Discourse Markers “well” and “ben” in Chiac

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This paper investigates the use of the discourse markers “well” and “ben” in speakers of Chiac, a dialect of Acadian French in southeast New Brunswick. Chiac is characterised by extensive borrowings and code-switching with English (Chevalier 2007; Perrot 1995; King 2008). Previous work analyses the discourse marker “well” (Schiffrin 1987a), “ben” (Bruxelles and Traverso 2001; D’Amboise and Léard 1996; Hansen 1995), and the alternations between “well” and “ben” in Acadian French (Chevalier 2000, 2002). The present study fills a gap in the literature by using quantitative and qualitative methodologies to address the following questions: 1) What linguistic and social factors condition the use of “well” and “ben” in this variety? and 2) What discursive function(s) are accomplished by the use of “well” or “ben”, and how can we explain why speakers chose to employ one variant over the other?

The corpus used for the present study was collected in 2012 and includes ten participants, students at the two French-medium high schools in Moncton: Mathieu-Martin and L’Odysée. The participants are between the ages of 15 and 17 and are native French speakers. There are four male and six female participants. The data were collected through sociolinguistic interviews conducted by a native speaker of Chiac. The participants were each interviewed for approximately 30 minutes. The data have been transcribed and coded in Elan (Wittenburg et al. 2006). We exclude some tokens from the present study, namely fixed expressions (for example, “well then”, “ben là”, “ben c’est ça) along with the use of “ben” as a conjunction.

By using methodologies from both variationist sociolinguistics and discourse analysis, we seek to establish the motivations for the choice of variant from one language and the other. We coded each variant for the following social factors: gender and community. Education and age are fixed in the present corpus. We also coded the following linguistic factors: position in the clause, language of the preceding word, language of the following word, interviewer language preceding use of the discourse marker, discourse marker doubling, and discourse marker function (response to yes/no or wh-questions, self-repair, quoting reported speech, clarification, and reflexive frame breaks). Qualitative analysis descriptively supports these results.

The results indicate that the French variant “ben” is used at a rate of 70% and the English variant “well” is used at a rate of 30%. Only three factor groups were significant: gender, discourse marker function, and language used after the discourse marker. These results show that males prefer “well”, while females prefer “ben”. Interestingly, the language used after the discourse marker is significant: if “ben” is used, the following language favoured is French, and likewise, the use of “well” primes English as the following language. This suggests that use of the discourse markers precipitates a switch between languages. The final significant factor groups was the discourse marker function: we found that answering wh-questions favours “ben”, while instances of self-repair and reported speech favour the use of “well”.

Studying discourse markers in Chiac provides insights about language borrowing in contact situations. Further work on the current project will be done using the Perrot (1995) corpus. This will allow diachronic comparisons to illustrate the direction(s) of language change.
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References:


