

LEXICAL BORROWING AMONG FRANCOPHONES IN THE GREATER TORONTO AREA

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The French language in Canada has historical roots extending back to the 1600's. Today, many Canadians are French speakers. In fact, nearly 12% of Canadians speak only French, and nearly 18% of Canadians speak both English and French (Statistics Canada, 2017). In Ontario, where the current study was conducted, 622,415 Francophones comprise 4.7% of the population (Office of the French Language Services Commissioner of Ontario, 2016). The current project examining the language practices of adult Francophones takes place in this minority language context.

This project examined lexical borrowing and code switching among ten adult Francophones in the Toronto, Ontario region. In-depth individual interviews were conducted during which the participants were asked to tell a story or describe an activity of personal interest. Participants also completed a questionnaire about their language use habits and language(s) of education. The data collected is discussed in terms of previous research on code switching and lexical borrowing in Canadian and United States locations where French is a minority language.

Background

Haugen's (1950) definition of lexical borrowing and Weinreich's (1968) definition of lexical interference guide the data analysis in this study. Lexical borrowing is defined as "the process which takes place when bilinguals reproduce a pattern from one language in another" (Haugen, 1950, p. 230). Weinreich (1968) describes lexical interference as a transfer of lexical elements with or without phonological integration in the target language. He cites three possible motivations: 1) confusion about the appropriate usage in the first language (L1) and the new language; 2) rejection of the word in the first language (L1) in favour of the equivalent word in the target language; 3) the development of specialized meanings for words borrowed from the target language, except in cases where the borrowings have a completely new lexical content (e.g., words which denote new technology; Weinreich, 1968). Both of these definitions are cornerstones in the field.

The participants in lexical borrowing studies were all Francophones raised in minority language communities in English-speaking provinces. Lexical borrowing among Francophone populations living in linguistic minority situations has been well documented (Brown, 2003; King, 2000; Flikeid, as cited in Brown, 2003; Raymond, 2011; Walker, 2004).

In a corpus collected among Louisiana Francophones, Brown (2003) found the French speech frequently contained words borrowed from English. In a corpus collected among Prince Edward Island Francophones, King (2000) noted words borrowed from English in the Francophones' everyday speech. Raymond (2011), whose participants were bilingual Franco-Ontarians, tallied occurrences of lexical borrowing based on levels of bilingualism, lexical category, and total number of borrowings. Walker (2004) noted code switching, borrowings from English, calques, and grammatical structures influenced by English among Alberta Francophones. Flikeid (1989, in Brown, 2003) also found borrowing from English in use in Nova Scotian French.

With this existing research about Canadian Francophones in a minority language environment borrowing English words into their French speech, a gap in the research was noted in the area of geographic location. No research on lexical borrowing focused on Francophones in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) was uncovered. Further, there is a gap in the research on the lexical borrowing of Francophones who had migrated from a Francophone region to an English-speaking region. Finally, there is a gap in the research on the rate of lexical borrowing in relation to the use of French in the Francophone home in a minority language environment.

As such, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. The rate of lexical borrowing from English into French will increase based on the length of time spent in a location that has an Anglophone (English speaking) majority.
2. The rate of lexical borrowing from English to French will increase in relation to the decrease of usage of French at home.

Methodology

The sample consisted of ten Canadian-born adults acquainted with the researcher. No remuneration was offered for participation in the project. The data collection measure consisted of a guided questionnaire, storytelling with story cards, and an explanation of how to do an enjoyable activity or the story of an experience that was important to the participant. The researcher visited the participants individually (except a married couple, who were visited together) and asked them the questions on the guided questionnaire, then to respond to the storytelling prompts, and finally to tell a story. Each interview took about an hour. The storytelling and descriptive sections were transcribed.

Results

The transcriptions of the storytelling and descriptive sections created a corpus consisting of 1,648 word tokens, which was analyzed for evidence of lexical borrowing and/or code switching from English into the French base language; only 14 English noun tokens were

found. As such, 0.85% of the total sample collected in the current research project can be described as lexical borrowing. Also noted was a large variation among the length of responses. For example, in answering the same question, one participant used only 74 word tokens and another used 570. The present study did not note cases of code switching, except for possibly one case (“Ahh, meatballs, mmhh...”).

