

Morpho-phonetic variation in the spoken French media: A comparison of three sociolinguistic variables

Martin Howard

University College, Cork

Department of French
University College, Cork
Cork, Ireland
mhoward@french.ucc.ie

Abstract

While recent studies have provided pivotal insights into the use of a range of sociolinguistic variables by speakers of Hexagonal French, this paper aims to illuminate how their usage may diverge / converge in the spoken language of the media. Based on a quantitative study of liaison realisation, /l/ deletion, and ‘ne’ deletion, the paper compares a number of trends behind their usage by journalists with those previously identified in that profession and among the general public. Results suggest that sociolinguistic variation is by no means a uniform phenomenon among journalists, but rather a number of (socio)linguistic factors impinge on such variation, just as in the case of the public. The results are discussed in terms of the differences and similarities that emerge across the variables, such that the specificity of the sociolinguistic variable in itself is seen to impact significantly on its use.

Key words: synchronic / diachronic variation, media language, variationist sociolinguistics, French language.

Resumo

Mentres que estudos recentes veñen proporcionando aproximacións esenciais para a comprensión do uso dunha gama de variables sociolingüísticas por parte dos falantes do francés de Francia, este artigo pretende explicar como o seu uso pode diverxer / converxer na lingua falada dos medios. Baseado nun estudo cuantitativo da realización da *liaison*, da supresión de /l/ e da supresión de ‘ne’, neste texto se comparan diversas tendencias agochadas tras destes usos por parte de xornalistas con aquelas previamente identificadas xa tanto nesa profesión coma entre o público en xeral. Os resultados suxiren que a variación sociolingüística non é en absoluto un

fenómeno uniforme entre os xornalistas, senón que o que a propicia é máis ben unha serie de factores (socio)lingüísticos, ao igual ca no caso do público. Os resultados discútese en termos das diferenzas e semellanzas que se aprecian a través das variables, así coma en termos da especificidade coa que cada variable sociolingüística incide nos usos de xeito significativo.

Palabras clave: variación sincrónica / diacrónica, lingua dos medios, sociolingüística variacionista, francés.

1. Introduction¹

In a recent state-of-the-art article on the issue of a French theory of variation, Françoise Gadet (2003) points to the limited study in France of sociolinguistic variation from within the variationist framework proposed by Labov. In contrast, such a theoretical framework has primarily been adopted by researchers outside France to the study of sociolinguistic variation within France, as exemplified in key-studies such as Armstrong (2001), Ashby (1988), Coveney (1996), and Hansen (1994), amongst others. This is in contrast with the more widespread recourse to variationist methods in the study of sociolinguistic variation in Canadian French, where a far greater range of studies exists on diverse language features. Notwithstanding the more limited application of the Labovian approach to the study of sociolinguistic variation in metropolitan French, existing studies nonetheless illuminate a number of key trends concerning the manifestation of such variation. These trends are threefold, relating to the synchronic differences surrounding use of the sociolinguistic variable as a function of linguistic, social, and stylistic characteristics; the diachronic changes that characterise use of the sociolinguistic variable over time; and, not unrelated to these two trends, the differences between the use of some sociolinguistic variables in Hexagonal and Canadian varieties of French.

Sociolinguistic variables range in status from the hyperformal at one extreme to the vernacular at the other extreme, with informal, neutral, and formal variants assuming their status between these two extremes. The distinction between hyperformal and neutral variants is best exemplified by variable liaison usage in French, whereby certain realisations of liaison are seen as carrying a high prestige value, such as in the case of the syntactic link holding between infinitive verbs and their complement (‘visiter un musée’ [to visit a museum]), and following /p/

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) while carrying out research for this paper as a Government of Ireland Research Fellow, as well as that of the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences, University College, Cork.

