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French and English languages in contact: The *Chiac* case

by *Rosario Pellegrino**

Abstract

This study concerns the language variation and changes across Borders in a bilingual context: the Acadian French in contact with North American English. In particular, it explores a specific linguistic idiom called *Chiac*, a language variety of south-eastern New Brunswick (Canada), characterized by strong English influence on the Acadian French substrate. Originally, it was spoken by bilingual teenagers in Moncton, Canada, and it is based on Canadian French but it contains several English influences both in words/morphemes and semantics/pragmatics. Through structural and lexical analysis, the study aims at underlining the social factors that influence speakers' choices and particularly those who use *Chiac* as a communication language. In fact, it is recently spoken by a growing number of speakers not only by teenagers. Variation and change across borders will represent a specific *Weltanschauung* in a bilingual context where Canadian French is less and less important though it is protected by French speakers as an identity status. Finally, some examples of lexical/phonological/phonetic/syntactic variations will be presented in order to remark strong English influence on this Acadian French substrate in a sociolinguistic perspective.

Keywords: Chiac, Language variation, French regiolect, Canadian French, Acadian French.

I

Introduction

Although Canada is a bilingual country, its linguistic geography is extremely varied. Quebec, for instance, is purely francophone while other regions, such as New Brunswick, are bilingual, and the vast majority are exclusively anglophone. However, the linguistic boundary between the two majority francophone groups does not coincide with the political boundary between Quebec and New Brunswick. For example, areas such as the Magdalen Islands and the Lower North Shore belong to the so-called Acadian linguistic area but politically fall within the region of Quebec.

The Acadians, inhabitants of the ancient colony of Acadia, are descendants of the colonists who settled in the region of the same name (which currently corresponds to the provinces of New Brunswick, New Scotland and Prince Edward Island). When British colonizers established settlements there in 1775, they took the name of Cajuns,

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which in French was translated into Acadians. Many communities subsequently returned to their region of origin and settled mainly in the coastal territories. The Acadian population represents the second francophone group and differs from the Quebeckers, who are more numerous and more widely known internationally. The Acadian region occupies the northern territory of so-called New France which includes the Maritimes and, in part, the American state of Maine.

In this North American region, particularly around the city of Moncton (in the south-east of the province of New Brunswick), a linguistic variety called Chiac (but also Chiak, Shiac, Shiak) has become established. This name seems to derive from another city in New Brunswick, Shediac.

The inhabitants of New Brunswick make up the largest French-speaking population outside Quebec, which has been the only bilingual province in Canada since 1969. However, bilingual speakers there display what Camille Voisin has called one-way bilingualism (Voisin, 2016, p. 101), i.e., while most if not all francophones are also fluent in English, only 16% of English speakers are able to hold a conversation entirely in French. Chiac emerged in a city and area characterized by more direct contact with English than other bilingual regions and subsequently spread elsewhere. Clearly, there is a sort of linguistic competition that induces French-speakers to fight to preserve their language from the hegemony of English. This attitude has spurred on politicians to ensure the survival of their language by passing special laws that officially recognize its dignity as an equal language. Significantly, Moncton, the homeland of the linguistic variety under examination, is home to the only French-speaking university outside Quebec with a student population of 4000 (<https://www.umoncton.ca>) (accessed 2022-06-20). Chiac displays such a high number of borrowings from North American English that some scholars wonder whether it should be considered a hybrid or mixed code. Indeed, analysis of this code shows that, at any level, the language is so marked by Anglicisms that it can be defined as both a hybrid and a mixed idiom.

Underpinning the Chiac phenomenon is the concept of linguistic variation: this is the driving force of every language and produces a number of diverse effects: diachronic (of time), diatopic (of place), diastratic (of social classes), diaphasic (of specific sectors) and diamesic (of the type of channel used: written or oral). While variation is a somewhat abstract concept since it defines the non-monolithic state of languages, variety refers to the way a language is spoken in a diasystemic context. There is an analogous relationship between variable and variation in that the abstraction of the former (e.g., a phoneme) is matched by its concrete application (e.g., a nasal vowel).

