

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# 1 Introduction: Methodological issues

---

## 1.1 Introduction

Whilst there has been a number of socio-historical linguistic studies of English there is relatively little which is comparable for French. Indeed French scholars have been comparatively slow to embrace sociolinguistics in general, perhaps for two main reasons. On the one hand, we may point to the strength of the normative tradition in France which has perpetuated the stance that anything outside *le bon usage* is not worthy of serious study.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there has long been in France a preoccupation with one kind of variation, namely dialectology and the production of linguistic atlases.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that there have not been studies of variation, including accounts of past periods of linguistic history; we need only think of Brunot's monumental history of the French language (1905–53), which displays a keen interest in, for example, usage of different genres and registers. Nevertheless, the treatment of variation has often been anecdotal and unsystematic, and has not been informed by the insights of modern sociolinguistic methodology.

The growth of interest in sociolinguistic variation in relation to contemporary French is associated, particularly from the 1970s on, with the work of non-French scholars, notably German (e.g. Söll 1985 [first edition 1974]; Hausmann 1975, Müller 1985) and subsequently British, Canadian and American linguists (e.g. Ashby 1981, 1991; Coveney 1996; Poplack 1989, 1992). In more recent times work on variation, and particularly on the spoken language, has gained in importance in France, especially with the work of members of the Groupe Aixois de Recherche en Syntaxe (GARS, now DELIC), and of scholars such as Gadet, who in 1997 edited a special number of the periodical *Langue Française* devoted to syntactic variation. Early impetus for investigating non-standard usages in the past came from the growth in studies of the characteristics of modern spoken French which led to an attempt, notably by German Romanists

<sup>1</sup> Note, for example, the normative implications of the title of an early study of non-standard usage, first published in 1929, Frei's *La Grammaire des fautes* (Frei 1982).

<sup>2</sup> One of the earliest studies of seventeenth-century variation by Veř (1911) typically focuses on regional variation.

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 1 Methodological issues

in the late 1970s and early 1980s, to determine whether these features were recent innovations or had a long historical tradition (see Chapter 2).

1.1.1 *The development of socio-historical linguistics*

Especially important to the development of socio-historical approaches to language have been the theoretical discussions of Suzanne Romaine which aim to cross-fertilize historical linguistics with sociolinguistics.<sup>3</sup> Romaine makes a major contribution towards the elaboration of a methodology for this discipline in her 1982 book *Socio-historical Linguistics: Its Status and Methodology*, which attempts to reconstruct a past state of English within its social context. She admits that the assumption of the homogeneity of language has been necessary in order to provide systematic accounts of language states on which sociolinguistics can build. Since, however, the contemporary language is demonstrably not homogeneous, she hypothesizes that language of the past showed the same variation. It is an essential principle of historical sociolinguistics that the linguistic forces which operate today are not unlike those of the past, that is, there is no reason for assuming that language did not vary in the same patterned way in the past as it does today. Moreover, while sociolinguistics has largely been elaborated to describe variation in speech, one can hypothesize that written language as evidenced in texts also varies in a patterned way.

For Romaine (1988: 1453) the main goal of socio-historical linguistics is ‘to investigate and provide an account of the forms and uses in which variation may manifest itself in a given speech community over time, and of how particular functions, uses and kinds of variation develop within particular languages, speech communities, social groups, networks and individuals’. From a methodological perspective there are two separate, albeit related, aims: ‘to develop a set of procedures for the reconstruction of language in its social context, and to use the findings of sociolinguistics as controls on the process of reconstruction and as a means of informing theories of change’. In other words, the findings of sociolinguistics may be used to help reconstruct past language states or explain how language changes. Romaine notes that Labov explicitly recognizes the second aim in his use of the findings of synchronic sociolinguistics to explain language change, but is not concerned – as we will centrally be in this book – with the reconstruction of language of the past in its social context. Labov (1994), for example, looks at current variation and its correlation with social structure and patterns of human interaction and notably at sound change in progress, and considers how this may be applied to the historical record (‘the use of the present to explain the past’) as a way of elaborating general principles of linguistic change. Milroy (1992: 5) similarly argues that our understanding

<sup>3</sup> Regrettably French scholars have on the whole made relatively little reference to her work.

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1.1 Introduction

3

of linguistic change can be greatly enhanced by observing recurrent patterns of spoken language as it is used around us in day-to-day contexts by live speakers, and aims to use this evidence in constructing a social model for the interpretation of language change. In his account more attention is given to the social side than in the Labovian account, which tends to be mainly system-orientated.

As regards the reconstruction of language in its social context, this may occur on at least two levels: at the macro-level there is the reconstruction of language in relation to society, and at the micro-level there is the reconstruction of linguistic form in relation to social meaning context. Romaine (1982) is perhaps the best example of an attempt to apply variationist theory to a problem of historical syntax; she argues forcefully that the historical data should be considered in their own right, regardless of the extent to which they reflect or are removed from the production of native speakers (1982: 122). Data may be provided by patterns of variation in speech and writing in contemporary societies and written texts of all kinds from earlier periods, including reports from historians and grammarians. One of the major methodological questions is how to extract social information from these and other sources.

Despite the relative neglect in France of the important body of sociolinguistic work written in English, whether synchronic or diachronic, scholars have nevertheless begun gradually to be interested in socio-historical studies of French. Research into past variation has been nurtured by members of the Groupe d'Études en Histoire de la Langue Française (GEHLF), who have worked, for example, on 'non-conventional' French (GEHLF 1992) and on syntactic variation in seventeenth-century travel accounts. Within GARS, André Valli has produced some historical studies of syntactic variation. Equally, the concern with historical sociolinguistics has gradually been reflected in the type of histories of the French language being written. A number of British scholars have recently produced histories of the French language which attempt to introduce a socio-historical dimension (Lodge 1993, Ayres-Bennett 1996a, Posner 1997), and Lodge has published on the history of the urban dialect of Paris (Lodge 1998).

Whilst Labov and Milroy have concerned themselves primarily with using the findings of sociolinguistics to inform theories of change, in this work we will concentrate particularly on reconstructing different varieties of seventeenth-century French. It will become evident that a number of aspects of Labovian quantitative approaches to sociolinguistics are highly problematic if we try to apply them to studies of past variation.<sup>4</sup>

1.1.2 *The scope of this book*

At first sight it might seem perverse to try and reconstruct variation in seventeenth-century French, since this period is generally characterized as one

<sup>4</sup> On Labovian methodology, see, for example, Labov 1972a, Hudson 1980: 143–90.

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 1 Methodological issues

of rigid codification and standardization, concerned with the establishment of the norms of written French, and thus of the elimination of variation. In fact, while promoting good usage, the authors of grammars and observations and remarks on the French language frequently characterize or criticize ‘non-standard’ usages – what people actually say although according to the norm being advanced they should not – and from such comments we may begin to reconstruct some of the different varieties. Paradoxically, then, in such a climate of standardization there is hypersensitivity towards small degrees of variation, thus making the seventeenth century a surprisingly rich source of information for socio-historical investigation. If sixteenth-century grammarians such as Meigret, Ramus and Estienne already associate certain usages with specified groups in society, they are as yet relatively tolerant of variation. For instance, Meigret (1550: 93) accepts both *je laisserai* and *je lairrai* as future forms of the verb ‘to leave’. Once variation becomes increasingly stigmatized in the seventeenth century, the number of comments on non-standard usages multiplies, especially in the work of the *remarqueurs*, that is, authors of volumes of *remarques* or observations on the French language.<sup>5</sup>

There is much evidence to suggest that the *remarqueurs* were aware of sociolinguistic variation and the importance of selecting the correct word or expression according to the nature of the interlocutors and the context of speaking or writing. Here are two typical examples:

Et en effet, la plupart des mots sont bons ou mauvais selon le lieu où ils sont placez; selon les personnes qui les disent, & selon celles à qui on les dit. Par exemple: *atrabile*, qui seroit un tres-mauvais mot dans la conversation des Dames & des Cavaliers, est un tres-bon mot dans un traité de Medecine, où il s’agit du tempérament des hommes. (Ménage 1676: 339)

Les termes y sont marquez chacun selon leur caractere propre, & plusieurs y sont appelez bas & populaires, sans qu’on prétende pour cela les condamner: Car tous les mots ont leur place, souvent il est à propos de se servir d’expressions communes, selon la nature du sujet; quelquefois mesmes elles donnent de la force aux choses.

