

Laurentian French *j*'s-assimilation

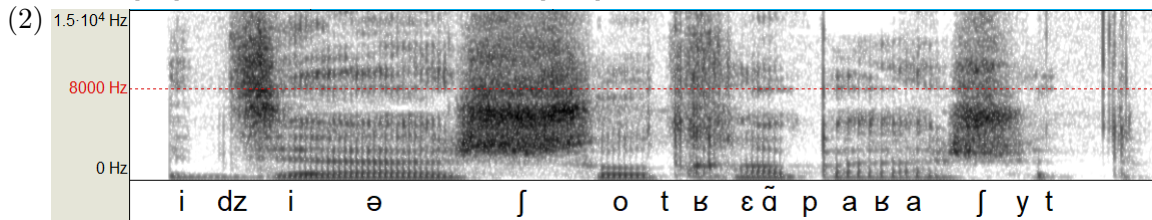
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Goal. In this presentation I document and analyse a phonological alternation in Laurentian French, the variety of French spoken along the St-Lawrence in Canada in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. This alternation consists in the productive assimilation of /ʒs/ into [ʃʃ], in the sequence orthographically represented *j*'s.

Background. In standard French, the first person pronoun *je* [ʒə] surfaces as *j'* [ʒ] before vowels. In many varieties including Laurentian French this elision of schwa can also happen before most consonantal contexts (in line with the fact that most schwas of Standard French can be elided, see Dell 1973). When this schwa is absent, *j'* obligatorily assimilates in voicing to the following consonant and will therefore surface as [ʃ] before voiceless segments (Walker, 1984, p.36-37), in line with the general pattern of regressive voicing assimilation in obstruent clusters (Côté, 2012, p.254). This is also true before fricatives, producing tautosyllabic sequences of fricatives, including a tautosyllabic geminate in the case of *je* + /ʃ/ > [ʃʃ] (Fortin, 2007, p.61). Additionally, with the verbs *être* 'to be' and *savoir* 'to know' there is frequent but not obligatory assimilation of the verb-initial /s/ to [ʃ]. This is common enough both in Quebec and in Europe that there exist informal conventional spellings for these forms: *chu(i)* < *je suis* 'I am' and *(j')ché* < *je sais* 'I know' (Wachs & Weber, 2011).

Novel contribution All previous discussions of Laurentian French only mention [ʃʃ] < /ʒs/ forms derived from *être* and *savoir* (e.g. Walker 1984, p.37; Lappin 1982, p.100; Léard 1990, p.287). In reality this assimilation is productive and can be found in naturalistic contexts with a variety of verbs (1). The spectrogram in (2) illustrates the pattern with the passage "il dit, euh, j'sauterais en parachute" (he says, uh, I would jump with a parachute) taken from a podcast interview with artist and politician Catherine Dorion (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGXH1XEHTpA&t=3558>). The first goal of this presentation will be to document this broader assimilation with naturalistic examples found in interviews and stand-up comedy.

- (1) a. [ʃʃɔʁ] < *je sors* 'I exit' c. [ʃʃuʁi] < *je souris* 'I smile'
 b. [ʃʃɑ] < *je sens* 'I feel' d. [ʃʃɛp] < *je saigne* 'I bleed'



- (3) a. [ʃʃɔʁti] < *je suis sorti* 'I have exited, come out'
 b. [ʃʃyʁ] < *je suis sûr* 'I am certain'
 c. [ʃʃypɛʁ] < *je suis super* 'I am super/very'

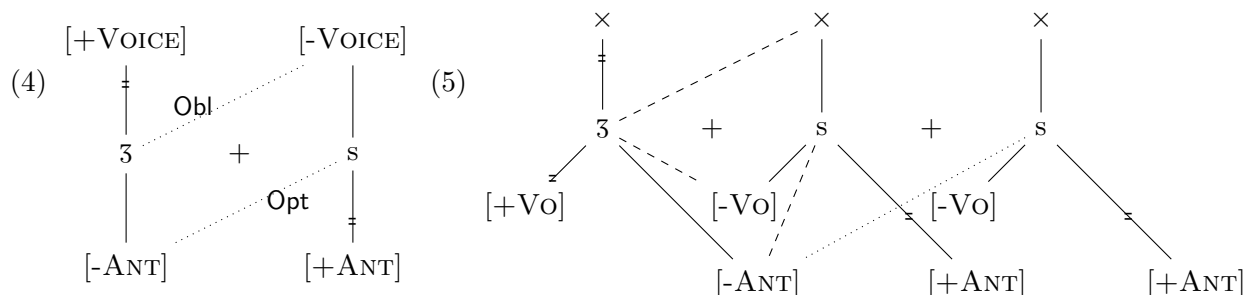
This phenomenon is highly non-standard and thus, as observed by Labov (1969) it is difficult to elicit clear judgements as speakers invariably report acceptability biased toward the more standard version. It is also rare, in part because it is optional, but also largely because of the rarity of its environment. I was unable to find a single example of this phenomenon —nor its non-application— with any other verb than *être* and *savoir* in the Quebec interviews of the PFC public database (<https://public.projet-pfc.net/>). It is therefore very difficult to quantify. This is reminiscent

of Lappin (1982) who was unable to report statistics on ‘surface reductions’, the term under which she classifies *chui* and *ché*, for lack of examples found in her corpus (p.101 fn. 2).

Niebuhr et al. (2011)

Importance as a change in progress This process is interesting as a change in progress. Although multiple examples of lexical diffusion have been described in the literature, they have mostly consisted of diffusion of changes to lexical forms. *J*’s-assimilation in contrast is the unambiguous diffusion of a productive phonological alternation, as the verbs involved variably surface with [ʃ] after *j*’, but alternate with [s] in all other contexts. It is also interesting for being a confirmatory instance of the ‘snowball’ effect in the sense of Wang (1969) and Ogura & Wang (1996). The pattern has affected very frequent verbs for a long time and is in the process of ‘snowballing’ to all /s/-initial verbs.

Formal analysis. This process is also formally interesting, first due to its two-way assimilation which requires something like (4). But also because the examples in (3) involving coalescence and assimilation in /ʒss/ sequences prove more challenging. I will argue for an analysis which corroborates the proposal of de Haas (1987) in which coalescence involves attachment both subsegmentally with features and suprasegmentally (5), needed to account for the ability of the posteriority of /ʒ/ to get all the way to the final /s/ without having the anteriority of the intermediate /s/ in the way.



References.

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