2

Chiac: variation, variety and linguistic dignity

Defining Chiac is no simple task, nor is it easy to estimate how many people speak it in the Moncton area. It is often defined through English structures still present in

the francophone code, but there is also a tendency to enucleate the any Anglophone interferences and consider only the francophone matrix. J.-A. Brown prefers to underline that:

It is a dialect of Acadian French with certain regular patterns, one of which is code-switching to English. Perrot (2005, cited in Leclerc, 2005, pp. 161-162) found that Chiac is seen, at least by its speakers, as a language variety that expresses a francophone identity. Because there exists a dialect continuum between Acadian French and Chiac, it is not clear how many people speak Chiac as their native language (Brown, 2011, p. 3).

In this sense, the scholar considers it a dialect and emphasizes the concept of code-switching that, better than others, illustrates the nature of the dialect. However, he argues that there is also the phenomenon of loans (loan structures), which represent a further element to be taken into account in the study of Chiac.

The scholar advances the hypothesis that Chiac can be considered an ethnolect or regiolect:

Chiac is characterized by the mixture of the variety of French spoken in Acadia, known as Acadian French, and English. [...] It could be called an ethnolect in the sense that speaking it marks one out as French Canadian, specifically Acadian; but more specifically a regiolect, since it marks one out as a member of a French–English bilingual community (Brown, 2019, p. 3).

Chiac's reference is neither standard French nor the standardised French taught in schools mainly in Quebec but Acadian French, which is called Joul and, more than other varieties, presents sounds and morphemes absent in standard European French. In the region of New Brunswick, French-speakers are considered rather old-fashioned, almost an old expression of a world insisting on reintroducing traditional linguistic choices in view of the inexorable advance of Canadian English. Joul is essentially a colloquial and informal language that does not provide for continuous references to morphosyntactic rules because the written language occupies a negligible role (King, 2008). A sort of opposition to anglophones contributes to the preservation of Joul as a sign of identity and of belonging to a community with deep roots and pride in its heritage.

Similarly, Chiac speakers claim their identity is different from that of Anglophones and, even though they adopt their own terms and structures, they show that they want to distinguish themselves from them by asserting their belonging to a different social group with its own traditions and of which they are proud. Their written and spoken French, on the other hand, is quite different from the standard French learned at school. They speak a traditional and local linguistic variety (regiolect) as an affirmation of an identity that has changed but has become united in a rather peculiar idiom (Perrot, 2014). Chiac is now considered by many to be a youthful language that expresses the essence of a generation of Canadians eager to express themselves in an alternative way.

A peculiarity of Chiac is the combination of English words inserted into French structures. However, studies have shown there are several reasons why this language

cannot be easily defined. First of all, some scholars proceed by exclusion, claiming that it is neither a variety of French (King, 2008) nor a mixed code (Papen, 2014, pp. 154-83). Contrary to this approach we share the definition of Chiac as an idiom characterized by the linguistic continuity of the Acadian dialect with constant influences of the English language at different levels (Brown, 2011, p. 5).

Brown seems to lean towards a generational attribution to Acadian and Chiac respectively when he states that:

If Acadian French is popular with the older generation but considered old-fashioned by youngsters, the Chiac of younger speakers will contain more English elements than that of older speakers, in order to set it apart from theirs (Brown, 2011, p. 5).

This analysis assumes that the survival of Joul and the affirmation of Chiac constitute a sort of strenuous defence of the generations against the anglophone advance. This is nothing out of the ordinary, given that urban languages are constantly modified by predominant vehicular and identitarian tendencies (Calvet, 1994). For Calvet the city is «un creuset, un lieu d'intégration et une centrifugeuse qui accélère la séparation entre différents groupes» (Calvet, 1994, p. 13). Since Chiac was first attested in 1963, it has been considered a non-accidental language of identity based on the well-known insertion of English terms into a French-speaking matrix. This is proven by the fact that English matrix verbs are constantly conjugated according to the rules of the French language and English terms are preceded by French articles (e.g. Je travale le country, worryez pas).

