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Urban Youth Accents in France: can a slight palatalization of /t/ and /d/ challenge French sociophonetics?

Cyril Trimaille and Maria Candea

Our contribution begins with a critical review of the research on a type of accent commonly known in France as *accent de banlieue* (“suburban accent”). The first section discusses a set of features perceived as components of the pronunciation style of young urban speakers in metropolitan France. The second section focuses on a pronunciation variant that has been described in research as emblematic of the French “*banlieue* accent” [suburban youth accent]: the palatalization of /t/ and /d/. On the basis of previous studies on the production and perception of this pronunciation (Vernet & Trimaille 2007, Devilla & Trimaille 2010, Trimaille, Candea & Lehka-Lemarchand 2012), we will show that this feature is not specific to young urban people, as it has also been spotted among other linguistic communities, with whom it is associated in different ways according to their social profile. We will also examine how caricatural uses in media productions (e.g. skits, cartoons) display this feature and contribute to its iconization (Irvine & Gal 2000). The complex dynamics of a potential phonetic change in progress requires mixed methods which provides partially contradictory results and address complex methodological issues for the sociophonetic field. We develop a pragmatic and critical perspective about indexical relations linking social and linguistic categories ; we show how an unstable linguistic category, the “*banlieue* accent” without a solid empirical basis can provide an illusion of stability because of its reliance on stable social categorization, defending therefore a stylistic approach to the social accent.

Keywords: French language, suburban youth accent, iconization, speech perception, mixed methods, social accent, style

1. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, numerous studies have focused on the language practices of the working-class suburban youth in France, with particular emphasis being placed on their variational nature and the features that are assumed to characterize them. Among these, a number have been described as constituting a so-called *banlieue* accent (suburban accent), a notion that has gradually become a reality. The *banlieue* accent has enjoyed relative success in the media; meanwhile, research on it has been subject to particularly visible ideological and political debates. Fries & Depez (2003) are explicitly surprised by the construction and naming of this native “accent”, whose description often tends to be assimilated with foreign accents and sometimes expresses latent xenophobia:

France is experiencing the development of a “foreign accent from within”, comparable to the Hispanic accent in the United States, because of its function as a marker of identity and also because of its stigmatization in the representations of the general public. This is an astonishing blind spot to be explored.¹

(Fries & Depez 2003)

Who are the speakers in France whose pronunciation is categorized with the label “*banlieue* accent”? Are their communities defined by where they live, by their age or by their social or

¹ “...la France est en train de connaître le développement d’un « accent étranger de l’intérieur » comparable à l’accent des Hispaniques aux États-Unis, de par sa fonction de marqueur d’identité mais aussi de par sa stigmatisation dans les représentations de la population générale. Il y a là une étonnante zone d’ombre à explorer.” (Fries et Depez 2003: 103)

even ethno-racial affiliation? Is it possible to establish a consistent list of features that constitute this accent?

We will first recall the controversial aspects of the notion of “*banlieue*” (Hambye, 2008) in French (I), before outlining the sociophonetic features that have been described as characteristic of a “*banlieue* accent”. This will allow us to discuss the fact that these features are systematically perceived as characteristic and specific elements of this accent (II). Finally, in the last part, we will focus on one of the features described as specific to the “*banlieue* accent”, namely the palatalization of /t, d/ in front of /i, y/, and we will provide a summary of the current state of our knowledge on the production and perception of what seems to represent a phonetic feature that may spread widely enough to become an ongoing change (III).

We will end with a discussion on the theoretical and methodological challenge posed by efforts to distinguish between what is either a phonetic change in progress or a stereotype in the process of stabilization, which in turn will enable us to outline a broader discussion on the empirical consistency of this “accent”, which seems to be better described as a “style” (Candea 2017). This paper also seeks to contribute to future discussions on the role that sociolinguistic researchers play in the processes of iconization and erasure (Irvine & Gall 2000) of pronunciation variants.

2. “*Banlieue*” and “*jeune de banlieue*”: controversial categories despite their increased recognition

The label “*banlieue*” (or “suburban neighbourhood”) is an ellipsis to designate socially disadvantaged suburbs characterized by a high percentage of social housing. This ellipsis

implicitly excludes well-to-do suburban neighbourhoods. The notion of *banlieue* has been imported, with reluctance, from the media into academic discourse. Not only does the term *banlieue* mask or erase urban and social diversity, but even when a social/socio-economic clarification is made (“working-class, disadvantaged, impoverished suburban neighbourhood”), it still tends to understate or even mask the ethno-racial (racialized) component to its meaning. The notion of *banlieue* has in fact served as a basis to the construction of another notion, that of “*jeunes de banlieue*” (“suburban youth”), which has followed the same trajectory from the media to academic discourse (especially since the 1990s), giving rise to increasing debate in the social sciences. Such debate has also affected sociolinguistics, as the essentializing discourse on “*la banlieue*” (the suburb, as if it were a monolithic reality), and then on “suburban youth”, has quickly led to the essentializing discourse on “youth language” and the so-called “*banlieue* accent”. A search on the Europresse database (which gathers the archives of 1,500 newspapers of the European press) shows that the first occurrences of *accent de banlieue* (suburban accent) date back to 1996; a survey, by the second author of this chapter, of 80 occurrences in press articles showed that they refer to young men in 95% of cases.

Questioning and criticism from the social sciences has not slowed down the popularization of these expressions. As early as the late 1990s, Conein and Gadet (1998) denounced the tendency to iconize the innovation associated with “youth speech”, which masked the sometimes ancient character of features that were at the time erroneously described as innovations. At the same time, in the sociology of communication, Derville (1997), for example, also denounced the “stigmatization of suburban youth”. This criticism was met with little success, and this trend only increased in the media during the 2000s.