D’ailleurs nostre Langue abonde en toutes sortes de façons de parler, elle en a pour le stile médiocre & pour le sublime, pour le sérieux & pour le burlesque; il faut tâcher d’en faire le discernement: & c’est en quoy consiste presque toute la science des paroles. (Andry de Boisregard 1689: Preface)

As we shall see, different authors of observations adopt different attitudes towards variation and give priority to different types of variation according to their own interests and purposes (see also Ayres-Bennett 2003). However, from their discussions a number of key parameters emerge which will be the main focus of our study: the relationship between written and spoken French; variation according to socio-economic status or social class; variation according

<sup>5</sup> For a description of the genre, see, for example, Ayres-Bennett 1987, 1991, 2002.

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1.2 Collecting data

5

to register, style, or genre;<sup>6</sup> variation according to the sex of the speaker; variation according to the age of the speaker; the relationship between variation and change. One major preoccupation of at least some of the *remarqueurs*, notably Ménage, is regional variation, excluded from the present study for the reasons outlined in the Preface.<sup>7</sup> It was also decided not to treat some of the more minor types of variation discussed during the century, such as usage according to the technical or specialized field,<sup>8</sup> differences of usage between poetry and prose, or between concrete and figurative contexts.

## 1.2 Collecting data

Sociolinguistic methodology requires a number of stages in preparation for the collection, processing and interpretation of the data, including the selection of the appropriate speakers, circumstances and linguistic variables (cf. Hudson 1980: 144). There are a number of obvious problems with trying to apply a Labovian-style quantitative model, based on the selection of representative informants and the composition of a balanced corpus, to the study of a past language state. Inevitably the socio-historical linguist is obliged to adopt methodologies which would be deemed unacceptable for a sociolinguistic analysis of contemporary French. In this section we will discuss problems associated with identifying appropriate textual sources. In addition we will consider the difficulties of deciding upon the variables and particularly of treating syntactic issues in a socio-historical perspective.

1.2.1 *The question of sources and defining a corpus*

One of the major preoccupations throughout this study will be the question of sources: what documents can be used as sources of the non-standard in

<sup>6</sup> There is much variation in the way the terms *register*, *style* and *genre* are applied (for discussion in two different perspectives, see Lyons 1977, chapter 14 and Biber 1995: 8–9). Here *register* is used to refer to socio-situational variation, characterized by the degree of formality or informality of the speech or writing; the degree of formality will depend on factors such as the relationship between the interlocutors and the nature of the setting. *Style* is used to refer to a characteristic way of using language, especially with regard to literary language, while *genre* denotes a category of texts which are similar in form, style or subject matter.

<sup>7</sup> While dialects were still spoken by the majority, French was spoken in most of the towns in the north of France. In the south, French was known, but was a second language. Racine, for example, speaks of the difficulty of understanding and being understood by the locals once he got as far as Lyon (Brunot 1905–53: V, 48). During the century new territories, including successive areas of Alsace (1648–81), Artois and Roussillon (1659), Flanders (1668), and Franche-Comté (1679), were added to the kingdom, thereby expanding the linguistic diversity. This was, however, a period of increasingly autocratic and centralized government, culminating in the personal reign of Louis XIV (1661–1715). The French language came to be an instrument of social conformity. The socially upwardly mobile and provincials wanting to integrate themselves at the court turned to works such as Vaugelas's *Remarques* to learn 'good usage'.

<sup>8</sup> For a study of the argot of the criminal fraternity 1455–1850, see Sainéan 1907.

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

seventeenth-century France? This, according to Labov, is the fundamental methodological problem at the heart of historical sociolinguistics (Romaine 1982: 122). Labov laments the fact that historical linguists have no control over their data, that it is a matter of accident which texts survive, so that 'the great art of the historical linguist is to make the best of this bad data'. Milroy (1992: 45–7) is so concerned about what he considers to be the inherent limitations of historical enquiry – the problem of using written texts and the impoverished nature of the data which survive from past periods – that he argues that the best way in which to observe, in a detailed way, the contexts in which linguistic change takes place is to focus rather on present-day data. Romaine, however, argues that the study of historical sociolinguistics is not fruitless. In her view historical data are only 'bad' if an invidious comparison is made with data from authentic spoken language; instead historical data should be considered as valid in their own right (Romaine 1988: 1454).