Even a part of the local population has tended to denigrate the use of Chiac as a half Anglais, half French language, except in informal situations. According to the study conducted by Voisin, there has been greater acceptance of Chiac over time «grâce à certains médias locaux et à plusieurs artistes qui ont fait le choix de l'utiliser» (Voisin, 2016, p. 104). Further evidence of this in recent times can be seen in Chiac's widespread use on social networks, as documented by Philip Comeau and Ruth King in work featuring a fictional character: the adventures of the superhero, Acadieman (Comeau & King, 2016). The scholars highlight the different attitudes assumed and the different social roles played by characters who speak Chiac compared to those who use other Acadian codes. Of particular interest is the initially comical effect of the switch code and, despite appearances, the fact that the characters stop using Chiac in local and communicative contexts.

Some studies show that the use of Chiac in everyday conversation is no longer considered a negative and/or a discriminating factor because the language has become an integral part of the social context of the Moncton region. As for the Acadian variety of French, the local community seems to represent a bond between language and identity that excludes the possibility of adopting standard French for most local inhabitants. In essence, there is a sort of opposition between Québécois and Acadian French which justifies their feelings towards the local variety (Voisin, 2016, p. 108).

Written Chiac has a more marginal role and requires a separate analysis. While people using social networks often make use of this language, so-called official communication does not appear to favour it. Exceptions to this trend are some French-speaking Acadian writers, who have chosen to write texts in Chiac as well, such as the journalist and writer France Daigle¹ and the poet Gérald Leblanc. The first novelist to ascribe any importance to Chiac was Jean Babineau², who is thought to have been the first to adopt it as a language in a novel. Ten years after his first experiment, in 2003 the author published an interesting novel, *Vortex*, in which he seems to affirm the dignity of Chiac as a literary language and has both the characters and the narrator speak in Chiac, a courageous choice that dispels the myth of Chiac as a vernacular language and, as such, not very elegant. In this work, the three languages (Acadian French, English and Chiac) have equal dignity and manage, without ceding ground, to fulfil the role of literary language by presenting a plurality of characters, places and particular experiences. Chiac has a precise function: it amplifies narrative power, evoking situations, characters and places both Canada and in Mexico compared to the United States. The Chiac language proves to be congenial to the figure of the devil in the novel as it expresses his ambiguity and wit in an interesting and sometimes disturbing way. However, as well as guaranteeing a sort of normalizing revolution of Chiac, it assumes a role of opposition to the homogenisation of Anglophone America through its function as a mestizo language. The title is the name of a Mexican gift store that represents redemption for its owner, André, after he is fired by an American multinational. It creates a sort of North American bridge between two distant and different realities united by opposition to American hegemony. That is why when the character reaches Mexico, he sometimes confuses the local language with Chiac in an impactful series of code-switches.

Nevertheless, Chiac is not a true mixed language, since the author seems to relate it continuously to the Acadian French norm while leaving out some peculiarities that would make it difficult. Thanks to certain literary choices, Chiac no longer appears to be considered an inconvenient vernacular language, and it is increasingly assuming a better-defined role that will hopefully give it a place in the “Francosphere”. The local community’s acceptance of Chiac and, following its use in certain literary contexts, its vitality among the younger generations will undoubtedly affirm its «statut de langue orale, réservée essentiellement à la communication informelle» (Voisin, 2016, p. III).

3

Chiac expressions: words suspended between French and English

Daigle’s 2011 novel *Pour sûr* is undoubtedly the one in which Chiac is most used. In certain passages, the dialogues make use of the regional parlance, with particular emphasis on the ways in which French is adapted to English expressions, Anglicisms in general and archaic forms present in popular language. Explicit reference is made to

the conjugation of verbs which, as the author underlines, follow French rules despite being English words. For example: «C'est supposé que les humains avont **stárté** à dessiner des animaux sus les wawles des cavernes avant de décider que, frôm nōw ōn, un tel dessin voudrait dire un tel son» (Daigle, 2011, p. 205).