(‘beaucoup aimé’ [much liked]), /k/ (‘suer sang et eau’ [to sweat loads]), and /r/ (‘aller en France’ [to go to France]). In contrast, non-realisation of liaison is seen as neutral, insofar as it does not contradict the rules of standard French in the same way as informal variants do, such as in the case of /l/ or ‘ne’ deletion, whereby realisation of /l/ or ‘ne’ is prototypically prescribed². Their realisation is seen to constitute the formal variants of the variables concerned. A final class of variant is that of vernacular variants whose defining characteristic concerns the social restriction surrounding their usage. That is to say, while informal variants are found to occur across all social categories, vernacular variants are marked in terms of their more restricted usage to a particular grouping, reflecting their stigmatized value, as exemplified, for example, by non-agreement of irregular verbs and their subject in third person plural contexts, such as in ‘ils sort’* (they are going out).

While the study presented here is concerned with the manifestation of such sociolinguistic variation in the spoken language of journalists, we will briefly detail some key-trends surrounding the manifestation of such variation in the general public’s language use. In so doing, we will then be more cogniscent of how such trends might be reflected in the specific findings that we will subsequently present concerning the spoken use of a number of sociolinguistic variables by journalists.

1.1. Sociolinguistic variation in French: Some key-trends

A first trend concerns the not unsurprising finding concerning the role of linguistic, extralinguistic, and stylistic factors, whereby a number of clear patterns characterises the speaker’s use of sociolinguistic variables. In relation to the classic extralinguistic factors of age and social class, we find, for example, that older and middle class speakers make greater use of more formal variants than their younger and lower class counterparts. Such trends have emerged in relation to deletion of the negative particle ‘ne’ (Ashby, 1981b, 1991; Coveney, 1996), /l/ deletion (Ashby, 1984), liaison usage (Ashby, 1981a, 2003), and schwa deletion (Armstrong & Unsworth, 1999; Hansen, 1994). In the case of the alternation between ‘nous’/‘on’ for first person plural reference, Coveney (2000) finds that, in spite of the minimal use of ‘nous’ by his informants, it is nonetheless speakers in the older age group and higher social class category who produce this form. Ashby (1992) also finds an effect for age and social class in his study of variation between the use of ‘on’ and ‘tu’/‘vous’ for second person singular and plural reference. Hansen (1994) reports a

² While some debate surrounds whether the current status of these variables might be evolving towards a more neutral one, for the purposes of exemplification in this section, we will follow the traditional classification.

complex effect for social class in her study of schwa deletion whereby the trend outlined only holds true in the case of her middle and lower class informants in conversation. The reverse trend is found during a reading task.

Apart from age and social class, the effect of gender on the speaker's choice of variant has also been investigated, although the findings are less clear-cut. For example, whereas studies of some variables report gender differences, others do not. In particular, recent studies such as Coveney (1996) fail to find gender-conditioned variation in the case of 'ne' deletion, while Armstrong (2001) reports only slight differences in the case of his adolescent informants. Such a finding contrasts with earlier findings by Ashby (1981b), who finds that his Tourangeaux male informants use the formal variant more frequently than in the case of their female counterparts³. Ashby (1981b) offers similar findings in the case of liaison realisation. In contrast, Ashby (1984, 1992, 2003) reports the reverse trend in the case of /l/ deletion, and the use of 'on', as well as a later study of liaison usage. In a study of /r/ deletion in conversation with the researcher, Armstrong (2001) also reports a similar gender effect, whereby his adolescent female speakers make the deletion more frequently than their male counterparts. This contrasts with their deletion of /l/ where no gender differences were observed, as well as their use of slang vocabulary, which the male informants used more frequently (Armstrong, 1996, 1998). Finally, although reporting minimal use of 'nous' in his study of 'nous'/'on' variation, Coveney (2000) finds that it is his female informants who produce this variant.