It is, of course, not only a question of the quality of the data; data may be entirely absent. The problem is naturally most acute when we come to consider the question of sources of spoken French, since inevitably we are obliged to rely on written texts which at best can only be an imperfect reflection of the spoken language of the past (see Chapter 2). We are, in addition, forced to compromise on another of our principles as historians of French, namely that when carrying out a diachronic study one should always seek to compare texts of similar genres or discourse types, since in looking at the history of spoken French comparison is made between data gleaned from contemporary recordings and written textual sources. Other studies have shown, however, that providing one is aware of all the potential problems and does not attempt to make inflated claims about the nature of spoken language of the past, attempts to look at the history of spoken French can be productive. For example, Fleischman (e.g. Fleischman 1990), analysing tense usage in medieval texts intended for oral performance, has shown convincingly that the apparently bewildering mixture of present and past tenses which is so characteristic of certain medieval texts is equally a feature of contemporary spoken narratives.

The problems associated with the use of written texts are not restricted to examining the history of spoken French; written texts are also problematic as sources of variation and change. In the case of phonological change, for example, the recording of the new variant in writing may represent a rather late stage in the change, once it has been accepted into the writing system, rather than innovation.

The necessity of relying on those written texts which through chance have survived to this day poses questions as to how reliable and representative these sources are. Some of these problems are evident in Romaine's selection of texts (1982: 114) for her study of variation in relative clauses in Middle Scots texts

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1.2 Collecting data

7

between 1530 and 1550 with a view to establishing differences between genres according to whether they are more or less representative of familiar usage of the period. Surprisingly, there is no discussion of the rationale behind her choice of corpus, which comprises just seven texts. Of these seven texts three are chosen to illustrate official and legal prose; there is one example of literary narrative prose, one example of epistolary prose, one example representing both courtly or serious verse and moralizing religious verse, and one example of comic verse. In short, we are offered no explanation as to why these texts were selected, or of the extent to which they may be viewed as typical or representative of their genre.

The general problems we have discussed so far are compounded by the fact that there is a relative paucity of documents illustrating informal, 'substandard' or semi-literate usages dating from the seventeenth century compared with later periods (cf. Martineau and Mougeon 2003). For the eighteenth century we can point, for example, to the journal of Ménétra (Roche 1982, Seguin 1985), the memoirs of Valentin Jamerey-Duval (Jamerey-Duval 1981) or of Pierre Prion (Le Roy Ladurie and Ranum 1985), the writings of 'inexperienced' or 'clumsy' writers at the time of the Revolution (Branca-Rosoff 1989, Branca-Rosoff and Schneider 1994), or plays such as Marivaux's *Télémaque travesti* (Valli 1984). This is, however, compensated for to some extent by the wealth of metalinguistic texts (see below).

In each chapter we shall consider the potential sources and discuss the problems associated with them. In view of the difficulties with textual sources, I thought it unwise to rely exclusively on one type of source; rather convergence of evidence from different types of source was sought. This means that wherever possible, confirmation of the status of a variant is sought through comparing evidence from different sources and looking for indication of convergence. For example, in Chapter 3 I consider the extent to which the dictionary style label 'burlesque' coincides with usage in actual burlesque texts. In this way it is hoped to minimize some of the difficulties with the data. This is not to say that there are not potential dangers with such an approach. First and foremost there is the risk of circularity, that is deciding that a certain usage must be appropriate for a certain genre, style, register, sex or age, perhaps on the basis of modern usage, and then considering that the dictionary which uses this label must be the most faithful. Equally, convergence between sources may suggest the emergence of a stereotype which may be exploited, for example, for comic purposes (see below pp. 30–31).

