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Contact-induced lexical variation in Quebec English: an accountable description

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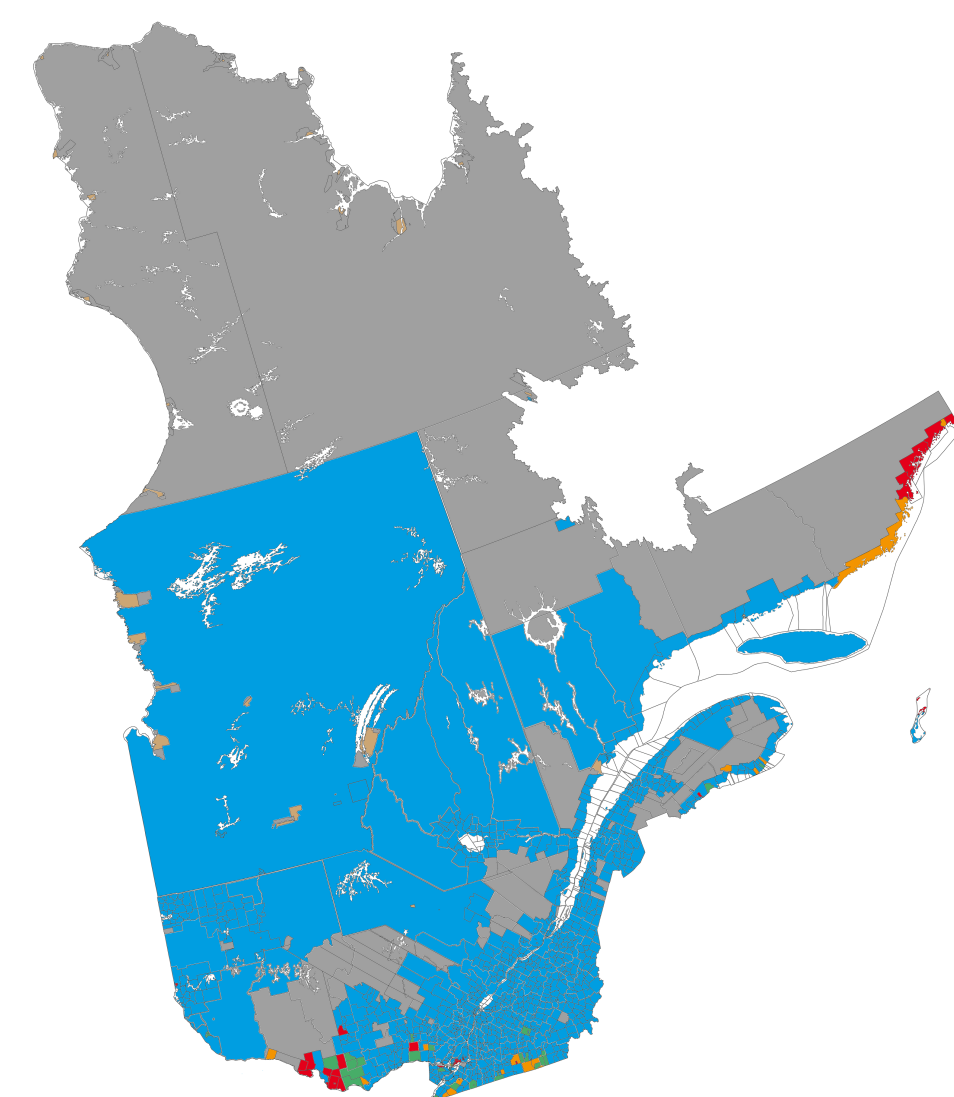
Introduction

QUEBEC ENGLISH (QcE)

- A regional variety of Canadian English (CanE) spoken by a **minority** of Quebecers;
- Ongoing **contact** with Quebec French (QcF);
- French **borrowings** and **semantic shifts**: a secondary phenomenon (e.g. Poplack et al. 2006) or a defining characteristic (e.g. Fee 2008, Boberg 2012)?

STUDY OF LEXICAL VARIATION

- Lexical **variables** are routinely examined in **dialectology**, but challenging to systematically analyze in **corpora**;
- It is difficult to identify all possible lexical **variants**: some propose more generic analyses (e.g. Poplack 1993);
- Corpus-based studies of QcE lexis are often **imprecise** (e.g. only reporting raw frequencies of one variant).



Majority language communities in Quebec
● English-speaking ● French-speaking
Source: Statistics Canada, Census (2006)

Methodology

RESEARCH AIMS

We examine **known contact-induced lexical variables** in **Montreal** (contact) and **Toronto** (no contact), focusing on:

- their degree of **sociolinguistic integration**, as reflected by use in formal contexts (newspapers);
- their **geographic diffusion** outside of Quebec;
- differences between distinct **types of contact influence**.

VARIABLES

- **100 variables** manually defined from previous research (e.g. Boberg 2012, Fee 1991, 2008, Grant-Russell 1999);
- Variable = a set of synonymous **lexical variants**, at least one of which is typical of QcE and one of CanE;
- The **relative frequencies** of all variants are examined as per the **principle of accountability** (Labov 1969).

DATA

News of the Web corpus (online newspaper articles): CanE section, **900m** words.