As shown in Table 1, the results of the questionnaire depict the participants as individuals who, on average, attended school in French until age 14, yet moved to an Anglophone area at age 26. They generally do not participate in activities in the French-speaking community and most frequently work in English. As such, they might appear at first glance to be individuals largely engaged in the English world in Canada.

Table 1: *Characteristic by average age*

| Characteristic | Average age |
|--|--------------------|
| Attended school in French until | 14.0 |
| Arrived in an English-speaking region of Canada at age | 26.2 |
| Participate in activities in the French-speaking community | 2.7 |

The data depicted in Table 2, as well as the participants’ personal histories, portrays individuals who were driven to move to Anglophone regions by economic necessity, who largely communicate in French with their children, place a very high value on Francophone education for their children, and strongly encourage the intergenerational transmission of French within the family.

Table 2: *Characteristic rates*

| Characteristic | Percent of participants |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Attended elementary school in French | 90% |
| Moved to an Anglophone region for work | 70% |
| Speak French with their partner | 60% |
| Have children | 70% |
| Speak French with their children | 78% |
| Send their children to Francophone schools | 100% |
| Participant’s parents (i.e., grand-parents) always speak French with their children | 100% |
| Grandparents always speak French with the grandchildren | 57% |
| Use French at work | 34% |

Discussion

Hypothesis 1 was not proved as no relationship was noted between the rate of lexical borrowing and the length of time spent in an Anglophone environment. Hypothesis 2 was not proved because all the participants state that they frequently use French at home, even if it is with their children and not with their partner (exogamous relationships). The rate of lexical borrowing found in this study (0.85%) is significantly lower than the rates reported by previous researchers, yet there were factors which could have influenced the results. First, the current study had a small group of participants (under 10), but used a mixed-method approach of a sociological questionnaire and interviews. Second, in the current study, the participants were all raised in Francophone (Quebec) or bilingual provinces (New Brunswick), and completed at least high school there, prior to moving to the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) or other Anglophone locations. Third, the participants of the present study came to Ontario as adults, were extremely proud of their educated French, and demonstrated a strong desire to transmit this to their children. The participants' desire to transmit the French language to their children was demonstrated through their choice of language of home communication (French), choice of Francophone schools, and encouraging of French as the main language of communication with the French-speaking grandparents. Finally, the authors in the background studies do not address the role of the researcher with regards to the participants. In some cases, it was stated that the individuals who collected the data were members of the Francophone community (Brown, 2003; Raymond, 2011; Walker, 2004). In the current study, the researcher was not a member of the community per se, but had knowledge of the community and its infrastructure. The question remains whether, and to what extent, the role of the researcher has an effect on the participants' responses during the interview.

In the current study, lexical borrowing was documented as “the process which takes place when bilinguals reproduce a pattern from one language in another” (Haugen, 1950, p. 230), but this phenomenon did not occur very frequently. The data collected showed the development of specialized meanings for words borrowed from the target language (Weinreich, 1968; e.g., the term *high school* denotes a secondary school in which the language of instruction is English). Also evident was rejection of the French word in favour of an equivalent word in the target language (e.g., “Ahh, meatballs, mmhh”, *RCMP*, and *OPP*). No examples were found of confusion about the appropriate usage of any words, which demonstrates that all the speakers were bilinguals (Weinreich, 1968).

Conclusion

As noted, the rate of lexical borrowing found in this study (0.85%) was significantly lower than the rates reported by previous researchers and neither hypothesis was proven. As discussed above, there are possible reasons for the difference in results. First, with a small sample size, it is difficult to identify trends with certainty. Next, all of the participants were from different Francophone communities of origin and the impact of this on the results is not known. Further, the researcher was an Anglophone in the Francophone community and an out-group member. Finally, the participants may have tried to speak their best French coming from a desire to “do well” at the interviews. In sum, questions remain around the way the participants presented their linguistic identities to the researcher, the effect of role of the researcher on the participants, and the first language of the participants or city of origin on the data collected; however, the results of this study suggest that future research may isolate some of the variables. Overall, the 10 individuals in the study gave the impression of being extremely proud of their language and culture as Francophones in a minority language environment and actively engaged in transmitting this to their children. This is significant as Francophones are, as noted above, nearly 5% of the Ontario population. It behoves the English-speaking population to endeavour to better understand some of the linguistic drivers within the Francophone population in the Greater Toronto Area.

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