Throughout this work the comments made in metalinguistic texts are set beside usage in other kinds of texts. These metalinguistic observations frequently constitute the starting point of our discussion by indicating the linguistic variables appropriate for analysis. The metalinguistic texts exploited comprise a range of documents including volumes of observations and *remarques* on the



Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

French language, dictionaries, formal grammars, and linguistic commentaries, notably on grammatical texts.

Perhaps the most interesting and useful amongst these as sources of variation are the volumes of observations and remarks on the French language, since they offer a plethora of information about contemporary non-standard usages in their criticism of *mauvais usage* (see Ayres-Bennett 2003). The founder of the genre, Vaugelas (1647), characterizes himself as a simple observer of usage, and presents his comments in a series of randomly ordered, generally short, remarks about individual points of doubtful usage. While subsequent *remarqueurs* adapt the format to their own needs (an alphabetical presentation is adopted, for example, by Alemand (1688) and Andry de Boisregard (1689, 1693)), they continue to focus on areas of uncertainty – or variation – in contemporary usage.<sup>9</sup> Thirteen volumes of observations were selected for our main corpus; these are listed in the Appendix (I:A).

The three major monolingual dictionaries of the last two decades of the century constitute a second important source of variation (Richelet 1680, Furetière 1690, Académie Française 1694).<sup>10</sup> To these were added data from the dictionaries of Nicot (1606), Cotgrave (1611) and Oudin (1640) as appropriate (Appendix, I:B). *Marques d'usage* in dictionaries (rendered henceforth as 'style labels') have received considerable attention over the past fifteen years (Bray 1986, Glatigny 1990a, 1998). In assessing the judgments made about a lexical item, the policy of the particular lexicographer and his attitude towards variation must be borne in mind; for example, Furetière's dictionary (1690) has a much more encyclopaedic quality than those of Richelet or the Academy. Moreover, different lexicographers place different emphases on different parameters; thus while Furetière's concern is primarily with the social class of the speaker employing a particular word or expression, Richelet is more interested in questions of register and genre (see Chapter 3).

Formal grammars, especially those intended for foreigners, tend on the whole to adopt a more normative approach, and therefore to contain less information about non-standard usages. Nevertheless, in particular the grammars of Maupas (1618) and Oudin (1632), and to a lesser extent, Irson (1662), constitute important sources of data (Appendix, I:C).

<sup>9</sup> So great was the authority of *remarqueurs* such as Vaugelas, Ménage and Bouhours that their observations tended to be copied and incorporated into the works of their successors, who did not necessarily observe contemporary usage themselves. I have therefore excluded from my primary corpus compilations of observations; D'Aisy's two volumes (1685a, 1685b), for example, principally comprise a summary of the observations of these three *remarqueurs* on French grammar and style.

<sup>10</sup> The dictionaries of Nicot, Cotgrave, Richelet, Furetière and the Academy were searched electronically using the CD-ROM, *Dictionnaires du XVII<sup>e</sup> et XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles* produced by Champion (1998). Oudin (1640) was consulted on the CD-ROM, *L'Atelier historique de la langue française* produced by Redon (2001).



Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 1.2 Collecting data

9

We also make reference to linguistic commentaries, particularly here the commentaries on the observations and remarks (Streicher 1936).<sup>11</sup> These are especially valuable in tracking changes of usage since the original comment was made (Appendix, I:D).

Other types of metalinguistic text are exploited in the different chapters as appropriate. For example, I shall discuss the important contribution of conversation manuals in Chapter 2. Also consulted are works on French pronunciation, works on spelling (especially those which consider spelling reforms), works on versification, and a number of other miscellaneous works which discuss questions of style or usage (see Appendix II).

In each chapter the data from metalinguistic texts are complemented by information from other sources. These may be literary texts, and the database known as *FRANTEXT* has been particularly valuable for researching usage in these.<sup>12</sup> A wide range of non-literary texts has also been exploited, including journals, popular pamphlets, informal correspondence and translations. In each case the advantages and disadvantages of the particular source are discussed.

1.2.2 *Deciding upon the variables*

A major difficulty with researching variation in the past is selecting the variables for analysis. Once again the problems associated with conducting sociolinguistic studies of contemporary French are intensified when we research the past. The present study is limited to the reconstruction of a number of key features for each parameter of variation which serve as case studies; the intention is not to attempt a reconstruction of every detail of every variety of seventeenth-century French, since this would take us far beyond the scope of the present volume.

