

## Culture

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Volume 14, numéro 2, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083525ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083525ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Canadian Anthropology Society / Société Canadienne d'Anthropologie (CASA),  
formerly/anciennement Canadian Ethnology Society / Société Canadienne  
d'Ethnologie

### ISSN

0229-009X (imprimé)

2563-710X (numérique)

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### Citer ce document

Daveluy, M. (1994). For the tenth anniversary of the Montréal 1984 corpus:  
Spoken French, a retrospective. *Culture*, 14(2), 7–8.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1083525ar>

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# For the tenth anniversary of the Montréal 1984 corpus: Spoken French, a retrospective

Michelle Daveluy \*

In the early 1970s, young researchers became interested in spoken French in Montréal. Their aim was to show that spoken language is as systematically organized as written language. Inspired by Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968), they undertook an extensive project: 120 interviews, providing representative speech samples of the whole francophone community, were carried out. The Sankoff-Cedergren corpus<sup>1</sup> was born (Sankoff and al, 1976).

Since then, anthropologists, linguists and sociolinguists have had access to this wealth of data, and their students have endeavoured to describe the particularities of the French spoken by francophone Montrealers. Among these students are Laberge, Thibault and Vincent. Through their efforts, research on French in Montreal became an integral part of the analysis of linguistic change that developed in the 1980s<sup>2</sup>.

The Sankoff-Cedergren corpus enabled linguistic change to be studied in "apparent time". In the framework of variationist sociolinguistics, the notion of "apparent time" developed by William Labov involves comparing the language behaviour of the different generations that make up the com-

munity being studied (see, among others, Labov, 1966 and 1981). For a given linguistic variable, differences between age groups are interpreted as an indication of changes actually occurring within the community. The linguistic forms which appear the most frequently in each of the different sub-groups are taken as evidence of how change is occurring or what is inhibiting it. Sub-groups can comprise women, the elderly, interest groups, etc., which contrast with the rest of the linguistic community by maintaining the habitual usage of a given linguistic form rather than adopting a new way "to say the same thing"<sup>3</sup>.

Analyses in "apparent time", however, can only serve as projections: later researchers were interested in empirically verifying changes detected in the speech of Montrealers. It is with this in mind that Pierrette Thibault launched the second phase of the *Projet de recherche sur le français parlé à Montréal*. With Diane Vincent, she headed a team which re-interviewed half the people originally interviewed in the Sankoff-Cedergren corpus, and so constituted the *Montréal 84* corpus. It consists of 72 interviews: in addition to the 60 interviewees of the 1971 corpus, a group of 12 young people between 15 and 25 years of age were interviewed

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for the first time to ensure representation of the whole community (Thibault and Vincent, 1990). Thirteen years had passed between the two phases of research — an interesting interval for the study of linguistic change in “real time”.

In both the 1971 and the 1984 corpora, interviewers aimed to create a natural conversational environment, with life in Montreal as the main topic. In 1971, religion and politics were major themes, while in 1984, discussion centered on individuals and life events (marriages, divorces, birth of children, work-related travel, etc.). Certain themes were reiterated in the later interviews — for example, the language question in Quebec, which always elicited a response. The questions geared toward the young people integrated to the second corpus reflect points covered with others interviewed for that corpus. In effect, only the end of the interviews differs in the two corpora: in 1971, it involved reading aloud a text while in 1984, a closed questionnaire on preferences and activities ended the encounter.

The methodological and theoretical reflections which inspired *Corpus Montréal 1984* are discussed in Thibault and Vincent (1990). However, this second corpus should not be considered as simply the fruit of renewed interest in spoken French but rather as the crystalization of an interest which has never ceased to exist. The texts presented here are written by sociolinguists whose professional formation took place within the framework of the *Montréal 1984* corpus and the theoretical considerations of the *Projet de recherche sur le français parlé à Montréal*. They embrace the essence of this interest and the relation between the two corpora, and thus not only provide a profile of the research carried out but bring it up to date.

This issue celebrates the tenth anniversary of the 1984 corpus and features work of a second generation of sociolinguists interested in spoken French in Montreal. It begins with a view in retrospect of the production of the two corpora. Gillian Sankoff, Henrietta Cedergren, Pierrette Thibault and Diane Vincent were invited to share their experiences.

They discuss the steps undertaken to produce the *Montréal 1984* corpus and offer stimulating reflections on different aspects of the study of linguistic change. In the order in which Marty Laforest<sup>4</sup> has chosen to present the interviews, the contexts in which both the Sankoff-Cedergren corpus and *Montreal 84* were created are revealed.

Additionally, Diane Vincent explains how discourse analysis found its niche in sociolinguistics. These interviews complement the brief description of the *Projet de recherche sur le français parlé à Montréal* at the beginning of this presentation text.

David Sankoff's contribution provides an entirely different kind of profile. His article describes precisely the perspective adopted in the variationist school of sociolinguistics, situates it in the larger framework of the social sciences and compares it with two other approaches. This portrayal is an inroad to understanding the theoretical framework of the papers which follow. The reasons why the use of quantitative methods in this field is justified, even necessary, are expounded.

The articles which follow can be categorized as belonging principally to two branches of sociolinguistics. On the one hand, the work of Warren, Daveluy and Blondeau represents Labovian variationist analysis. On the other, that of Laforest and Laur, while diverse, exemplifies discourse analysis. The article by Sylvie Dubois which belongs in this collection cannot, for practical reasons, be included in this issue. It will, however, be published in the next issue. We have included as well a bibliography of the works published on the Montreal 1984 corpus.

### Notes

1. Both David and Gillian Sankoff were associated with Henrietta Cedergren in this research project.
2. The bibliography published in Thibault and Vincent (1990: 131-141) illustrates this.
3. Semantic equivalence is one of the basic principles of variationist linguistics.
4. I would like to thank Marty Laforest for her valiant efforts in completing work for this publication when, for reasons beyond my control, I could no longer fulfill my duties.