The English verb “start” is conjugated as any regular French verb of the first group. The context of the novel is a sort of labyrinth in which the author defends and illustrates Chiac that turns out to be a long reflection on minority cultures and on the role that languages play in so-called border contexts. Significantly, the protagonists, Terry, Carmen and their children, frequent *Le Babar bar* in Moncton and debate the meaning of their existence in the world. In a tangle of situations and twists, the role of Chiac turns out to be essential and qualifying since it stands as an element apparently outside the author's control, constantly guaranteeing the element of surprise. Chiac seems to be halfway between the language of youth, and even of children, and that of their ancestors. It has a disruptive force that upsets existing equilibriums and leads the reader to see the freshness and originality of the language as if it were a *coup de théâtre*. Of herself and her readers Terry inquires: «Quoisse que je faisais par là? J' **opéretais** une machine à couper des pūzzles. J'étais dans une petite **bōoth** avec un gros **mōnitor būt** vraiment c'était comme si je **drivais** un **lāwnmotor** dans un champ» (Daigle, 2011, p. 205). In this case, we cannot speak of code switching between French and English, because we find adaptations of the latter language and casts that embellish it, which reveal the contact with other forms of Creole.

After the first expressions, in which the author tries to transmit to her readers the humour of the community in which she lives, she realizes that Chiac can guarantee this effect easily, admitting that she was inspired by Michel Tremblay³ who used Joul to obtain the same result.

The author thinks that Chiac is essentially an oral language, knowledge of which is not sufficient for its population to be able to communicate in a region where the language problem is evident. The goal for young people is to learn how to communicate in correct French, especially in the written form, a skill able to redeem the new generations in such a diversified world as ours. She prefers to argue that the use of Chiac in her novels is certainly not an example for the community, but a snapshot of reality and a way to make messages clearer and more surprising thanks to the evocative and disruptive power of local language terms. When she inserts terms, she chooses to give structure to a word she does not find. An example is the conjugation of verbs that need orthographic manipulation to be clearer. She often chooses to accent vowels with the tilde (ã, ê, î, ô, û), an accent that is absent in both languages but which has a particular value: to indicate that the term originates in the English language and must be pronounced according to its usage therein. An example is: «Stĩll, c'èst itou une ōbsession» (Daigle, 2011, p. 464).

In the same novel, the value of the tilde is explained: «Le tilde sert à distinguer les mots prononcés en anglais des mots prononcés en français» (Daigle, 2011, p. 438). There are, however, words without the tilde that are phonologically adapted to French: e.g. “cawliont” from English “to call” adapted to French with the ending “ont” that is

typical of Acadian French. Unlike words with the tilde, those without this accent are pronounced according to the rules of French phonetics.

Also interesting is the state of mind and sense of guilt shared by many locals in the region of Moncton embodied by the characters and the narrator of the novel: they make the situation highly realistic. At times the characters reveal their troubles by clearly expressing their feelings in their own language incorrectly so that they have to express them in another language: this creates a strange effect of a hybrid and constant code-switching. In particular, *Carmen* prefers standard French, which represents the true model for her, to Chiac although she does not despise its use in some situations: «Elle a souvent l'impression que le chiac résulte d'une certaine paresse, ou d'un manque de curiosité, de fierté, de logique, d'autant plus quand le mot français est connu de tous et facile à intégrer au parler courant» (Daigle, 2011, p. 76). Hence, she does not exclude the possibility that she may, in some ways and on certain occasions, use Chiac terms, despite preferring the correct use of so-called standard French. The emerging idea is that Chiac carries with it a sort of original sin: as it is considered the language of mediocrity, it consists of a manifest deviation from a language considered sacred and inviolable: *le bon français*. The same holds for the instinctive use of English. Etienne points out to his father *Terry* that he has once again used an English term, while the author justifies this use by specifying that «cette forme de transgression faisait également partie de son identité» (Daigle, 2011, p. 333). In particular, the use of English is halfway between an unforgivable transgression, which contaminates French, and a distinctive sign since it distinguishes the speaker from all the other inhabitants of the region. Besides, there is a certain benevolence towards archaisms when they embody the feeling of attachment to the language spoken by their ancestors, a bulwark of values in part lost.