In a recent ethnographic survey, Berthaut (2013) studied coverage by television news of “*banlieue*” issues. His ethnographic study was conducted as close as possible to the everyday practices of journalists, at the national public television channel France 2. Berthaut identifies the frequent use of depreciative categories when journalists and technical staff speak about people living in *banlieue*, the use of stereotypical permanent first names as pseudonyms to refer to people filmed in *banlieue* (“Mohammed” for all men, “Aïcha” for all women) and other various discursive and cinematographic practices that lead to a kind of depersonalization of real people and that transform them into simplified figures for the media:

*The use of these false names is regularly associated with a stylization of the rough accent associated with young people living in working-class neighbourhoods, even if the protagonists depicted don't have such an accent. Paradoxically, journalists often point out the good quality of the speech of people they meet there, saying, “We were lucky, you know, because **jeunes de banlieue** are rarely able to speak like this.”²*

(Berthaut 2013: 307)

As this example from Berthaut (2013) shows, the category “*banlieue* accent” thus functions as a postulate, even a prejudice, which turns into an exception that confirms the rule of speakers whose practices are closer to those of a journalist than to the stereotype of “suburban youth”. Using the expression “*accent de banlieue*” thus links the accent to a globally stigmatized territory rather than to a specific group of people, which is tantamount to a technique of masking

² “*Le recours à ces prénoms d'emprunt s'accompagne régulièrement d'une imitation de l'accent rustre prêté aux jeunes habitants des quartiers populaires, même si les protagonistes représentés à l'image en sont dépourvus. Paradoxalement, le journaliste pointe pourtant souvent la qualité d'expression des interlocuteurs rencontrés : « On est tombés sur des bons, hein, parce que c'est rare qu'ils s'expriment comme ça, les jeunes de banlieue ».*” (Berthaut 2013: 307).

social factors. Some researchers adopt the expression because of its notoriety, all the while distancing it by putting it within quotation marks (Lehka-Lemarchand 2011). Meanwhile, others reject it and propose alternatives, such as “working-class youth French” (Fagyal 2003) or “Parisian multicultural French” (Gadet and Paternostro 2013), or periphrases aimed at maximum explanation and ostensible rejection of naturalizing generalizations, such as: “language practices of young people mainly from immigrant and so-called ‘working-class’ social backgrounds, evolving in the city, in cultural and linguistic spaces characterised by plurality and mixing” (Auzanneau and Juillard 2012).

The debate on the risk of homogenization and reification of a great variability of linguistic practices under the label “language”, “accent”, “variety” or “speaking” is still not closed. Gadet (2003), Trimaille and Billiez (2007), and Auzanneau (2009) have raised concern to the fact that such a risk contributes to processes of stigmatization and to the diffusion of negative prejudices (a good synthesis can be found in Gadet and Hambye 2014).

In the next part of this chapter, we adopt a critical perspective in order to bring into focus the different elements that contribute to the deconstruction of the sociolinguistic category of “*banlieue* accent”. To do so, we attempt to grasp the linguistic and empirical realities that underlie —rightly or wrongly— the perception of an alternative and categorical pronunciation of French.

3. Features perceived/described as constitutive of the pronunciation style of young urban speakers in metropolitan France

Since the 1980s, researchers have described and attempted to isolate features supposedly common to pre-categorized people falling under the “suburban” label. In addition to a special focus on the lexicon, these studies have highlighted forms of pronunciation that affect segmental and supra-segmental aspects. This accent is also mentioned by Vivianne Méla (1997: 27), who notes that “The young probably adopt and exaggerate a ‘banlieue accent’ which, according to Calvet (1994: 84), is characterized by a very open and very backward articulation of vowels and by a word or phrase stress which falls on the penultimate syllable.”³

We will begin by attempting to draw an inventory of these elements, based on a few studies conducted since the late 1990s. To do so, we start with the list of features presented by Jamin (2009). Note, however, that we are deliberately choosing not to include what this author considers to be a common background shared by “suburban French” with the so-called French “working-class” (“français populaire”), and/or whose production among many speakers is linked to stylistic factors (deletion of liquids in a consonant cluster; failure to make certain connections; deletion of *e caducs*). Here is what remains of this list (based on the work of Jamin 2002, 2005, and 2009) containing segmental and supra-segmental features that would be “distinctive of the so-called banlieue language” (Jamin 2009: 94):

- prepausal /R/ glottalization
- voiceless and plosive /R/ production
- high rate of [ɑ] posteriorization
- [ɔ] closure before /R/ and /l/, as in *la mort*
- [ɛ] closure before /R/ as in *j’suis vert*

³ “[L]es jeunes adoptent et exagèrent sans doute un « accent de banlieue » qui est caractérisé selon Calvet (1994 : 84) par une articulation très ouverte et très à l’arrière des voyelles et par un accent de mot ou de phrase qui tombe sur l’avant-dernière syllabe.”

- palatalization and/or affrication of dental plosives /t/ and /d/ before high vowels /i/ and /y/
- palatalization and/or affrication of velar plosives /k/ and /g/, even in final position
- word stress on the penultimate syllable instead of on the final syllable
- intonation: non-standard rising pattern and sharp fall of the F0 curve on the final syllable.