ANALYSIS

- Look up **1,000** most recent **occurrences** for each variable (all variants combined);
- Extract those from **Montreal** and **Toronto**;
- Manually **exclude** homonymy / polysemy;
- Get **relative frequencies** for all variants / cities.

Results

IMPOSED DIRECT LEXICAL TRANSFER

- Terms referring to **Quebec administration**, whose only legally valid version is in French;
- **6 (out of 13)** variables fully attested in both cities, while **another 6** present **only French** variants.

Lexical variants	Montreal		Toronto	
<i>CEGEP</i>	287	100%	11	26%
<i>junior college</i>	1	0%	31	74%
Total	288	100%	42	100%

TABLE 1. Lexical variable *CEGEP* vs. *junior college*. Fisher $p < .001$

CULTURALLY-BOUND LEXICAL TRANSFER

- Terms with **referents typical of Quebec**, with no single established English equivalent;
- **10 (out of 25)** variables fully attested in both cities;
- Most lexical choices are geographically shared, with a general **preference for French** borrowings.

Lexical variants	Montreal		Toronto	
<i>francophone</i>	198	87%	145	85%
<i>(paraphrasis)</i>	29	13%	25	15%
Total	227	100%	170	100%

TABLE 2. Lexical variable *francophone* vs. *paraphrasis* (French-speaking, French speaker, speaker of French). Fisher $p = .66$

ELECTIVE DIRECT LEXICAL TRANSFER

- Terms of French origin for which established **English equivalents exist**;
- **17 (out of 29)** variables fully attested in both cities;
- Significant **geographic differences in 8 cases**, with French items relatively more frequent in Montreal.

Lexical variants	Montreal		Toronto	
<i>caisse (pop(ulaire))</i>	11	69%	11	8%
<i>credit union</i>	5	31%	134	92%
Total	16	100%	145	100%

TABLE 3. Lexical variable *caisse (pop(ulaire))* vs. *credit union*. Fisher $p < .001$

CALQUE

- **Translations** of French lexical items into English;
- **2 (out of 4)** variables fully attested in both cities;
- **Limited data**, although some geographic differences can be observed.

Lexical variants	Montreal		Toronto	
<i>cultural community</i>	35	73%	57	35%
<i>immigrant community</i>	13	27%	108	65%
Total	48	100%	165	100%

TABLE 4. Lexical variable *cultural community* (cf. Fr. *communauté culturelle*) vs. *immigrant community*. Fisher $p < .001$

SEMANTIC SHIFTS

- Existing English words used with a **new meaning**, usually typical of a phonologically **similar French word**;
- **Variable** = a set of possible meanings (variants) associated with a single lexical form;
- **8 (out of 19)** variables fully attested in both cities, with limited clear-cut cases of contact-induced shifts;
- Manual annotation of attested meanings was challenging, and the impact of shifts **may be underestimated**.

Semantic variants	Montreal		Toronto	
<i>animateur</i>				
'group leader'	21	78%	21	13%
'film animator'	6	22%	136	87%
Total	27	100%	157	100%

TABLE 5. Semantic variable *animateur* 'group leader' (cf. Fr. *animateur*) vs. 'film animator'. Fisher $p < .001$

- A related issue: typically **formal English words**, phonologically similar to their French equivalents, may be **seen as less formal in QcE**;
- **Variable** = a set of lexical variants differing in register (e.g. *detrit* vs. *litter*, cf. Fr. *détritus*);
- **5 (out of 10)** variables fully attested in both cities, but with a very limited number of occurrences.

Ongoing work: semantic shifts

- The observed **sparsity of semantic shifts** is contradicted by previous work on QcE (e.g. Fee 1991, 2008, Boberg 2012) and by psycholinguistic evidence of semantic interference in bilinguals (e.g. Romaine 1995).
- Possible explanations: **corpus type** (e.g. semantic shifts may be more stigmatized than borrowings in writing); limits of **human annotation**.
- Ongoing PhD research: **distributional semantic models** (computational representations of meaning) applied to the **detection of semantic shifts** in QcE.
- A large dataset of **geolocalized tweets** (in preparation) will be used to train the distributional models.
- A **sociolinguistic study** will be conducted in Quebec in order to evaluate the computational analysis.

SEMANTIC SHIFTS ON TWITTER: AN EXAMPLE

Conventional meaning in Toronto:
I'm Kristine, an illustrator and animator from Toronto with a background in product desing.

Semantic shift in Montreal:
I wish I was on a beach right now in the DR watching the animators dance to the same three Spanish resort songs for a week

Conclusions

48 out of 100 variables were fully attested (i.e. all variants were found in both cities):

- the presence of these contact-induced variants suggests they are sociolinguistically **integrated**;
- the absence of other variants may reflect the **formality** of the written context.

Most attested **contact-related variants** are used in both Montreal and Toronto:

- their relative frequency tends to be **higher in Montreal**;
- they appear to be **typical of Quebec**, but not exclusive to it.

Distinct **usage patterns** linked to different types of contact influence:

- the differences are generally **not clear-cut**;
- exception: **culturally-bound lexical transfer**, with a general geographically shared preference for items deriving from contact.

Issues such as **semantic shifts** may benefit from computational methods. Ongoing work will shed more light on this matter.

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