

The loss of complex pronouns in Québec French : A formal account

1 A change in progress in Québec French

Québec French (QF) has a dual paradigm of strong (non-clitic) plural pronouns, which can be simple or complex. As shown below, only 3rd person simple pronouns show a gender contrast.

	Simple	Complex	
1	<i>Nous</i>	<i>Nous-autres</i>	“us”
2	<i>Vous</i>	<i>Vous-autres</i>	“you”
3F	<i>Elles</i>	<i>Eux-autres</i>	“them”
3M	<i>Eux</i>		

Table 1: Strong plural pronouns in Québec French

Blondeau (2011) and Blondeau et al. (2021) documented the sharp decrease of complex pronouns in Montréal French from 92% in 1971 to 48% in 2012 (30% for speakers aged 18-25). However, no formal account of this ongoing change was provided. This paper aims at filling this gap.

2 Research questions

Since the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s, there has been increased exposure to Standard French (SF) in Québec, thanks to higher levels of education, literacy and media consumption. Moreover, globalization and immigration resulted in increased contacts with non-local varieties of French, notably European and North-African varieties of French as well as Haitian French. However, while the combination of these external factors certainly contributed to the rapid rise of simple forms in QF, a number of questions remain: 1- What is the nature of the simple/complex distinction ? 2- Is the loss of complex pronouns simply the result of their replacement by the SF simple variants or is it the result of a more profound change in the pronominal system?

3 Québec French complex pronouns as clitics

We argue that, while SF’s inventory of strong pronouns includes both singular and plural forms, in QF, this inventory is limited to singular forms, as shown in Table 2.

	Standard French		Québec French	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1	<i>Moi</i>	<i>Nous</i>	<i>Moi</i>	–
2	<i>Toi</i>	<i>Vous</i>	<i>Toi</i>	–
3F	<i>Elle</i>	<i>Elles</i>	<i>Elle</i>	–
3M	<i>Lui</i>	<i>Eux</i>	<i>Lui</i>	–

Table 2 : Strong pronouns in Standard and Québec French

While simple pronouns are nominal heads (1), QF complex pronouns are in fact weak forms generated directly under D (2), and cliticized on *autres*, which acts as a host for the proclitic.

(1) [DP [NP *nous*]]

(2) [DP *nous* [CarP *autres* [NP PRO]]]

4 Supporting arguments

Autres as a dummy host First, this analysis accounts for the differences between SF and QF complex pronouns. In SF, *autres* is relatively rare and used with a class marker (*femmes* in (3)) to indicate contrast (Hilgert 2012). In contrast, in QF, the use of complex pronouns is far from being rare (Morin 1982) and *autres* is devoid of any semantic contribution (Tremblay 2020).

(3) **Nous autres femmes**, nous avons un sens que les hommes ne possèdent pas.

“We women have a sense that men don’t have.”(Mauriac C., cited in Hilgert, 2012)

Regularity of the paradigm. Second, unlike affixes, clitics do not present arbitrary gaps (Zwicky & Pullum 1983). QF is unlike Spanish (4), where complex pronouns are lexicalized and restricted to 1st and 2nd person pronouns. In QF, *autres* is used across the paradigm (5).

- (4) a. Nosotras/nosotros *nos Spanish
 b. Vosotras/vosotros *vos
 c. *ellasotras/*ellosotros ellas/ellos
- (5) a. Nous autres nous SF and QF
 b. Vous autres vous
 c. Eux-autres elles/eux

Phonological reduction Third, in QF, the pronouns *nous* and *vous* can be phonologically reduced as in [nyzo:t], [nəzo:t] or even [nzo:t], but are never accentuated.

Gender neutralization Finally, unlike other Romance languages which can mark both gender and number on determiners (eg Spanish *las=l+a+s*), French (6) marks either gender (*la, le, une, un*) or number (*les, des*), but not both (**las*). This generalization also holds for accusative clitic pronouns as shown in (7), which is unsurprising under the assumption that clitic pronouns are generated under D.

- (6) a. La/le/les Definite determiners (SF and QF)
 b. Une/un/des Indefinite determiners (SF and QF)
- (7) Je **la/le/les** vois. Accusative clitics (SF and QF)

Thus, the neutralization of the gender contrast in *eux-autres*, as shown in (8), is compatible with the view that *eux* is a clitic generated under D.

- (8) Putain c'est la mode les filles se disent ça entre **eux autres**.

‘Whore, it’s trendy, the girls call themselves that’ (027F60, Corpus FRAN-HOMA-2012)

5 A change in the paradigm

We argue that the loss of complex pronouns is the result of the reanalysis of clitics as non-clitics:

- (9) [DP **nous** [_{CarP} *autres* [_{NP} pro]]] -> [DP [_{NP} **nous**]]

At Stage 1, the QF inventory of strong pronouns is limited to singular forms, but at Stage 2, this inventory includes plural forms, but doesn’t show the SF gender contrast in the 3 person plural.

	Stage 1		Stage 2	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1	<i>Moi</i>	–	<i>Moi</i>	<i>Nous</i>
2	<i>Toi</i>	–	<i>Toi</i>	<i>Vous</i>
3F	<i>Elle</i>	–	<i>Elle</i>	<i>Eux</i>
3M	<i>Lui</i>	–	<i>Lui</i>	

Table 3: Evolution of the QF strong pronoun paradigm

This analysis accounts for the fact that young speakers, unlike older generations, use the reanalyzed form *eux* to refer to female antecedents, as in (10).

- (10) Je suis avec **eux**. (F26, pointing at two middle-aged women in a restaurant)
 ‘I’m with them »

References Blondeau, H. 2011. *Cet « autres » qui nous distingue*. Québec:PUL. Blondeau et al 2021. *Pronouns on the move*. NAWAV 2021. Hilgert, E. 2012. *Nous autres/vous autres/eux autres, pronoms catégoriels*. SHS Web of Conference 1, 1777-1792. Morin, Y.C. 1982. De quelques [I] non étymologiques dans le français du Québec. *RQL* 2.2 9-47. Tremblay, M. 2020. Variation dans le système pronominal gallo-roman. *Arborescences*, 158-179. Zwicky, A. M. & G. K. Pullum. 1983. « Cliticization vs. inflection: The case of English *n’t* ». *Language* 59 (3) : 502–513