At the segmental level, one of the features that caught the researchers' attention very early on was a non-standard pronunciation of /R/ in the final position. Thus, as early as 1983, Chevrot et al. (1983) (taken up by Billiez, 1992: 120) point to "a voiceless and strong constrictive articulation of [R]", giving it an Arabic colouration, a feature they link to the language of a large, relatively recent, immigrant population. This hypothesis of an influence of contact between North-African Arab varieties and French, particularly but not only among bilingual speakers, has been documented in Romano's studies (2003 in Billiez et al. 2003), Jamin's (2005) extensive quantitative study, or even more recently in Evers (2020).

Since Jamin established this list, various studies have questioned the strength of the correlation between these features and the "*banlieue* accent" in several ways: either by further observing the pronunciation practices of groups of people in the "suburban youth" category (Lehka-Lemarchand 2011, Fagyal 2010, Candea 2017), or by deepening their categorical perception, particularly by people from outside the target group (Paternostro 2016). For example, Fagyal (2003) spoke about the lengthening of the penultimate syllable as an innovative vernacular marker of young people with a postcolonial immigration background, but this is actually a very old prosodic marker, produced even in various rural communities. The same is true regarding the deletion of liquids in final position, and for the non-realization of variable liaisons, which are in no way specific to the "*banlieue* accent". Lehka-Lemarchand (2007) has

spoken about the “abrupt rise-fall pattern in pitch” as a stylistic specific marker, with stable social indexicality; however, Paternostro (2016) has shown that the “rise-fall” pattern in pitch could be considered as a continuum with more or less emphatic value. In fact, by proposing to interpret the short rise-falling intonational pattern as a resource for expressing emphasis, when it had been described as a possible marker of “*banlieue* accent” (Lehka-Lemarchand, 2007; Boula de Mareuil & Lehka-Lemarchand, 2011), Paternostro (2016) challenges pre-fabricated identity categories and emphasizes the relevance of not minimizing agency and the ability to renegotiate interacting identities. His study is, firstly, based on an experimental approach, more precisely a perception test which shows that, out of context, the listeners solicited “are only partially able” to distinguish between an “emphatic intonational pattern” and a “*banlieue* intonational pattern” (they do so in only 59% of cases; 2016: 99), with a very low rate of agreement between “judges” and “researchers” of 54%.

Furthermore, items that elicit responses with a high inter-rater agreement rate (90-100%) represent only 13% of the examples tested. In other words, the perceptive distinction between these two intonational patterns has proven to be very difficult, if not impossible to determine. To complete this perceptual result, Paternostro (2016) also relies on acoustic analysis, which leads to the same results: the two intonational patterns (bi-categorized by the researchers) are, rather, placed on a continuum and are not clearly differentiated; the average trend shows a slightly different polarization of the values of the degree of glissando and the ratio of duration between the last and penultimate syllables.

In conclusion, while media discourse gives the illusion of a consistent and identifiable “*banlieue* accent”, research is struggling to find an empirical basis for the widely shared stereotypes. So far, unfortunately, however, the notoriety of stereotypes continues to impose

itself on researchers, who continue to multiply their insights in order to better describe and understand the heterogeneity of practices (production) mirrored with the homogeneity of discourses on perception. To illustrate the difficulty of constructing observables that can feed convincing hypotheses from such a complex object that are also impacted by different ideologies, we have chosen to describe in detail the state of the art of the research on a feature that we have long observed, using several methodologies, namely the palatalization of /t, d/ in front of /i,j,y,u/.

4. A pronunciation variant described in research as emblematic of the French “suburban youth accent”: the palatalization of /t/ and /d/ before /i/ and /y/

When we speak of dental-stop palatalization, we are generally referring to any backward shift in the tongue’s point of contact with the palate, from the front to as far back as the velum. The shift may be accompanied by a lengthening of the contact time between the tongue and the place of articulation, as well as by a gradual release with friction. In some languages, place-of-articulation shifts are constrained by the phonological system. For example, in languages that have many minimal pairs opposing /t/, /ts/ and /tʃ/, articulatory confusion between the three positions is avoided either by shift inhibition or shift chains. In the French phonological system (Durand, Laks & Lyche 2009) these pronunciations are free variants, most of which speakers are unaware of. Of course, these variants may be associated with social and/or contextual connotations within a given community at a given time, and may be perceived, for example, as an affectionate, childlike, working-class, or regional pronunciation, etc.

In the history of spoken Parisian French between the sixteenth and early twentieth centuries, the backward shift in place of articulation on dental stops was mentioned regularly as a rural or working-class feature (velarization) (Rosset 1911: 314 quoted by Jamin 2005: 115; Straka 1952: 216; Léon 1993: 204). In fact, velarization of dental stops, sometimes generically called palatalization or metaphorically called *mouillée* (wet pronunciation) in French, pertained more specifically to the shift in the place of articulation of /t,d/ before the glide /j/: the tongue's point of contact moved as far back as the velum and the phonemes /t,d/ were pronounced [k,g]. For example, the French word *mortier* [-tje] (mortar) was pronounced *morquier* [-kje], and the words *grenadier* [-dje] (pomegranate tree) and *dieu* [djø] (god) were pronounced *grenaguer* [-gje] and *guieu* [gjø] (Lodge, 2004). In literature (since Molière and some other authors in the 17th century) and also in collections of popular literature (even in the 20th century, e.g., Rictus, 1914), graphic variants such as *guieu* instead of *dieu* were sometimes used to denote velarized pronunciations when the author wanted to suggest the pronunciation of lower-class characters.

