Introduction:
The Linguistic Study of Acadian French

We are pleased to present this special issue devoted to Acadian French, a variety of North American French spoken mainly in Atlantic Canada. Acadian French differs linguistically from its better-known neighbour, Quebec French, due in part to the different European origins of the colonists: the majority of Acadian settlers came from the Centre-Ouest region of France, whereas Quebec colonists were more diversified, with substantial numbers of settlers from north of the Loire Valley. Even more important than the geographical origins of Acadian French is the relative degree of isolation of its speakers over the course of more than three centuries. Acadian French has preserved features lost in other French varieties spoken in North America and in Europe, and so provides a window on the past. For instance, until fairly recently most Acadian varieties preserved the traditional morphology of the verb: for example, the first person plural je ... -ons (je parlons ‘we speak’), and the third person plural ils ... -ont (ils parlent ‘they speak’). This usage began to decline in France centuries ago (Beaulieu and Cichocki, this issue; Flicheid and Peronnet 1989; King 2005). Similarly, the simple-past tense, the passé simple — as in ils coupient ‘they cut’ — survived in most Acadian varieties well into the 20th century. This usage has almost totally disappeared from oral French spoken elsewhere in the francophone world (Haden 1948; Flicheid 1997).

In other ways, Acadian French is innovative, having had limited contact with normative French over the centuries. This provides the setting for changes nascent in colloquial French to become advanced in Acadian varieties, such as use of a default singular form of the verb in subject relatives (e.g., les pêcheurs qui va à la côte ‘fishers who goes [sic] to the shore’) instead of matching the number of the subject (King 2005). Some of this innovation involves the linguistic effects of contact with English, including high levels of lexical borrowing (Flicheid 1989a; King 2000) and the development of what some have argued to be a mixed code, chiac, spoken in the Moncton area of southeastern New Brunswick (Perrot 2001).

Today Acadian communities are scattered throughout the four Atlantic provinces. They are found on western Newfoundland’s Port-au-Port Peninsula, in the northwest, northeast, and southeast of New Brunswick, in the Evangeline and Tignish regions of western Prince Edward Island, and in pockets of Nova Scotia ranging from Chéticamp, Île Madame, and Pomquet in the northeast of the
province to Baie Sainte-Marie and Pubnico in the southwest. As well, there are speakers of Acadian French in areas peripheral to the Atlantic Provinces: the Gaspé Peninsula, the Magdalen Islands (Îles-de-la-Madeleine), and in the northeast United States. A related variety, Cajun French, is spoken in Louisiana.

The social circumstances of Acadian speakers in the Atlantic Provinces — degree of contact with external varieties of French, degree of contact with varieties of English, access to schooling in French, use of French in the workplace — vary considerably across regions. For instance, contact with external varieties of French came relatively late to Newfoundland Acadian communities, dating from the 1970s, whereas there is a long history of such contact in the Chéticamp area of Nova Scotia and in the Moncton area of New Brunswick. In northeastern New Brunswick, there is relatively little contact with English, for example the Shippagan area is almost 100% francophone; at the other extreme, Pubnico in Nova Scotia and Tignish in Prince Edward Island have French as a minority language in the community, as well as in the province at large. Thus, Acadian French puts the researcher in the privileged position of being able to test the effects of differing degrees of contact. With regard to the linguistic phenomena mentioned above, the traditional morphology is well preserved in the Newfoundland variety but to a lesser extent in northeastern New Brunswick; the passé simple has disappeared fairly recently from southeastern New Brunswick but remains vibrant in Baie Sainte-Marie, Nova Scotia (Flikeid 1997). Similarly, the effects of English vary considerably from region to region: as previously mentioned, the Moncton area has been the subject of quite a number of studies of English influence on French, whereas such influence is more or less non-existent in the northeast of New Brunswick.

Surprisingly, little research on Acadian French appeared in print prior to the 1980s. Very early dialect descriptions (Geddes 1908) and dissertations involving functionalist analyses of the phonology (Lucci 1972; Ryan 1981) and morphology (Gesner 1979; Péronnet 1989; Ryan 1982) along with Massignon’s mid-century lexical survey (published as Massignon 1962) formed the bulk of the publications. Indeed, Gesner (1986), in his Bibliographie annotée de linguistique acadienne, was able to provide comprehensive descriptions of all of the existing literature, on all levels of language and including unpublished student papers, in only 89 pages.

The situation has changed considerably since the mid-1980s. Today there are large variationist sociolinguistic corpora for varieties spoken in all four Atlantic provinces: those constructed by Beaulieu (1993) and Flikeid (1984) for New Brunswick, Flikeid (1989b) for Nova Scotia, and King (1985, 1991) for Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island. Ongoing research programs continue to exploit these corpora.

Other databases of recorded speech have also been established. The Centre de recherche en linguistique appliquée (CRLA) at the Université de Moncton
houses a number of corpora. Acadian data are part of the Base de données lexicographiques panfrancophone project (BDLP) at Université Laval. See also Falkert (2005), Péronnet and Kasparian (1998), and Wiesmath (2006).

 Appropriately, Acadian French is currently the object of study in many areas: computational linguistics (Chevalier et al. 2004; Cichocki 2006), dialectology (Brasseur 2000; Péronnet et al. 1998), discourse analysis (Butler 1990; Boudreau and White 2004), grammatical theory (Beaulieu and Balcom 2002; King 2005), acquisition of the referential variety (Balcom, this issue), lexicography (Cormier 1999), the sociology of language (Allard and Landry 1998; Boudreau and Dubois 2004), and variationist linguistics (Beaulieu 1993; Flikeid 1989b; King 2000).

 The articles in the present volume address several of the research themes outlined above. Balcom explores the learning of Referential French by university students who are speakers of Acadian French, specifically auxiliary use with two subclasses of unaccusative verbs by first- and fourth-year university students from northeastern and southeastern New Brunswick. She finds that the fourth-year students were closer to the referential norm in their auxiliary use than first-year students. Beaulieu and Cichocki examine internal factors that constrain variation in the traditional third person plural ils ... -ont form in a community in northeastern New Brunswick; they show that social networks within the community also play a significant role in the maintenance of this form. Butler and King document the functions of the discourse marker mais dame, popular in 19th-century France but moribund in the present day; it is, however, in robust use in the Newfoundland variety, where it has a number of functions in conversational and narrative discourse.

 Patricia Balcom, Université de Moncton
 Louise Beaulieu, Université de Moncton
 Gary R. Butler, York University
 Wladyslaw Cichocki, University of New Brunswick
 Ruth King, York University

 REFERENCES


