Book Reviews

Gess, Randall, Chantal Lyche and Trudel Meisenburg, eds.


The Book

As put forward by Gess, Lyche and Meisenburg in the very first sentence of their introduction (p. 1), Phonological Variation in French. Illustrations from Three Continents is the first book-length presentation of the first results of an ambitious, international project on the phonology of Contemporary French\(^1\) (= Phonologie du Français Contemporain, henceforth PFC) which has been launched in 2000. As recalled on page 10, the raison d’être of the PFC project was at the time, thanks to some modern technologies usable for the collection, storage and processing of large databases, to design a “reference corpus for French spoken throughout the world” which would enable phonologists working on French to provide more robust analyses based on authentic data rather than “on the same dubious data (Morin 1987), ‘the linguistic Frankenstein dubbed Standard French’ (Durand 2006: 81)”.

Structure

The book itself and its chapters are clearly structured: The book is divided into three parts which are surrounded by an introductory chapter and a concluding chapter both provided by the editors: Part I (pp. 21–102) is devoted to the status and specificities of French as spoken in Africa. Part II (pp. 103–208) deals with European French and Part III (pp. 209–368) with North American French.

All chapters (except for Chapters 1 and 14) adopt a similar structure: After having provided (when necessary) some relevant sociological, sociolinguistic, historical and/or geographical facts regarding the variety of French and of the other languages spoken in and around the studied area, the authors sketch out the PFC data their study rely on and propose a thorough description of the phonemic

system/phonemic inventories (vowels and consonants) for the variety of French they are concerned with. Two central issues in the phonology of Contemporary French are then addressed, from a descriptive point of view: (realisation of) schwa and liaison. Additionally, several authors offer a number of comments regarding the prosodic system of the variety of French they discuss.

**Outline**

Chapter one introduces the volume. In order to make the book accessible to readers who are “relatively unfamiliar” with the phonology of French or French linguistics, Gess, Lyche and Meisenburg’s chapter provides first an introduction to the concept “français de référence” (henceforth FR), which corresponds to the pronunciation norm put forward in pronunciation materials designed to teach French as a Foreign Language (cf. Morin 2000, Lyche 2010), as well as to the phonology of FR. FR phonemic system is presented as having fifteen vocalic (some of which – /ə/, /ɑ/ and /œ̃/ – are given a marginal status for obvious reasons, cf. Table 1), eighteen consonantal phonemes (including marginal /ɲ/ and /ŋ/, cf. Table 2) and three glides (cf. section 2.).

**TABLE 1**  
**FR: Vocalic phonemes and glides.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>front</th>
<th>back</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unrounded</td>
<td>rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral</td>
<td>i / j</td>
<td>y / ɥ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nasal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>i / j</td>
<td>y / ɥ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid-high</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid-low</td>
<td>ɛ</td>
<td>ɛ̃</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>ã</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**  
**FR: Consonantal phonemes.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>bilabial</th>
<th>labiodental</th>
<th>dental</th>
<th>alveolar</th>
<th>alveopalatal</th>
<th>palatal</th>
<th>velar</th>
<th>uvular</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>stops</td>
<td>p / b</td>
<td>t / d</td>
<td>k / g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fricatives</td>
<td>f / v</td>
<td>s / z</td>
<td>ñ / ŋ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>nasals</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>(ɲ)</td>
<td>(ŋ)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>laterals</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>ʁ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Some crucial details regarding (the behaviour of) schwa,\textsuperscript{2} liaison and prosody in French, the three core areas of the PFC project, are highlighted in sections 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5.

A short presentation of the PFC project is proposed in section 3, where the reader is given an outline of the PFC methodology and is reminded about the PFC protocol and data. These were obtained by asking speakers of French to proceed with four different tasks: all speakers read a wordlist (84 items including five minimal pairs appearing twice in the list, cf. Appendix I) as well as a text (cf. Appendix II) and were also recorded while having two different kinds of conversations (formal and informal interviews). Gess, Lyche and Meisenburg remind their readers on page 12 that, when the book was published, the PFC database already consisted of 36 surveys (available online), a total of 396 speakers and 360 hours of speech.