Apart from such classic extralinguistic factors, two further sets of factors are those concerning stylistic issues and the linguistic environment in which the variable occurs. Since linguistic factors are specific to each variable, it is more difficult to draw general conclusions concerning such factors – suffice to note that the linguistic environment in terms of its phonetic, phonological, and grammatical make-up has been found to impact considerably on the speaker's use of diverse sociolinguistic variables in French. In relation to stylistic factors, findings are more general, with the speaker's choice of variant seen to differ according to the stylistic formality of the context in which the data were elicited. The use of more formal sociolinguistic variants is generally more frequent during formal speech styles, with the use of more informal variants being correspondingly more frequent during less formal styles. Although style has not been amply investigated in French sociolinguistic research⁴, such a trend has been reported across a range of variables, including liaison

³ An exception to this trend was found, however, in the case of the middle class informants in the study.

⁴ See Gadet (2004) for discussion.

realisation (Ashby, 1981a, 2003), /l/ deletion (Armstrong, 2001), /r/ deletion (Armstrong, 2001), schwa deletion (Armstrong & Unsworth, 1999; Hansen, 1994), ‘ne’ deletion (Armstrong, 2001, 2002⁵; Ashby, 1981b, 2001), ‘nous’/‘on’ variation (Coveney, 2000), and the use of slang vocabulary (Armstrong, 1998).

The diversity of factors impinging on the speaker’s choice of sociolinguistic variant points to the complexity of underlying trends at work behind that choice. However, apart from such linguistic, extralinguistic, and stylistic factors, two further trends can be identified. The first of these concerns the more frequent use of more informal variants which characterises Canadian varieties of French compared to metropolitan French⁶. For example, some contextual uses of more informal variants are seen to reach near-categorical levels in Canadian French, such as in the case of ‘ne’ deletion (Sankoff & Vincent, 1980) and /l/ deletion (Poplack & Walker, 1986; Sankoff & Cedergren, 1976). Nonetheless, while levels of use of more informal variants have previously been observed to be lower in metropolitan French, they are now seen to be increasing across a range of variables. For example, the most recent study of /l/ deletion by Armstrong (2001) demonstrates that deletion is near-categorical in the case of impersonal ‘il’ (he / it) and ‘ils’ (they-masc), in contrast with the more reduced level of deletion of 88% in such contexts, reported by Ashby (1984). A similar increase in ‘ne’ deletion has also been observed in a number of studies. For example, Ashby’s (2001) longitudinal comparison of speakers in Tours shows a drop in rates of realisation to 18% in 1995, as opposed to the rate of 37% in his earlier study of data collected in 1976 (see Ashby, 1981b). This lower rate of deletion reflects that of 9% reported on by Coveney (1996) in his study of data

⁵ The effect for style was, however, restricted to the female informants, with no style differences apparent in the case of the male informants.

⁶ We further note the greater use of marked vernacular variants in Canadian varieties of French, that is to say, variants deemed to carry a stigmatized value, being restricted in use to certain social groups, such as in the case of levelling of third person plural inflections on irregular present tense verb forms (*e.g.* ‘ils sort’* [they are going out]) and overuse of the ‘avoir’ auxiliary in cases where ‘être’ is prescribed. See King (2000), Mougeon & Beniak (1995), and Sankoff & Thibault (1977) for examples of Canadian studies, and Gadet (1992, 1998) and Pooley (1996) for discussion of vernacular variants in Hexagonal French. For studies of vernacular forms specific to Canadian varieties such as ‘m’as venir’ (I will come) for the expression of futurity, and ‘eux-autres ils viennent’ (the others they are coming) in the case of subject noun-doubling, and deletion of the relative pronoun ‘que’ (that / which), see respectively Mougeon & Beniak (1991), Nagy *et al.* (2003), and Martineau (1988). Auger & Rose (1997) offer insight from a lexical perspective. For a comparative discussion of sociolinguistic variation in Canadian and Hexagonal French, see Ashby (1988) and Howard (to appear).

elicited from speakers in Picardie in the 1980s. Taken together, these findings point to a third general trend in the sociolinguistic literature on Hexagonal French, whereby a longitudinal increase seems to characterise the use of some more informal variants, with a corresponding decrease in the use of more formal variants.

