Assessing change in a Gallo-Romance regional minority language:
1pl verbal morphology and semantic reference in Picard

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The status of Picard, an endangered Gallo-Romance language of Northern France, is the object of considerable debate. While scholars recognize that the two varieties’ phonology and lexicon differ considerably, Éloy (1997:137) argues that Picard’s morphosyntax does not significantly differ from that of colloquial French. Suspecting that Éloy’s assessment relies on superficial comparisons, we have carefully analyzed data collected from a bilingual Picard–French community of practice located in rural Picardie to determine how much Picard and French morphosyntax truly differ.

This paper examines 1pl verbal morphology. As we can see below, both French and Picard make use of 1pl and 3sg forms to refer to a group that includes the speaker. Variationist analyses have shown that use of nous has become marginal in many varieties of colloquial French (e.g., 1.6% in Montréal; Laberge 1977: 132 and 4.4% in Picardie; Coveney 2000: 466; see also King, Martineau & Mougeon 2011). To this day, no comparable analyses have been undertaken for Picard.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>French</th>
<th>Picard</th>
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<td>1pl forms</td>
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<td><em>mais nous allions</em> au lycée</td>
<td><em>oz allons</em> rpèrler</td>
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<td>‘but we went to high school’</td>
<td>‘we are going to talk again’</td>
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<td>3sg forms</td>
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<td><em>on va essayer</em></td>
<td><em>O va pas revnir</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>‘we are going to try’</td>
<td>‘we are not going to come back’</td>
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We compare older and contemporary Picard written data, as well as contemporary oral data from bilinguals, and show that the two languages use their shared structures differently. A superficial analysis of our data suggests a gradual convergence toward French. Use of nous is marginal in our French data (1.9%; N=368). Use of the 1pl form remains more frequent in Picard, but it gradually decreases over time: 44.7% in 1940s and 35.6% in 1960s. However, a detailed analysis of linguistic factors, notably pronoun semantic reference (general, extended group or restricted group; see Boutet 1986 and below), indicates that the innovative French-like 3sg form is primarily associated with general indefinite reference in Picard (91.9%, N=678 vs 15.3%, N=626 in other contexts), and is barely used to refer to restricted groups. Most interestingly, the relative frequency of the two variants remains stable over time.
Thus, our examination of this variable demonstrates the importance of carefully considering linguistic conditioning through the comparative method when assessing language change in two typologically related varieties, especially when testing popular claims that a minority language is converging toward its dominant counterpart in a bilingual community. It also shows the importance of analyzing multiple features. Indeed, the conservative character of 1pl in Picard mirrors what has been reported for ne deletion, while contrasting with this variety’s innovative character with respect to subject doubling and the generalization of a single auxiliary, avoêr ‘have’ (Auger & Villeneuve 2017, 2019; Villeneuve & Auger 2013).

**Examples**

1. General:  
   a. *o n’* porrons pu vive su la terre  
      (Lettes 1956, 644)  
      ‘we won’t be able to live on the land’
   b. *o n’* laiche mie mourir parsonne  
      (Lettes 1946, 168)  
      ‘we don’t let anyone die’

2. Extend. gr.:  
   a. *o n-n* avons connu deux d’jërres […]  
      *o savons* ch qu’i n-n est (Lettes 1956, 655)  
      ‘we have gone through two wars, we know what it is’
   b. *o s’* plaint souvint in France qu’*oz est* d’ trop boin […]  
      (Lettes 1966, 1180)  
      ‘we often complain in France that we’re too good’

3. Restrict. gr.:  
   a. nous eutes, *o voêyagerons* à pieud.  
      (Lettes 1966, 1191)  
      ‘us, we will travel on foot’
   b. *oz est* quate chonq camarades à l’école insanne  
      (Chl’autocar 1996, 721)  
      ‘we’re four or five buddies in school together’

**References**