Section 4 offers an overview of the book itself and of the specific (sociolinguistic) features of the varieties of French spoken in Africa (where monolingualism is an exception), Europe and America.

Part I is devoted to French as it is spoken in Africa, that is, in an area where multilingualism is a rule and French is only exceptionally an L1, therefore an area where the speakers’ different L1s are expected to have an influence on the local variety of French. It is composed of three chapters. Chapter 2 by Bordal is a study of the variety of French spoken in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). Like other French speaking countries of Africa, the CAR is multilingual in essence; French has there an official status, along with Sango, but is usually learnt as a second language in the course of formal education. On the other hand Sango, the only other official language in the CAR, is the vehicular language there and is acquired as an L1 (or as a dominant L1 in the case of bi- and multilinguals). The data used by Bordal were collected from January to March 2008 in Bangui, according to the PFC protocol. The author made sure that all her informants, who are divided into three age groups and different levels of education, were French-Sango bilinguals.

Chapter 3, by Boutin, Gess and Guèye, is concerned with French spoken in Dakar (Senegal) by wolophone speakers (WF). French is the only official language in Senegal. It nonetheless is mainly restricted to written use and administrative purposes, and spoken, mostly as an L2, by only 25% of the Senegalese population. Among the other languages spoken in Senegal, however, Wolof enjoys a special situation since 45% of the population acquired Wolof as their L1, and 80% of the Senegalese population speak or understand

\textsuperscript{2} Schwa being defined as a vowel which alternates with zero.
Wolof. The WF-PFC data referred to in this chapter were collected in Dakar (Université Cheikh Anta Diop) in November 2008. The FW informants, who were acquaintances / relatives of one of the interviewers, belong to different age and social groups.

Chapter 4 by Lyche and Skattum focuses on French as it is spoken in the capital of Mali (Bamako), a country where multilingualism is a rule and French is spoken only as an L2 despite the fact that it is nonetheless the official language and the language of education. In order to test the influence of the different coexisting L1s on the phonology of the French spoken in Bamako (FB), the authors recorded native speakers of five major languages spoken in Mali: Bambara (4 speakers) and Syenara (2 speakers), which are the only tonal L1s represented in this study, Fulfulde and Songhay (2 speakers each), and Tamachek (3 speakers).

The authors of Part I attribute a number of phonological characteristics observed in the different varieties of French to the influence of the different L1s surrounding French in CAR, Senegal and Mali: assibilation, different kinds of vowel harmony, consonant deletion and/or vowel epenthesis (to ensure that syllables have a certain shape, as favoured in the different L1s), nasal assimilation, stress placement, the realisation of the phoneme /R/ or the identity of the minimal prosodic unit (one content word and one or more function words in CAR, the prosodic word in Senegal and a lexical word surrounded by its clitics in Mali). They also give a precise description of the (morphophonological/ stylistic) contexts in which schwa is realised and state that liaison occurs mostly in contexts where it has been identified as compulsory in FR. The different systems described in chapters 2–4 are compared to the phonological system of the FR.

Part II proposes a description of four varieties of French spoken, exclusively as an L1, in Europe, an area for which many survey points are available in the PFC-database: Southern French, Belgian French, younger speakers' French (Paris), and Swiss French. All the authors, in their respective contributions, highlight the differences between the variety they describe and FR and/or neighbouring French varieties. Southern French is represented by two Marseille surveys proposed by Coquillon and Turcsan in Chapter 5. The data referred to by Coquillon and Turcsan date back to 2002 (survey 13a, 10 speakers) and 2003–2004 (survey 13b, 8 speakers). In both surveys, the informants, who belonged to different age and social groups (middle vs. working class) were recruited in the family of a researcher.

In Chapter 6, Hambye and Simon aim to find out which features make Belgian French (FB) distinct from the French spoken in Northern France, i.e. to
identify the salient characteristics of the so-called Belgian accent(s). Their study relies on three PFC surveys undertaken in the cities of Gembloux, Liège and Tournai. In each survey point, twelve informants representing three age groups and three social categories (depending on the level of education), were recorded according to the PFC protocol.