While the trends outlined provide important insights into sociolinguistic variation in metropolitan French, in general, it remains to be seen how such variation manifests itself in the language of journalists.

1.2. Media language and sociolinguistic variation

According to Forsgren (2002: 351), media language is characterised by a formal trait which distinguishes it from the spontaneous discourse of everyday language. Such formality is clearly palpable in media discourse whereby journalists seem to converge in their style of speaking, adopting similar “*pratiques langagières institutionnalisées*” (institutionalised language practices) which reflect a consensus concerning the speech style which a particular programme or channel wishes to convey. With the exception of Bell (1991), however, few studies have provided an expansive investigation of such linguistic practices in general. In his study, Bell investigates the issue of ‘accommodation’ in the discourse of journalists on a range of radio channels in Auckland, New Zealand. In particular, he finds that the journalists on each channel adapt their speech characteristics to reflect the social characteristics of their respective audiences. Further evidence to support such accommodation is found in Bell’s finding that journalists who work on different channels also adapt their speech characteristics accordingly, such that they generally do not evidence the same characteristics irrespective of the radio channel concerned. A further finding in Bell’s study also points to the considerable convergence at work in relation to the speech characteristics of the different journalists on the same radio channel.

Bell’s work points to the important style-shifting which occurs in media discourse and which seems to reflect an important effect for the role of the journalist’s perceived audience. In contrast to such a focus, the study to be presented here aims to consider a number of other factors such as the programme type and the spoken media concerned in terms of either radio or television, the journalist’s reporting role on the programme concerned, as well as their gender. In so doing, we aim to illuminate how the journalist’s use of different sociolinguistic variables may not simply be constrained by the factor of ‘perceived audience’, but may reflect a number of other factors which come into play. We will detail in the following this general issue in terms of a number of specific research questions.

2. Research questions

As a study of sociolinguistic variation in spoken media language, this paper aims to address a number of underlying questions, including the following.

1. With regard to the manifestation of sociolinguistic variation in the journalist's speech, how does the journalist behave when confronted with the sociolinguistic choice between two variants of a single variable, one of which is considered to be more formal than the other? As we will detail below, we are primarily concerned with formal media programmes. Therefore, while it might be expected that the use of more formal variants dominates, the question arises as to what extent less formal variants are in evidence.

2. A second question concerns the differences and similarities between the use of sociolinguistic variables by journalists and the general public. As we outlined above, use of less formal variants is seen to have increased over the years with regard to those variables where a longitudinal comparison is possible. The question therefore arises as to what extent use of sociolinguistic variables in media language is seen to approach the general public's use of such variants. For example, while the formality of the programme might seem to call for more increased use of formal variants, to what extent do journalists also realise less formal variants, so as to reflect the general public's speech norms on use of sociolinguistic variables?

3. As we have previously noted, a number of differences emerges between the general public's use of sociolinguistic variables, in terms of their extralinguistic characteristics, such as their age, gender, and social class. In the case of media language, the question therefore arises as to the differences that might emerge between journalists in terms of their use of a sociolinguistic variable. For example, how do extralinguistic and stylistic factors similarly impact on the journalists' use of a sociolinguistic variable?

4. A final question under investigation here concerns how use of the (in)formal variants might differ across sociolinguistic variables. As we have seen, there has been a tendency among the general public towards more increased usage of less formal variants, generally irrespective of the specific variable concerned. In relation to media language, the question therefore arises as to how the use of a particular variable might reflect the use of others. For example, in the case of the formal media programmes under investigation here, how does the use of a particular variable correspond to the use of others? As such, it is possible to consider how differences emerge between the journalist's use of one variable and another, such that sociolinguistic variation in general may or may not emerge as a very uniform phenomenon in media language. Indeed, such a comparison of variables is

particularly important in view of Ervin-Tripp's (1972) important notion that sociolinguistic competence cannot be understood in terms of a single variable but only in terms of the co-occurrence of patterns of use of formal and informal variants.