In studies conducted during the second half of the twentieth century, cited above, these velarized pronunciations are generally mentioned as archaic. Contemporary research on French continues nonetheless to mention the palatalization of /t,d/, which seems to have extended its domain of applicability, as it now refers to occurrences before the two close vowels /i/ and /y/ and not solely before a glide. In this case, however, it is no longer a velarized pronunciation but corresponds to an upward shift in the place of articulation, sometimes with a gradual release that produces what is called an affrication. For /t,d/, this amounts to pronouncing these dentals as [tʃ,dʒ] in European French and as [ts, dz] in Canadian French, notably in Quebec. In the following section, we will combine the continuum between palatalized and affricated variants of /t,d/ under the abbreviation “PalAff”.

Two competing hypotheses

Concerning the French of France, Fónagy (1989) was the first to speak of dental-stop affrication, hypothesizing that a change was underway. In his 1989 study, revised in 2006, Fónagy demonstrated heavy affrication of these two consonants by certain French speakers. For this purpose, he had Hungarian speakers with no knowledge of French take perception tests and word categorization tests. The participants were asked to listen to and to note the pronunciation of isolated French words, without knowing if they were variants or different words. Hungarians were used as listeners because /t-tj-tʃ/ and /d-dj-dʒ/ are phonologically distinct in the Hungarian language, and they are thus able to perceive these variants (because of their distinctive function), while French speakers are not since they have not acquired the opposition in the phonological system of their first language. Figure 1 shows the difference between the spectrograms of the French word *nature* pronounced with an alveodental stop (on the right) or an affricated stop (on the left).

Figure 1

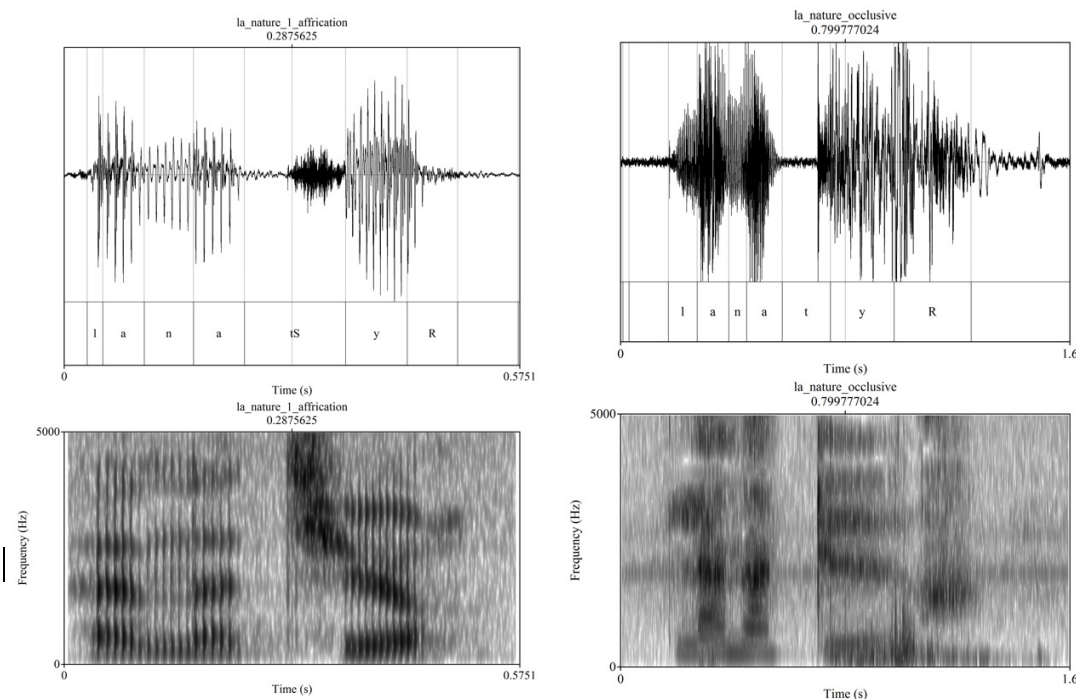


Figure 1. Spectrograms of the pronunciation of /t/ in /lanatyR/: affricated palatal (left) and alveodental (right)

Regarding production, the duration of complete occlusion of the affricated dental consonant is equal to or shorter than the simple plosive variant, but the release (fricative noise) of the affricated variant is much longer. In short, the affricated variant is longer overall and corresponds to more of the tongue in contact with the alveolar ridge. The transition between the consonantal sound and the vowel is slower and more progressive in the affricated pronunciation.

Many findings converge in supporting Fónagy's (1989) hypothesis. It was also defended by Armstrong and Pooley (2010), who contend that the tendency to strongly palatalize dental stops in front of /i,j,y,ɥ/ could in fact be the only "candidate" for a consonantal phonetic change taking place in European French. This hypothesis is compatible with Romano's (2003) remarks (in Billiez et al. 2003) about PalAff variants:

But while they are particularly salient, these articulatory features are not specific to the adolescents whose productions we are studying here: indeed, they are also present in a corpus made up of productions collected in a more supervised situation (laboratory), from young students and teachers from different regions.⁴

(Romano 2003, in Billiez et al. 2003: 45)

⁴ *“Mais s'ils sont particulièrement saillants, ces traits articulatoires n'en sont pas pour autant spécifiques aux adolescents dont nous étudions ici les productions : en effet, ils sont également présents dans un corpus constitué de productions recueillies en situation plus surveillée (laboratoire), auprès de jeunes étudiants et enseignants de différentes régions.”*

It is interesting to note the existence of a similar phenomenon in most varieties of Quebecois French, in which a convergence already seems to be well-established. In Quebec, the affricated variants /ts, dz, dʒ/ in the same contexts, i.e., before /i,j,y,u/, have been attested among speakers from all social classes, ages and genders, in both formal and informal contexts, with overall rates ranging from 50% to 85%. This phenomenon occurs especially for voiceless dentals, as shown, for instance, in Bento (1998)'s study, in which affrication was correlated consistently with the speaker's city, but inconsistently with the speaker's gender and age (in a sample of people from Quebec City, speakers in general, whether women, men or children, affricated more than those from Chicoutimi, but in a sample of people from Chicoutimi, children and men affricated more often than did women, thereby possibly suggesting more complex variation patterns).