Chapter 7 by Hansen focuses on the variety of French spoken in Paris by the youth (FYP). Nine Parisian speakers aged 18 to 26 were recorded in 2001 and 2004 following the PFC protocol. They represent two different socio-cultural backgrounds in terms of education (advanced level vs. technical upper secondary school level).

Chapter 8 by Racine and Andreassen provides a description of the French variety spoken in Neuchâtel (FN), which is compared not only to FR but also to other Swiss French varieties (a.o. the one spoken in Nyon). Even though Switzerland has four official languages (German, French, Italian and Romansh), French is the only official language in the canton of Neuchâtel. The PFC Neuchâtel corpus, which was collected in 2009 around Neuchâtel, contains recordings of twelve speakers representing different age and social groups. One relevant contribution of Racine and Andreassen is the identification of age as a relevant factor of variation in FN.

The European French studies available in Part II attempt to characterise the different varieties of French from a generational and/or geographical point of view. The data put forward regarding the status of the mid-low vs. mid-high difference for vowels, the realisation of schwa and the number of nasal vowels seems to confirm the necessity of a distinction between Southern and Northern French, even though it is slowly disappearing since younger generations tend to lose certain oppositions (cf. the contribution by Hansen and by Andreassen). The authors discuss a number of phonological facts like the status of the palatal nasal, cluster simplification, pitch span (characteristic of Marseille French, according to Coquillon and Turcsan), vowel quantity and penultimate lengthening, obstruent devoicing (in Belgium), /k/-palatalisation (Parisian French) and identify a number of criteria which are relevant to describe liaison and the distribution of schwa.

Part III is dedicated to French as spoken in North America (Canada and USA). Chapter 9 by Cichocki describes Tracadie French, a variety of Acadian French spoken in New Brunswick, i.e. Canada’s only English-French bilingual province. Cichocki’s contribution relies on the interviews of 12 native speakers conducted during the summer 2005 in the area of Tracadie-Sheila. The interviewees, who received their education in French and most of whom had a limited knowledge of English, exhibit different levels of education, which is partly
correlated with their age (older speakers had less formal training than younger speakers).

Chapter 10 by Côté focuses on the Laurentian French variety spoken in Trois-Rivières in Quebec. It is grounded on interviews conducted in August 2010 in the city of Trois-Rivières with 12 mainly monolingual participants with a relatively high level of education who belonged to two age groups.

Chapter 11 by Klingler and Lyche describes the French variety spoken in Louisiana (USA), a state where French is a minority language spoken mainly by elderly speakers. Klingler and Lyche’s study is based on the interviews of four native speakers of Louisiana French from the white francophone community who were born and raised in or near Ville Platte and for whom English has become the dominant language. The authors mention that they had to slightly modify the PFC protocol for the Ville Platte survey and devise other tasks (like a word translation task or the recitation of a prayer) more appropriate for native speakers of Louisiana French, most of whom are elderly and illiterate in French.

Chapter 12 by Tennant is interested in a Laurentian French variety spoken outside Quebec, in the Canadian town of Hearst (Ontario), where French is a majority language spoken as a native language by 89% of the population. The study is grounded on the interview of 12 bilingual speakers whose level of proficiency in English was variable, but many of whom spoke English with a “slight francophone accent”. The interviewees represent different age groups.

Chapter 13 by Walker is concerned with the French variety spoken in the Albertan area around Peace River (Canada), where English is the dominant language. The study relies on the analysis of the interview of six native speakers of Peace River French who are English-French bilinguals and represent different age and social groups.