With these questions in mind, we undertook a study of three sociolinguistic variables in spoken French media language, namely variable liaison realisation, /l/ deletion, and 'ne' deletion. We will in the following present a brief overview of each variable.

3. Presentation of the sociolinguistic variables under investigation

3.1. Variable liaison

Bybee (2001: 337) defines liaison as "the appearance of a word-final consonant before a vowel-initial word in words that in other contexts end in a vowel". The realisation of the word-final consonant principally concerns three phonemes, namely /z/, /n/, and /t/, while /k/, /r/, and /p/ are much less frequently observed. Three types of liaison can be identified depending on the morpho-syntactic link between the two words concerned. For example, categorical contexts principally concern the link between articles and nouns, and between subject pronouns and verbs. In contrast, a range of variable contexts has been identified, as exemplified in Figure 1. Contexts of hypercorrection concern those contexts where liaison is prohibited, such as following 'et' (and), before numerals ('les onze et douze mai' [the eleventh and twelfth of May]), and between articles and nouns beginning with an aspirate (h), such as in 'les huttes' (the huts). For discussion of the prescriptive rules underlying liaison usage, see Bybee (2001), Malécot (1975), and Morin & Kaye (1982).

Figure 1. Range of syntactic contexts of variable liaison usage.

Following a qualifying adverb	Spécialement adapté
Following a bisyllabic preposition	Pendant une heure
Between a noun and adjective in the plural	Les portes ouvertes
Between a verb and complement	Ils sortaient ensemble
Between a noun and verb	Les enfants avaient dormi
Following a negative particle	Ils ne sont jamais arrivés
Following a semi-auxiliary verb	Il fallait accepter
Between an adjective and noun	D'anciens amis
Following a conjunction	Mais on n'a rien dit

Previous studies of variable liaison usage point to the non-uniformity of its realisation in the contexts identified in Figure 1, whereby certain morpho-syntactic contexts promote its usage more than others⁷. In particular, the most recent study by Ashby (2003) reports more frequent usage following forms of ‘être’, semi-auxiliary verbs, and negative particles with the exception of ‘pas’. In contrast, less frequent usage is observed in other contexts, such as following forms of ‘avoir’, polysyllabic prepositions and adverbs, and ‘pas’, and also between nouns and adjectives, and verbs and their complements.

Apart from the morpho-syntactic link between the words concerned, stylistic and extralinguistic factors also exert an influence. For example, in the case of style, while liaison is seen to be more frequent during a formal speech style than an informal one, the actual liaison context also plays a role, whereby certain contextual uses are only found in very formal styles, such as public speeches, reflecting the considerable prestige value that certain contextual uses of liaison assume. Such high prestige values are observed in the case of liaison realisation following infinitive verb forms, as in ‘discuter avec’ (to discuss with), and also after the phonemes /p/, /k/, and /r/⁸.

In the case of extralinguistic factors, a number of studies reports on the effects of the speaker’s age, gender, and social class, whereby middle class and older speakers are seen to realise liaison more frequently than their lower class and younger counterparts (Ashby, 1981a, 2003). In the case of gender, Ashby (1981a, 2003) and Green & Hintze (2002) find that liaison realisation is more frequent among men than women. In contrast, Booij *et al.* (1987) and Malécot (1975) report an opposing trend, while De Jong (1991) fails to find gender differences in his older study of speakers recorded in 1969 in Orléans.