Three more recent studies conducted in three different French cities –Jamin (2005) in Paris; Vernet and Trimaille (2007) in Grenoble; and Jamin, Trimaille & Gasquet-Cyrus (2006) in Marseille– upheld a competing hypothesis: they found clear evidence that affricated pronunciations were most often produced by young male working-class speakers from immigrant families living in an urban setting (see in particular Jamin 2005). These studies support the hypothesis of a possible ongoing process of stereotyping.

In the context of the Paris suburbs, Jamin (2005) PhD research first showed that the use of palatalized forms was linked to the following social variables: age, sex, street-culture membership and ethnic background. Trimaille then found the same kind of social pattern in Grenoble (Jamin, Trimaille & Gasquet-Cyrus 2006). Jamin & Trimaille (2008) then considered the supralocal dimension of the variant and, secondly, viewed it as a case of sociolinguistic convergence within a trend of divergence from the standard form. They interpreted this

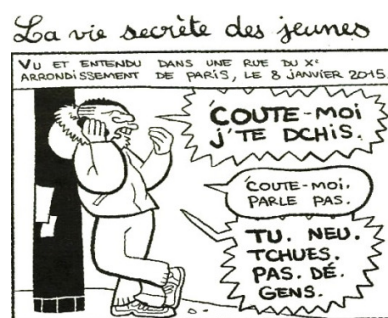
convergence as the result of a combination of internal factors (assimilatory processes which potentially affect all speakers); external factors such as language contact between French, substrates and adstrates; and extra-linguistic factors such as social or geographical mobility and psycho-social factors such as identity construction and strategies.

Therefore, we can theoretically imagine that strong palatalization or affrication is a phonetic change from below, led by young male urban speakers who are very involved in street culture. Even though the hypothesis of ongoing phonetic change is supported by many observations, it seems impossible to definitively rule out the opposing hypothesis, because “social meaning is highly flexible” (Campbell-Kibler, 2009:149). Indeed, a possible beginning of an actual stereotyping process was documented by Trimaille, Candea & Lehka (2012), who reported the use of the graphemes *tch*, *dch* and *dj* instead of *t* and *d* in comics or on posters about comedy acts [Figure 2], thereby testifying to the fact that such pronunciations are sometimes salient enough to caricature the speech of immigrants or young speakers from Parisian suburbs with immigrant background. If affrication is undergoing a stereotyping process and thereby becoming an indicator of an “urban working class with a postcolonial immigrant background”, then the linguistic behaviour of “legitimate speakers” (i.e. the appropriate person in a legitimate situation, on a given linguistic market, see Bourdieu, 1982) could also evolve into a reaction of avoiding the palatalized variant, which would lead to the latter group of speakers not adopting the feature.



Figure 2. Stylized transcriptions: (left) “*The Secret Life of Young People*”⁵ (Sattouf 2007)- (right) Comedy show poster “*Fatima has things to tell you*” (Belhaddad 2011)

These two competing hypotheses are worthy of attention, as they raise challenging questions about methodological issues. Indeed, if a weekly newspaper with a circulation of millions of copies (*Figure 3* shows an excerpt from the *Charlie Hebdo*’s issue published after the January 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris) publishes a vignette with a stylized profile of a “young suburban boy” wearing a hoodie and sneakers, and whose pronunciation is noted with “tch” instead of “t” and “dch” instead of “d”, it means that the editorial staff of this widely circulated newspaper endorsed the assumption made by cartoonist Sattouf that this stereotypical variant, will be associated to young men from the *banlieue*, underlining also the negative reception of the terrorist act among those whose profile could be associated with that of terrorists.



⁵ “It is not written in the school rules that braided hair is forbidden in the classroom. Plus it's not as if they are dreadlocks, you see, they're little plaits that are so beautiful like that...”

Figure 3: Vignette, January 2015, *Charlie Hebdo*, cartoon by Sattouf⁶ (using *tch* and *dch*, instead of *t* and *d*, e.g *dchis* instead of *dis*)

Jamin's study (2005) on production, based on the above-mentioned suburban field recordings, has identified stratification by age and gender. These, combined with the fact that such cartoons are widespread, should, according to traditional variationist methods, sufficiently support the hypothesis that palatalization functions as a marker in the Labovian sense. However, as mentioned above, palatalized/affricated variants have existed for a very long time in the vernacular language (at least since the 17th century - see Rosset (1911: 314) quoted in Jamin 2005: 115), and there is empirical basis for the hypothesis that this is a change in progress (from clear occlusion to spirantization via an entire gradient of a lengthening of the contact time between the tongue and the palate). Can we consider that the indexicality of this mark has changed in such a short time and that it now functions as one of the emblematic features of what is referred to as "*banlieue* accent"?

We therefore sought to deepen our knowledge on these PalAff variants by carrying out different and complementary research. The first series of research concerns the study of production, while the second investigates perception.

