An update on the usage of on vs. nous in spoken Mediterranean French
Evan D. Bradley, Max Schmid, & Sofi Teitsort.
Penn State Brandywine

Introduction

Definite ‘on’
• Coveney (2000) reports that ‘on’ has largely replaced ‘nous’ as the preferred first person plural subject clitic in informal spoken French.
• Because this “definite ‘on’” is considered non-standard and dispreferred by prescriptivists, Coveney suggests it may remain as a stylistic marker of formality (and in other usages).
• Hansen (2013) confirmed almost no use of ‘nous’ in semi-structured interviews with Parisian speakers.
• Hansen further observed use of ‘on’ for definite referents other than first person plural, including second person singular and third person plural, as well as referents which were ambiguous between definite and indefinite.
• Hansen speculates that the “built-in vagueness” of ‘on’ facilitates its extension to new contexts.

Questions
• We examined the occurrence of ‘on’ in different grammatical and social contexts using an experimental elicitation paradigm.
• Does ‘nous’ occur in more formal contexts?
• Is ‘on’ spreading into other pronouns?

Hypotheses
• Speakers use ‘nous’ in more formal contexts.
• Speakers may use ‘on’ for pronouns other than first person plural, perhaps as a gender neutral strategy.

Method

Stimuli
• 30 sentence pairs were created to elicit responses making reference to a variety of subjects (1-PL, 2-SG, 2-PL, 3-SG, 3-PL).
• The first sentence established a context, and the second requested information to elaborate the story.
• Formality was manipulated by having the prompt introduced by a different character, who was the intended recipient of the response: a child, an adult peer, or an elder/authority figure.

Procedure
• Stimuli were presented in a slideshow on a tablet computer.
• Responses were collected using a lapel microphone.
• 10 subjects completed the experiment during a one-week trip to Marseille and Nice.
• Participants were instructed (in French) to help complete the story using a complete sentence, and to avoid repeating the names of the individuals in the story (to increase pronouns).
• Only responses in which the subject used a pronoun (62%) were coded and analyzed.

Findings

1st Person Plural Pronouns
• ‘Nous’ was used in the majority of cases.
• Only 4 subjects used ‘on’.
• Did the written format encourage formality?
• Prompts were written in standard French.

Formality
• ‘On’ was used more often in low formality contexts.
• Should be interpreted with caution due to low occurrence.

Innovative Uses
• ‘On’ was used for referents other than first person plural.
• Other uses occurred nearly as often as first person plural.
• Non 1-PL uses occurred only in low/med formality contexts.
• Not all referents were elicited, and some of these uses could be errors.

Conclusions
• ‘Nous’ is still in use in spoken French, in some contexts.
• Greater use than in corpora might mean formality plays a role, and our design encouraged formality.
• The study was also administered by non-native speakers, which could have further encouraged participants to use more standard style.
• Speakers likely know multiple grammatical systems, and can switch between them depending on style.

References

Acknowledgements
• Penn State Brandywine Global Programs.