3.2. /l/ deletion

/l/ deletion is observed in word-initial, word-median and word-final position, namely in third person subject pronouns ‘il’ with both personal and impersonal values, ‘elle’, ‘ils’ and ‘elles’; the object pronouns ‘le’, ‘la’, ‘les’, ‘lui’ and ‘leur’; the definite articles ‘le’, ‘la’ and ‘les’; and in other lexical words containing consonant

⁷ For studies, see, for example, Ågren (1973), Ashby (1981a, 2003), Booij & De Jong (1987), Bybee (2001), Encrevé (1988), Gadet (1989), Green & Hintze (1988, 2002), Klausenbergh (1984), Malécot (1975), Morin (1982), Morin & Kaye (1982), and Smith (1998).

⁸ For expansive discussion of the stylistic appropriateness of liaison usage, see Malécot (1975).

clusters such as ‘escalier’ and ‘table’. However, studies such as Armstrong (1996, 2001), Ashby (1984), and Laks (1980) in France, and Poplack & Walker (1986) and Sankoff & Cedergren (1976) in a Canadian context, indicate that deletion is not uniform across contexts, but rather is more frequent in the case of third person pronouns than in other contexts⁹. In particular, near-categorical rates of deletion have been observed in the case of ‘il’ with both personal and impersonal values. In contrast, deletion rates are much lower in the case of ‘elle’ and ‘elles’. For example, in the latter case, Poplack and Walker (1986) report a rate of deletion of 33% in a Canadian bilingual context, while Ashby (1984) reports a rate of deletion of 26% for ‘elle’ in his study of continental speakers in Tours. Other studies report differing rates, with Armstrong (1996) observing a rate of just 15% for ‘elle’ in his study of adolescents in Eastern France, while Laks (1980) reports a rate of 33% for his adolescent informants in a Parisian suburb. In contrast to such higher deletion rates, rates of deletion are lower in the case of object pronouns, with rates in the range of 0.5%-91% in Poplack and Walker’s Canadian study, and between 0.4%-21% in Ashby’s Tourangeau study. Finally, deletion in the case of definite articles has not been widely observed in a continental context, whereas rates of 7%-38% have been reported in a Canadian bilingual context.

Just as in the case of the liaison, a range of linguistic, extralinguistic, and stylistic factors has been found to impact on /l/ deletion in the native speaker. For example, at a linguistic level, as we have outlined, the actual functional category concerned, be it a subject pronoun, object pronoun, or definite article plays an important role, while in the case of subject pronouns in particular, ‘il’ favours deletion to a much greater extent. In the case of extralinguistic and stylistic factors, Ashby (1984) reports an effect for age, social class, and gender, such that younger, male, and lower social class informants delete the /l/ to a greater extent than other speakers. In contrast, Armstrong (1996) reports a minimal gender-effect for his adolescent informants, in contrast with a more important effect for style.

3.3. ‘Ne’ deletion

Armstrong and Smith (2002: 23), quoting Coveney (1996: 55), remark that “the presence or absence of *ne* is “possibly the best known sociolinguistic variable in contemporary French””, which has been investigated by a range of scholars, including Ashby (1981b, 1991, 2001), Armstrong (2001; Armstrong & Smith, 2002), Coveney (1996), Gaatone (1971), Gadet (1989), Pohl (1975), Pooley (1996), and Sankoff & Vincent (1977, 1980). The range of studies allows us to capture the

⁹ For other studies, see Ashby (1984), Diller (1983), and Morin (1982).

gradual decline in the use of ‘ne’, with early studies reporting rates of deletion of, for example, 38% (Pohl, 1975), with later studies reporting near-categorical rates of 84% (Ashby, 2001), 81% (Coveney, 1996), and 92% (Armstrong, 2001). Such increased decline in use of ‘ne’ has been especially sharp in recent years, compared with the more gradual decline suggested by studies between the 90s and the 50s and 60s, as evidenced for example by Ashby’s (1981b) study of data collected in the 70s, where he reports a rate of deletion of 63%.