One interesting fact which emerges from Part III is the necessary partition between the French varieties spoken in majority settings (Tracadie French, Hearst French and Trois-Rivières French) and those spoken in minority settings (Louisiana French and Peace River French). In the latter, French is not a dominant language, and English, as the dominant language, is expected to have an impact on French. Most varieties of American French (except in the case of Louisiana French which has only 11 vowels) are presented as having a rather rich vocalic inventory which maintains a number of elsewhere

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3 Unsurprisingly, all surveys, especially those concerned with European and American French, also highlight the fact that conservative patterns (like the opposition between mid-high and mid-low vowels, the realisation of schwa or liaison) are more often attested in the reading tasks and in guided conversations than in spontaneous conversation.
declining oppositions, and a number of processes that are more or less unknown in other French varieties, such as high-vowel laxing (and sometimes even devoicing), assibilation, affrication, tapping, the presence of surprising word-final consonants, vowel fusion or diphthongisation. As far as the realisation of schwa is concerned, American French seems to be a schwa-avoiding variety (cf. Côté’s paper).

Chapter 14 proposes a summary of the different parts and chapters which, like the book itself, is geographically organised. Within each section, the authors, while acknowledging the uniqueness of every French variety presented in the book, summarise the main results of each survey and identify the features that are common to all the French varieties spoken in the different geographical areas (Africa, Europe and America). The different phonological systems described in the book are also compared to the phonological system of FR, which as a result seems to be more or less unnatural/artificial.

**About the Facts**

This book is highly interesting in so far as it makes it possible for those who are not specialised in (the) phonology (of modern French) or in (the linguistics of) modern French to become aware of what the label "French" may refer to, from a phonological and sociolinguistic point of view, depending on who speaks it and where/in which context the language called "French" is spoken. French is presented as a real, living language which varies across continents, generations, situations, and which does not (necessarily) correspond to the descriptions given of FR in pronunciation materials designed to teach French as a foreign/second language. Twelve whole chapters are devoted to an in-depth description of the phonological system of twelve varieties of modern French, therefore enabling the different authors to provide their readers with many pieces of information regarding the phonological system of these varieties: for each variety, readers are given many details, including of course the general shape of the phonemic system, but also the inventory of the possible realisations of a given phoneme or an account of the allophonic processes which play a role in the language. The reader is given an insight into the amount of variation attested in the phonology of French.

Like most publications stemming from the PFC-project (and the PFC-database itself), this book is also valuable from the point of view of (theoretical) phonology, since it provides an interesting list of variational facts in the phonology of French, which can be exploited by theoretical linguists.
concerned with the shaping of (phonological) variation or the representation of phonological objects, processes and the like.

One might however regret — and this minor problem is due to some extent to the fact that the aim of the book was to present a substantial number of French varieties spoken around the world — that, even though the large amount of facts presented in the individual chapters are brought together and summarised in the conclusion, the reader is given the impression that all these facts are almost randomly put together. In a word, it looks as if not only French (as a kind of abstract supersystem dominating the different varieties described in the book) but also the different French varieties depicted in the book themselves seem to be a bare collection of features and processes without a necessary coherence nor a true system in the sense of de Saussure (1995[1916]), in which everything is interconnected. This impression becomes even stronger when attention is paid to the structure of the book and of its chapters, whose organisation, alluded to above, is very linear (1. phonological system, 2. schwa, 3. liaison, 4. prosody) and leaves little room for organisational variation or for interaction between the different sections of a given chapter. As a consequence, the reader is under the impression that the book does not raise any general issue in phonology, and merely reports a number of variational facts.

Data Collection

One problem raised by several authors is tied to the PFC-project itself, a highly ambitious project, whose aim is to provide “a reference corpus for French spoken throughout the world” (cf. p. 10). For this reason, PFC-surveys are available for many French-speaking countries around the world, and the PFC-surveys which have been carried out so far try to take not only sex and age, but also the identity of the dominant language (in the case of minority settings as reported in Klingler and Lyche or Walker), the level of education/social background, the adopted register, and, especially in the case of African French, the identity of the informant’s L1(s). For each survey point, “around ten speakers” are interviewed (cf. p. 10), and each interviewees’ group is in principle balanced for sex and divided into three age categories. Except in specific cases (e.g. when the informants are illiterate in French, cf. Klingler and Lyche), the interviewees

