

Prosodic Change in the Vernacular of the French Suburban Youth

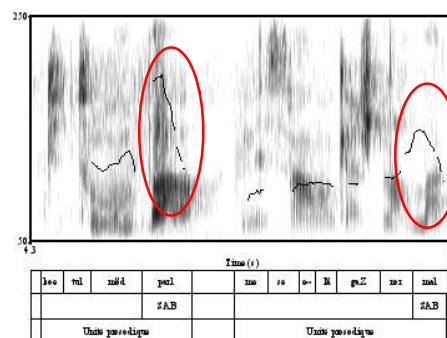
This paper presents some results of the research on the prosodic specificities of the vernacular of French suburban youth. The emphasis is on the acoustic and perceptual analysis of some particular prosodic patterns which are frequently used in the suburban youth speech and are identified by non suburban French speakers like social marks of this group.

Since the early ninties, many studies claimed that youth living the poor multi-ethnic suburbs situated near large cities in France (so-called *banlieues*) spoke “their own variety of French”, characterized by specific lexical, segmental, and especially by specific intonation features, commonly called “suburban accent” (the accent of the *banlieues*). Despite the commonly shared assumption that the accent of this marginalized population is “recognizable by all French native speakers” (Jamin M. 2005, p.3), it have been rather neglected by linguists, who have preferred focusing on the variation on the lexical level.

This study investigates the suburban youth accent from phonetic and sociolinguistic points of view. The corpus consists of 35 hours of speech realized by 41 young people living in the suburb of Rouen (130 km far from Paris) in 3 different communicative situations: formal communication (interviews), informal communication between peers, storytelling.

On the basis of an acoustic and perceptual study, we show that the variety of French, spoken by this suburban youth, is characterized by a specific prosodic pattern, that is *essential* to the suburban accent identification by the listeners. This pattern is characterized by a sharp fall of F0 (at list -64 semi-tones per second), located on the final syllable of a prosodic unit, as illustrated in this figure.

These rising-falling contours induce the highest suburban accent identification when they are following by a silent pause and are realized on a syllable without significant lengthening (which is necesssary in this position in French). However, this lack of syllable lengthening isn't necessary for their identification by listeners. Furthermore, when this falling contours are not following by a silent pause, they induce greater the suburban accent identification if they are realized on a syllable **with** significant lengthening.



Sociolinguistic analysis show that this contours are not used by all suburban youth with the same frequency, but present an important stylistic and social stratification. Their frequency of use depends on the degree of informants' involvement in the street culture, which depends on their origin, social level, the time they spend outside and other factors. The degree of informants' integration or identification with the subculture influences their adoption of this accent feature. As far the social stratification is concerned, the use of this accent feature is closely correlated with the degree of formality of speech, but also its degree of interactivity: more the speech is interactive and less is formal, more the use of this prosodic variable is frequent. Therefore, we suggest that this rising-falling countour is used by this group to manage the interactivity in the speech. But his primary fonction is nevertheless to be a social marker, as far as it reflects the position of this youth towards their suburb and their peer group, their integration into this group and into the street culture.

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