There is no shortage of occasions when speakers cannot pronounce certain English sounds, and others when they sound almost sinister:

C'est sans doute la forte et souvent insidieuse présence de l'anglais qui donne au chiac son caractère propre, et la prononciation tout à fait anglaise de ces mots pèse lourdement dans la balance. Un Français peut bien dire «parquigne», l'Acadien, lui, aura l'impression de faire du théâtre s'il doit en dire autant. Il prononcera donc tout naturellement «parking», comme il l'entend de la bouche des milliers d'anglophones qui l'entourent. On a affaire ici à une rupture d'ordre musical, rythmique, esthétique. Souvent le mélange des deux langues passe presque inaperçu, mais souvent il blesse tant l'oreille que l'entendement (Daigle, 2011, p. 44).

Another passage underlines the question of why a speaker chooses such an alternation: «Par habitude de l'anglais? Par gêne du français? Par goût de variété? Par nonchalance? Par intuition langagière? Par complicité?» (Daigle, 2011, p. 198).

There is probably no one answer as it is mostly a question of habit and a sense of belonging to a proud linguistic group. This does not rule out the possibility of randomness as a determining factor that is sometimes induced even by listening to other speakers.

A similar phenomenon occurs with archaisms. Many Acadians tend to:

[...] prononcer nombre de mots comportant un è comme s'il s'agissait d'un é. Père et mère, par exemple, se diront père et mère. Il s'agit bien sûr d'une ancienne prononciation française. Mais cette prononciation et plusieurs autres ont vraiment l'air de produire un effet ringard aux yeux de l'Autre, comme si cette inadaptation au français moderne était la preuve d'un défaut d'adaptation à la vie moderne tout court (Daigle, 2011, p. 48).

The trend seems quite clear: the speakers of the region prefer archaisms to borrowings of English terms that they sometimes pronounce in the French manner.

The characters in Daigle's novel are faithful interpreters of a sociolinguistic reality that is both unstable and complex: living in Moncton. Neither the idealisation of the dialect nor its denigration represents a solution to the issue of the identity of a traditional community which lives in a dynamic context and needs choices that will lead it towards a future characterized by development and better-defined linguistic choices (Boudreau & Perrot, 1994).

It should not be forgotten, however, that Chiac is linked to the region of Moncton, where 77% of the inhabitants say they speak it regularly, compared to only 18% in the Acadian region, most of whom claim that they use it mainly with people from the Moncton area (Voisin, 2016, p. 108). A high percentage (58%) of the inhabitants of this region declare they usually write in Chiac, though in "everyday" contexts such as on social networks, demonstrating that it retains its informal language matrix.

4

Rap in Chiac

The colloquial nature of Chiac is highlighted by the musical group *Radio Radio*, which bestows dignity on this language also in the musical field. Rap seems to lend itself to Chiac's code-switching and, as it is a very popular genre among young people (the main Chiac speakers), it provides a privileged observatory from which to start a complete analysis of this linguistic phenomenon.

For their first album, the band chose the title *Cliché hot*, in which the English adjective hot is associated with the French word cliché, although the adjective follows the noun according to the French rule (the English custom requires the adjective to precede the noun). The musical and linguistic activity of the group is grafted onto a tradition started by other groups⁴ who have chosen to make use of Chiac in their song lyrics.

In his detailed study of the song *Bingo*, Thibault analyzes the individual stanzas of the text and identifies the dominant French expressions:

L'élément français domine, qu'il s'agisse d'éléments du français général, de canadianismes au sens large, ou d'acadianismes ; et ce, en particulier chez les grammèmes. Les éléments anglais occupent toutefois une place très importante, surtout parmi les lexèmes (Thibault, 2011, p. 17).

The scholar provides a list in hierarchical order of the frequencies found in the text: nouns, adjectives, simple verbs, verbal particles, discursive particles, swear words, adverbs, and onomatopoeia. The prevalence of lexical elements and adjectives is confirmed, often placed after the noun according to the French custom. French is also the dominant language in morphosyntactic aspects.