Two main strategies have been adopted here for selecting which linguistic features will be studied. On the one hand I examined the metalinguistic texts to identify areas of variation, and this was particularly helpful where a topic

<sup>11</sup> An example of a commentary on a literary text is Ménage's observations on Malherbe's poetry, published in editions of the poems from 1666 onwards (Malherbe 1666). Some of the comments are concerned with what is appropriate for poetry, but others make more general comments about variation. See also Ayres-Bennett and Caron (1996) on the Academy's commentary on Vaugelas's translation of Quintus Curtius Rufus' life of Alexander.

<sup>12</sup> Base textuelle *FRANTEXT*, CNRS-ATILF (<http://atilf.inalfr.fr/franxtxt.htm>). Full details of the size of the corpus and bibliographical details of the texts may be found on the website. It is important to remember that texts are continually being added to this database and that the statistics cited from it in this book relate to its contents in the period during which the present research was conducted. Account must also be taken of the edition selected for inclusion in the database, which may date from the seventeenth century or be a more recent or modern one. In addition, generally only one edition of each text is included, making the corpus unsuitable for tracking changes through different editions. In exploiting *FRANTEXT*, I had to take account of possible variant spellings (e.g. *savoir/sçavoir; vrai/vray*). When searching for occurrences of particular verbs, '&c' placed before the infinitive of the verb allowed the search for all conjugated forms of the verb (providing it was a verb form recognized by the program); similarly '&m' permitted the identification of all the declined forms of nouns and adjectives.

Cambridge University Press

052182088X - Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

Excerpt

[More information](#)

was discussed in a number of different metalinguistic texts. On the other hand, especially in the case of features of spoken French I wanted to consider whether certain features which are said to typify contemporary spoken French were also characteristic of our period. This is not without potential problems, not least since there is a lack of agreement as to what the defining characteristics of modern spoken French are (see Chapter 2). Finally, I have included in the case studies a range of different kinds of features including phonological, morphological and syntactic questions; syntactic variation poses particular problems which will be discussed in the next section.

### 1.2.3 *Syntactic variation in a socio-historical perspective*

There has been considerable debate as to whether Labovian sociolinguistic methodology, elaborated for phonology, can successfully be applied to syntactic research (Sankoff 1973, Lavandera 1978, Romaine 1981, 1982, 1984). For Labov, social and stylistic variation presupposes that you can say the same thing in different ways (that is, that variants have the same referential meaning but are different in their social or stylistic significance; Labov adopts a truth-definitional point of view). The concept of the linguistic variable has been successfully applied to phonological variation because of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign; thus the meaning of the word *père* is unchanged whether the 'r' is pronounced as a uvular fricative or a rolled trill. In the case of syntax the problem of determining identity of meaning for all variants of the variable is much more acute. Gadet (1997b: 11) suggests that this necessitates a looser interpretation of functional equivalence, namely 'dire des choses proches à propos d'un même référent'.

Romaine (1981: 15–17) draws a distinction between on the one hand morpho-syntactic variables of the type of negation in Montreal French, or deletion of the complementizer *que*, which may be conditioned linguistically by both phonological and grammatical features and which are conditioned by social and stylistic factors, and on the other hand what she terms 'pure' syntactic variables, such as the agentless passive, which she hypothesises may be conditioned not by social and stylistic factors, but simply by syntactic factors. In other words, the variation between active and passive is conditioned only by surface structure constraints, and does not convey any social or stylistic information. Similar doubts about the social significance of syntactic variation are raised by Cheshire (1996: 2) and Gadet (1997b: 9).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Working within a different framework Berrendonner, Le Guern and Puech (1983: 20) also contend that not all variants correlate with social factors; indeed, variation may not connote anything in particular. They argue that if social correlations alone are sought, other explanations may be overlooked, and they themselves place emphasis on 'des considérations intra-systématiques'. In their view, 'une langue est une polyhiérarchie de sous-systèmes, et certains de ces sous-systèmes offrent aux locuteurs des *choix* entre diverses variantes'.