Production

Firstly, if palatalization is stigmatized by a process of widespread stereotyping, we should be able to observe stylistic variation: it should decrease in highly supervised speech, among the same speakers. Regarding such variation, the results of several studies available at this time are rather inconsistent. For example, while the study by Vernet and Trimaille (2007) shows stylistic

⁶ « Listen to me. Listen, don't speak. You.can't.kill.people ».

variation that, in line with the hypothesis, depends on the situation, research by Jamin and Trimaille (2008) has, however, found no significant stylistic variation. Candea (2018) provides detailed analysis of interaction indicating stylistic variation, but correlation with meta-linguistic vigilance is not clearly indicated. Secondly, if the palatalization of /t,d/ is being stereotyped, it should inhibit the change that is taking place, and all those who do not wish to affiliate themselves with suburban street culture should be able to avoid this feature. It should be absent or in decline in the dominant media for example, or generally in the speech of legitimate speakers as explained by Bourdieu (1982). Our studies on production data therefore focused on the evolution of these variants in the major media within the past decade, but they did not shed clear light on this issue.

Trimaille's (2008, 2010) results on media data showed that highly palatalized or even affricated pronunciations could be observed in the speech of certain French government ministers at that time, even interviewed on national radio station broadcast. The rates are different from one minister to another, but two women, Valérie Pécresse and Fadela Amara, stand out for their frequent and strongly marked utterances despite their very contrasting socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, even in a public and formal situation. Another study conducted on a large corpus of media speech (1997-2010) by Candea, Adda-Decker & Lamel (2013) adopted a more massive quantitative approach, automatically selecting 100,000 /t/ and 50,000 /d/ in front of /i,j/, as well as 30,000 /t/ and 60,000 /d/ in front of /y,q/ produced indiscriminately by journalists or non-journalists expressing themselves in the media. The study shows that in the media the rates of palatalized or affricated productions increased during this period, though very slightly, especially for /t/. For the /tj/, for example, which is the most affected, the rate of palatalized or affricated realizations strong enough to be automatically

aligned with a [tʃ], went from 4% in 1998 to 8% in 2010, which is still much lower than the rates of between 40% and 80% found by Trimaille and Vernet among adolescents in Grenoble in 2007. This upward trend in the media may suggest a lack of awareness, which would reinforce the argument that palatalization is not, so far, a social marker. But the argument can also be reversed, as the increase is not strong enough within this window of micro-diachrony, and at this pace we will have to wait a long time before we can really talk about pan-social convergence.

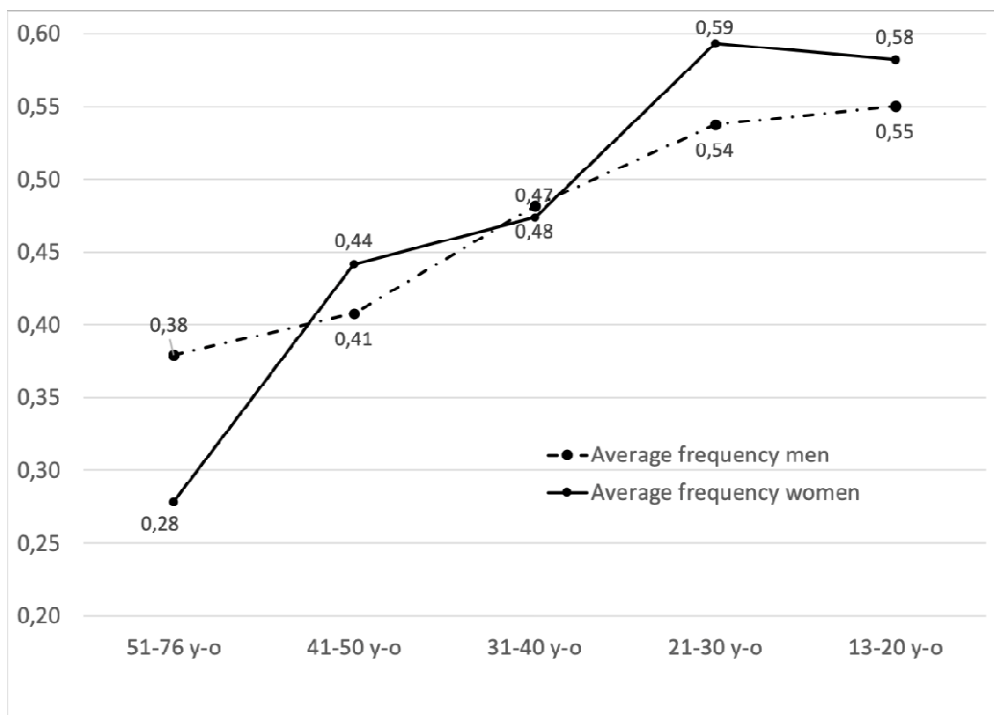


Figure 4: Average frequency of palatalization according to gender and age (adapted from Warette 2020)

Warette's (2020) results in Figure 4, obtained through sentence-reading tasks, show on the one hand that the average percentage is higher among the youngest (ANOVA, one factor, p value = 0.003), which may support the hypothesis of change in progress, provided that the group

is socially homogeneous (a qualification which could not be controlled). But on the other hand we also observe a surprising evolution of this variable by gender: slightly more among males than females in the older age group, and vice versa in the younger age group (ANOVA, two factors, p value = 0.004). This new and interesting result should be verified by replicating the study using a larger and more representative sample, because, if confirmed, it would suggest that the beginning of the “street culture” stereotyping noted by Jamin in the early 2000s was “beaten out” by the underlying trend of expansion from below of the palatalized and/or affricated variant, indexing instead a modernity more easily displayed by women.

