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What can be learned about the grammar of French from the corpora of French spoken outside France?

PLENARVORTRAG/KEYNOTE SPEECH

Abstract

French is a rather particular language as far as corpora are concerned: they appeared late in comparison with other major European languages (English of course, but also Italian or German). In comparison to hexagonal French, corpora began to be gathered much earlier (and are still more numerous) for French outside France (first from North American French in the 70s and a bit later from different African French varieties in the 80s). Two reasons for this can be offered:

- 1) French linguists remain a little “normative” as far as nonstandard varieties are concerned, even if they pretend not to be,
- 2) Francophone linguists working on unfixed oral varieties have no other way than gathering corpora to document their grammatical specificities (as there is no tradition of description).

This paper will show several examples of widely received assertions which, thanks to corpus data, have been proven to be totally or partly false, in particular concerning the grammatical effects of contact. This presentation will lead us to ask questions which were not generally asked before corpora became an ordinary way to describe languages:

- 1) What are linguistic varieties? 2) To what extent do they differ from each other linguistically? and 3) How wide-reaching should the appellation “French” be given the extent of variation found in the data?