Social Stratification as Semantic Microvariation: Negation and Negative Concord in Gallo-Romance Dialects

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This presentation argues that semantic microvariation methodology can provide new insight into the syntax, semantics, pragmatics and sociolinguistics of negative concord constructions. Negative concord is a linguistic phenomenon whose properties have been heavily studied in both sociolinguistics and semantics. However, in the past, data concerning the use of concord structures by speakers of different social groups has not generally been considered to be relevant for their formal semantic analysis. Likewise, detailed studies of syntactic and pragmatic differences between negation markers and n-words are rarely taken into account in sociolinguistic studies, since research in this domain is usually devoted to studying distributional patterns of truth conditional and discourse-pragmatically equivalent expressions (Labov 1966, 1972).

I present a comparative study of negation marking and optional negative concord in three Gallo-Romance dialects: Piedmontese (a Gallo-Italic dialect spoken in Northern Italy with two sentential negation markers: pa, nen) (1a), Picard (a Oïl dialect spoken in Northern France with two negation markers: point, mie) (2), and Montréal French (a Oïl dialect spoken in Québec, Canada with a single negation marker: pas) (3).

(1)
a. I l'hai (nen) vist gnun.
b. I l'hai (pa) vist gnun.
'I saw nobody' (lit. 'not nobody')

(2)
a. O n'aveu (point) rien d'eute à foaire.
b. O n'aveu (mie) rien d'eute à foaire.
'We had nothing else to do' (like 'not nothing')

(3)
On avait (pas) rien d'autre à faire.
'We had nothing else to do' (lit. 'not nothing')

Using a combination of grammaticality/felicity judgment fieldwork studies and quantitative studies of sociolinguistic variation, I argue that there exist fundamental similarities in the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the constructions in (1-3). I give a formal syntactic and semantic analysis of these constructions, and discuss its consequences for the interpretation of patterns of social stratification of negative concord in Montréal French found in sociolinguistic studies (Daoust-Blais 1975, Lemieux 1985, Burnett et al. 2015), and, more generally, for connections between quantitative sociolinguistics and formal semantics/pragmatics.