According to this set of data, one can claim that, today, palatalization of /t, d/ is not a stereotype as defined by Labov (1966). If it was such a consistently stigmatized variant, one can assume that it would not be observed in sentence-reading tasks, in such a wide range of speakers or, even if not massively, in the speech of journalists, ministers, and people of high social and academic levels. Furthermore, another element argues against the stereotype value of palatalization. If palatalized (and a fortiori affricated) variants were stereotypical, it could be assumed that its frequency and intensity would decrease with the occupational integration of speakers, which does not seem to be the case according to Warette’s data and analysis.

But how then to explain Sattouf’s vignettes and the comedy shows (*Fig. 2 and 3*), which played on the hypothesis of the PalAff /t,d/ variant functioning as a marker? Does perception precede production? Can any of these non-standard variants be salient, yet still continue to spread? Within the continuum of non-standard pronunciations from palatalization to affrication, could some of these variants function as markers in the Labovian sense? Or, in another way, can

PalAff realizations be associated with different social meanings linked to other semiotic features, whether linguistic or not ?

Perception

To obtain a clearer picture, studies focusing on the perception of these variants are essential, as complements to production studies. Indeed, without controlled studies on perception, there is a great risk of working on an artefact produced by the distorted perception of researchers whose ears have trained themselves to distinguish the variants within the continuum of realizations ranging from occlusion with a clear and short explosion to a long explosion and with enlarged contact of the tongue to the palate. To address this issue, here we will mainly cite a study carried out in two stages, in 2012 and 2019.

A perceptual experiment conducted by Trimaille, Candea & Lehka (2012) among 15-to-24-year-old high school and college students in greater Paris, Rouen, Lyon and Grenoble, yielded results supporting the hypothesized lack of salience of affricates for these listeners. Participants in the experiment had to rate the degree to which they felt the pronunciation of a 30-second read dispatch met the standards set for news broadcasts by various types of radio stations. The goal of the perceptual experiment was to determine whether or not affricated variants are used by listeners to evaluate and categorize speakers' performances when they are asked to evaluate speakers' acceptability as appropriate in formal contexts (broadcast news). Two of the questions were: "*If you were a **recruiter** for a radio channel, do you think that this person **could be** a newsreader?*" and "*As a **listener**, would you consider natural that this person presents the news on: national radio / youth radio / community radio?*". The speakers read the same passage in a "news broadcast style"; their productions were categorized into three groups according to

their rate of PalAff variants. The listeners were asked to answer close-ended questions and to provide some short explanations about their choice, especially through a list of “what should be avoided” to improve pronunciation in order to become a good newsreader. The results suggest that, for the 80 young respondents (50 women, 30 men), affrication of /t,d/ is not part of the main criteria a speaker has to avoid to become a good newsreader. No significant differences were found between positive and negative ratings by region or gender, as the experiment showed considerable convergence of responses on this kind of task.

By analyzing data (collected in 2012 using the described above methodology) on the perception of palatalization by older judges, Bezborodko (2020) investigated whether there might be a difference in perception and judgements in relation to the age of the judges. Her results also converge on a lack of correlation between the rate of palatalization and the evaluation of oral productions, regardless of the judges’ age, which means that the elements that seem to be decisive in evaluating the ability to present information on the radio are not related to the palatalized variant itself.

To summarize those perceptual studies, we do not currently have clear evidence to reinforce the hypothesis of a growing perceptive salience of the PalAff variants. But these pilot studies are not large enough to reject this hypothesis, especially if the stereotyping process needs more time than allowed for by the micro-diachronic window.

5. Final discussion and conclusion

According to Kerswill & Williams (2002), examining the salience of a feature requires covering many points, such as linguistic properties, sociolinguistic distribution, overt opinion in the

society, discourse analysis and experimental investigation. That was our aim for the PalAff variants, and in doing so we came up with two competing hypotheses. On the one hand, the first stage of supralocal convergence of vernacular pronunciations (Devilla and Trimaille 2010) could now be followed by the beginnings of “pan-social convergence”, thus possibly corresponding to an ongoing phonetic change, as predicted by Fónagy (1989); on the other, the first stage could be followed by a stereotyping process that leads to the emergence of a new social marker. A third hypothesis could also be formulated, that of a differentiated treatment/perception of the two variants. Given that palatalization and affrication are two variants positioned gradually on a continuum, it cannot be excluded that the degree of perceptual salience varies, depending on the speakers and situations, between these two degrees of variation.

The complexity of the results makes it possible to raise the issue of the specificity of the studied feature (PalAff variants) in relation to the so-called *banlieue* accent. The more lighting methods are used, the more the strength of the correlation between PalAff variants and the “*banlieue* accent” is questioned. However, this kind of problem also arises for the other features identified as markers of the *banlieue* accent.

For example, focusing on the salience of the prosodic marker “short fall-rising pattern at the end of a rhythmic group”, which is described as another specific feature and endowed with a certain perceptual salience in its most marked forms (Boula de Mareuil & Lehka-Lemarchand 2011), Paternostro (2016) shows that the perception of a typical “*banlieue* talk” is by no means automatically aroused by the presence of such an intonational pattern, in the absence of other converging features. Hence this author’s proposal to consider that it would be a single basic intonational pattern in French, which would be mobilized most often to express emphasis, and which could be realized with different degrees. If there has been a broad consensus in the media

since the end of the 1990s that a “*banlieue* accent” exists, in sociophonetic research there has only been an increasing consensus that there is a lack of consistency of this category which becomes salient only if there is a “halo effect” , or a cluster of convergent features (Nisbeth &Wilson 1977).