The lyrics «Tu veux, on va plus vite / Tu veux, on va plus slow» suggests code switching, but other expressions similar to many in common use, such as «Si qu'on dit qu'on joue à la balle / Ça veut dire qu'on joue au DART / Dart, target / Fesser le bull's eye/ Roll back nos beats / Pas aussi cheap que Wal Mart» demonstrate the linguistic autonomy of Chiac. The latter sentence contains two English terms (dart and target) pronounced in English and the possessive bull's eye, a construction absent in the French language but which is reported as it refers to a fixed expression. Also noted is a popular form of Quebec French (Si qu'on), which in standard French simply corresponds to "si on". The presence of "que", foreign to the English language, might suggest an archaic French form detected in Acadia. In fact, it seems more likely that the presence of "que" simply represents a custom according to which subordinate clauses should have "que" at the beginning as a distinctive sign. In addition to standard French and North American English, local varieties and more or less archaic forms are added, suggesting the autonomous nature of Chiac.

Another example from their song offers us food for thought:

Way plus smooth / Comme pussy willow
 J'vas faire accroire / Qu'chu vieux pis là
 J'vas faire le slow / Tous les mercredis
 Vous pourrez me / Ouaire au bingo

The English term "Way" is an adverb that has reinforcing value in comparative structures. In this case the formation of the comparative sentence is identical to the French one. Typically, monosyllabic English adjectives form the comparative by adding the suffix "er" to the adjective itself, while here we have "plus smooth". The syntagma "pussy willow" corresponds to the "saule blanc" in French, that is the white willow. The quote recalls the typical branches of the weeping willow. "Pussy" also indicates female genitalia in informal language. In this interpretation it would be a vulgar expression. The verb "je vas" is an archaic form of the current "je vais" with which it seems to have coexisted before the other form was attested. Interestingly, the phonetic fusion of "je" and "sus", a local variant of the standard French "je suis", yields the grapheme "chu" in the song.

A further term of note is "Ouaire" from standard French "voir" in which the labial fricative "v" is vocalised into /w/ and the diphthong "oi" is pronounced according to the phonetic tradition of standard French, as "we".

Clearly, in literary and musical texts there is a prevalence of terms and expressions in standard French or Acadian with the insertion of some forms in Chiac that reflect

the vitality of the regional language. Nevertheless, written Chiac continues to occupy a marginal position although attestations are increasing and its role has changed considerably from a local, often despised language to a living language with an increasing number of young speakers. This suggests that the number of speakers may grow further.

5 Conclusions

The analysis of excerpts from Daigle's novels and the rap song reveal that Chiac is a code that has its own rules; the positions and morphosyntactic structures of the French matrix are always respected and nothing is left to chance or to the arbitrariness of the speaker/writer. The code thus appears to be autonomous insofar as it offers customs of verb formation and vocabulary of English derivation, according to established forms and customs. It can therefore be said to be a variety of French subject to the modifying action of English and not vice versa. However, it has been shown that in Chiac there are relationships of non-randomness in the processes of formation of the lexicon, adjectives and morphosyntactic structures. One example of this is the position of adjectives, verb endings, and the lack of pronunciation of the "s" of the plural of nouns and adjectives. For this reason, we think the old definition of a French-speaking code with a high number of borrowings from North American English is inappropriate. Nor would it be possible to speak about code-switching since the two languages involved, French and English, do not present grammatical forms identical to the ones in Chiac.

Notes

1. In 2002, the novel *Petites difficultés d'existence*, set in Moncton, makes widespread use of Chiac. The novel also deals with the legitimacy of Chiac as a language.
2. The book *Bloupe*, published in 1993, is rightly seen as the first experiment in which the author, Jean Babineau, chooses to use Chiac as the primary language, sign of identity and, even more so, of resistance to the two linguistic groups of the Moncton region.
3. Michel Tremblay, born in 1942, is a Canadian novelist and writer working in French.
4. Among them: *Le Pizza Delight*, So Gérald Leblanc, 1755, Pis Roland Gauvin, Pis là le Dixie-Lee, Jacobus et Maleco (Thibault, 2011, p. 42).

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