey game or in a tavern). Again, pay careful attention to phonetic detail.

a) fève	maître	part
neige	maîtriser	sort
neiger	pâte	sortir
peur		
b) trempe	teinte	conte
tremper	teinter	conter