To return to palatalization, the continuity between variants and the persistent difficulty in isolating markers of the “*banlieue* accent” even calls into question the empirical existence of this category as an accent, and thus a certain stability of shared pronunciation practices. In 2005, Jamin identified the degree of insertion into “street culture” as a relevant factor correlated to the frequency of the listed “*banlieue* accent” markers. He was thus following Labov’s, and in the French context, Lepoutre’s (1997) hypotheses, which opposed the degree of insertion in “street culture” to that of “school culture”. However, it is easy to imagine that this factor concerns only a small percentage of people living in disadvantaged social estates; mostly young men and a smaller percentage of young women. This would explain why:

- 1) these indexical and partly iconic features show great inter-individual variability;
- 2) many pupils almost never adopt them, while many others practice them at varying rates depending on the issues at stake (Lehka-Lemarchand 2011);
- 3) these features are not shared within the different generations of a family, as can be the case, under certain conditions, with features that index a ‘regional accent’.

Taking this reasoning to its logical conclusion, we can consider that these pronunciation practices thus contribute, in the same way as other semiotic practices (vocabulary, sounding, choice of clothing, gestures, etc.), to the performance of a style that indexes participation to “street culture”, which in turn may be ideologically linked to values of nonconformism and

toughness. This calls into question the very notion of accent or in any case totally blurs the boundary between “accent” and “style”.

Such an approach is consistent with that upheld by Eckert and Rickford (2001) and many other academics, particularly after Coupland (1980). If we consider that social life is a perpetual and multidimensional process of constructing categories and identities and associating those social phenomena with semiotic means, language constructs the social aspect, and style is one of the resources available for this construction. This perspective contrasts with the view of language as a mere reflection of the social aspect and the view of social life as difficult navigation by individuals through pre-existing categories that are fixed and immobile (Eckert and Rickford 2001: 6). This better explains the inconsistency of correlations according to the methods adopted, as well as their fluidity over time (even over short periods of time). The definition of linguistic variation changes significantly: it evolves “from marking categories to constituting a more fluid landscape of meaning” (ibid.)

If we support the use of multiple methods and theoretical insights, it is both to limit the risk of circular reasoning and to shed light on new phenomena that are emerging in/or outside the collective consciousness. On this point we follow Bishop, Coupland & Garrett (2005), who, after a large-scale survey on the perception of (regional) accents in Great Britain, draw attention to the fact that the use of the traditional, already-known pre-categories in a survey could in itself activate the conservative linguistic ideologies associated with these categories, thereby possibly obscuring the results and preventing the emergence, if any, of recent changes that have not yet been translated/mediated into sufficiently recognized official discourse. One can therefore come to question whether the use in discourse of traditional categories (such as the one discussed here, “*accent de banlieue*” [*banlieue* accent]) –which are more ideological and identity categories than

linguistic categories— plays the role of a framework that allows a notion to remain operational in non-specialized discourse and in ordinary interactions, and that performatively enables the perpetuation or even reinforcement of (social) boundaries.

Our fieldwork and our regular reading of the media allow us to point out a high level of porosity between discourse in the media or in Academia and the lay discourse on “*banlieue*” and “*jeunes de banlieue*”, including, of course, the discourse of the young people who live in such areas. The pervasiveness within society of the category “*jeunes de banlieue*” [young people of *banlieue*] to refer to marginalized individuals as an identity assignment encourages young people, especially those from post-French-colonial descent, to strongly reject this identity, or to strongly conform to it. Regarding this particular point, the general lack of discourse about girls from “*banlieue*” in both the media and in scientific papers (Billiez and Lambert 2008, Moïse 2003) can act as an advantage because the lack⁷ of very common models for these young girls allows for a broader space for constructing different identities in interaction.

Regarding the “*banlieue* accent” category, we can also point out a very high level of porosity between all kinds of discourses, even though scientific papers tend to favour the use of quotation marks, or expressions like ‘the so-called *banlieue* accent’, when referring to it. This plays a decisive role in the identity construction of young people living in the *banlieue*, because they are encouraged to accept the idea of strong and stable categories with a clear definition – which is inaccurate. Wouldn’t then it be time to ask sociophoneticians why we use “so-called *banlieue* accent” and no other label? What is the status of “so-called”, and is this a sufficient

⁷ The context could shift on this point, because in the last decade more and more movies have focused on young women from the projects: *Les roses noires* (2012), *Bandes de filles* (2014), *Fatima* (2015), *Divines* (2016), *Le Brio* (2017)

modalisation and precaution to expose, validate and circulate a supposedly sociolinguistic but in fact empirically questionable and epistemologically confining category?

We propose to defend the hypothesis that the “*banlieue* accent” is nothing other than a style (such as, for instance, a gendered style), which evolves with street fashion and in interaction with successful artists, who are able to influence indexicality, toward prestige as well as toward stigmatization. Promoting the stylistic approach of variability of pronunciation practices (instead of an approach based on identity categories) can allow for better understanding of the atypical fluidity of the considered features in each context and can also open up interesting political perspectives. If our interpretation of the so-called “*banlieue* accent” as a set of styles were to spread, it could break the link (which is socially constructed and potentially performative) between territory and social class on the one hand and accent on the other. If the idea that the *banlieue* accent is only a “style” were to become widespread, students who perform it would feel less pressure to drop it (as a stigma to avoid), and it would be easier and more acceptable for them to practice style shifting (as opposed to the idea of “losing” one’s accent). Referring to “*banlieue* street styles” instead of “*banlieue* accent” may also highlight the more heterogeneous social landscape in the *banlieue*, taking into account what we actually observe in our fieldwork.

To sum up, our assumption is that the “*banlieue* accent” is not a linguistic category. However, it remains, by far, a socially operational instrument of discrimination and intolerance.

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