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4 Even though some authors manage to make different sections slightly interact with each other, e.g. Boutin, Gess and Guèye (pp. 59, 67) must acknowledge an interaction between the presence of a glottal stop at the beginning of vowel-initial words and the absence of liaison in their description of the French variety spoken by wolophone speakers.
have to proceed through four tasks: they have to read a word list (composed of 84 items, plus, possibly, a number of complementary words) and a short text, and participate in a formal (guided) and an informal conversation. However, even though the PFC-protocol is well thought-out and has great potential, several authors remain unsatisfied and mention that their data remain insufficient to determine for sure whether a given factor has a real influence on the French of their speakers. Thus even though the PFC-project is “mature” (p. 12) and the PFC-corpus huge, the amount of available, comparable data is still not big enough to cover all variation types (i.e. variation related to age, sex, social background, geography etc.); for each PFC-survey, the number of informants remains too small, and so is the amount of (comparable) data collected for each speaker. Such a problem, of course, is not PFC-specific: it also concerns other projects, other (even bigger) corpora and other disciplines. One question thus arises: how much data is needed in order to understand how a (phonological) system works? There is no denying that authentic data are needed, but there is no doubt either that our investigations will always require more data than (what may be) collected: our corpora, which are only corpora, i.e. carefully selected data, will never be exhaustive. Human beings (linguists) and their linguistic intuitions will always be required, especially since languages are in constant evolution.

Variation: Why?

The book, which provides interesting phonological material to think of, adopts a purely descriptive approach, and lists the phonological characteristics of

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5 Some authors make claims regarding theoretical issues, some of which could be discussed. For instance, Côté, when describing the French variety spoken in Trois-Rivières, argues that since /ɲ/ “generally” surfaces as [ŋ] in coda (which includes the word-final position) and /ŋ/ mainly appears as a word-final suffix in loanwords from English, there is no need to postulate the existence of two distinct phonemes /ŋ/ and /ɲ/. While this view is economical (less underlying representations), it remains to be shown whether it corresponds to a cognitive reality: do speakers really have only one phoneme?

Mainly for articulatory reasons, the same author refuses to include schwa in the vocalic system of the French spoken in Trois Rivières and claims that schwa and /œ/ are basically, i.e. articulatorily, one and the same phoneme, which, according to her, can be indexed for deletability: /œ/1 thus corresponds to a vowel which can be deleted and /œ/0 to one which can’t be. Her analysis however still makes a distinction between two phonological objects which show different behaviours. One may thus wonder why the deletable vowel /œ/1 is absent from the vocalic inventory given on page 239.
twelve French varieties, which are systematically checked against the phonological system of FR. Presumably, the descriptive perspective adopted in the volume is partly an editorial choice (which reflects the theory-neutral position of the PFC-project) and partly due to material constraints: if an in-depth theoretical account of the twelve varieties had been proposed in the volume, the book would have been much bigger.

The absence of theoretical consideration in the volume raises an issue, which is not specific to the field of phonology, namely: why study phonological variation at all? A priori, the objective of such an approach is to better understand what the boundaries of a given language are, i.e. what the essence of this language is. In other words, if A, B, C and D are identified as being varieties/dialects of the language L (which means that speakers of A, B, C and D can understand each other), they are bound to share a number of properties. The study of variation in this language will help us uncover precisely what they have in common, thereby help us understand what the core properties of this language are and why, for instance, E cannot be considered as a variety of L as well. In order to uncover what the core properties of (the phonology of) French are, and to which extent French may vary without becoming another language, it will be necessary to have recourse to phonological theory/-ies, and to the various tools they offer (representations, structures, computation, features and the like), so as to help us understand how linguistic variation works.

This book can thus be considered as a first, necessary step towards a better understanding of what “French” is. It raises a number of theoretically relevant issues like the representation of vocalic contrasts (based on melody vs. quantity; cf. the behaviour of mid-vowels), of schwa (as one vs. two different phonological objects), of word-boundaries (i.e. the shape of the prosodic architecture) or of processes like liaison among others.

References


6 Even though FR is presented more as a default reference point than as a well-established variety (cf. p. 2).
7 Which may be defined in terms of features, inventories, processes or something else.


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