

A Comparative Study of Subject-Verb Agreement in Subject Relative Clauses in Acadian French: The Interplay of Internal and External Factors

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There is a tendency in informal spoken French towards non-agreement with a plural head in subject relative clauses (see Frei 1929 and Bauche 1920/46 for European French and Mougeon & Beniak 1991 for Ontario French), illustrated in 1:

- (1) Il y a des choses qui **fait** peur. (AC-02)
“There are things which makes [sic] you scared.”

However, it is difficult to determine the extent of the phenomenon since most varieties have lost distinct singular vs. plural morphology for the 3rd person: quantitative analysis is largely limited to data for irregular verbs which retain different singular vs. plural forms. However, several varieties of Atlantic Canada Acadian French do preserve number distinctions throughout the paradigm and provide robust data for quantitative analysis (Flikeid & Péronnet 1989).

We compare usage in large sociolinguistic corpora for Acadian communities which differ in type and degree of dialect contact: 1) Grosses Coques, Nova Scotia, the most homogeneous and isolated community across several centuries; 2) L’Anse-à-Canards, Newfoundland, a more recently established community founded by both Acadian and late 19th century Metropolitan French settlers; and 3) Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Québec, a community with a more diversified, long-term history of dialect contact.

Although there is near-categorical retention of traditional agreement patterns for Grosses Coques and L’Anse-à-Canards in all other contexts, there are strikingly different results for subject relatives. Whereas Grosses Coques maintains plural marking at 90%, L’Anse-à-Canards shows almost the reverse pattern: default singular marking prevails in subject relatives except in the presence of one subtype of plural head, which triggers subject-verb agreement. While Îles-de-la-Madeleine tends toward default singulars in subject relatives, it exhibits more variation than the other communities. We explain these differences in terms of a) settlement history and dialect contact; and b) the relationship between subject-verb agreement and the degree of retention of overt verbal morphology more generally.