The near-categorical level of deletion in more recent years has been interpreted by some scholars as reflecting the increased hyper-style value which ‘ne’ usage may be assuming. As Armstrong (2002: 157), quoting Coveney (1996: 89-90), states, “although we clearly need more information about the social and stylistic differentiation of *ne* in various communities, it seems possible that it is [...] a “hyper-style” variable”. In particular, while the changing status of ‘ne’ deletion from a formal to a hyper-formal variable may not yet be complete, the social differentiation at work behind its usage is seen to be increasingly less important. That is to say, whereas earlier studies reported differences in its usage as a function of the speaker’s social characteristics, more recent studies have noted a convergence in levels of usage between speakers. For example, Ashby (2001) fails to find gender differences in his study of data collected in 1995, while Armstrong (2001) reports minimal gender differences in his study of adolescents in Eastern France. This contrasts with Ashby’s earlier finding for data collected in 1976, where male speakers showed a higher level of ‘ne’ usage compared to female speakers.

Furthermore, Coveney (1996) bases his argument for the increasing hyper-style status of ‘ne’ on his finding that intra-speaker variation exceeds inter-speaker variation in his study of data collected in the 1980s. That is to say, the difference in levels of ‘ne’ usage observed in a speaker speaking in a formal and informal style was much greater than the difference between levels of ‘ne’ usage observed across speakers with different social characteristics. Furthermore, Armstrong (2002) reports that, in his study of adolescents the formal-informal stylistic distinction does not capture the micro-variation at work behind ‘ne’ usage, whereby the ‘ne’ seems to be used for stylistic effect.

Having presented an overview of each individual variable, we will in the following compare their distinct characteristics with a view to considering how the use of each differs in terms of their status as sociolinguistic variables.

3.4. Comparison of the characteristics of the sociolinguistic variables

The variables under investigation here differ not only in terms of their phonological and morphological status, but also in terms of their status on the

sociolinguistic continuum. As previously mentioned, that continuum ranges from hyperformal variants to vernacular variants, with informal, neutral, and formal variants assuming their status between these two extremes. From this point of view, the variants of liaison are seen to consist less in the formal/informal distinction which characterises /l/ and ‘ne’ deletion, but rather in a hyperformal/neutral distinction. That is to say, while Standard French prescribes the realisation of /l/ and ‘ne’, non-realisation of liaison does not necessarily contradict the rules of Standard French. Indeed, in view of the enormous prestige which characterises liaison, its realisation in some contexts is quite rare, such as between infinitive verbs and their complement, and following /p/, /k/, and /t/, as outlined above. Since such uses are only prescribed in very formal discourse, they can be seen as extending beyond the norms of Standard French, in ways which are not true of the other variables of /l/ and ‘ne’ realisation. That is not to say, however, that all liaison contextual uses can necessarily be considered to be hyper-formal. For example, in the most recent study, Ashby (2003) reports on its frequent usage in certain contexts such as following ‘quand’ (when) at 85%, ‘bien’ (well) at 72%, ‘est’ (is) at 37%, and some negative particles with the exception of ‘pas’ at 33%. As such, some very infrequent liaison uses seem to assume a more hyperformal status compared to the more frequent ones identified by Ashby, such that all liaison uses do not neatly fit into the category of hyperformal, but rather overlap between the formal and hyperformal.

Notwithstanding the more hyperformal quality of liaison in general, as previously mentioned, some researchers have generally pointed to the increasing hyperformal status of our other variables. As one reviewer points out in particular, ‘ne’ deletion is increasingly evident in everyday spoken French, such that its informal status may be seen to be evolving towards a more neutral status, whereby it has to a certain extent lost its status as a social marker. For example, quoting Mougeon’s observations in the case of ‘ne’ deletion in Canadian French, Dewaele (2002) writes that “[n]e retention has become basically a super formal style marker with weak or non-existent ties with social variables”¹⁰. Similarly, /l/ deletion in the context of some lexicalised expressions such as ‘il y a’ (there is/are) is reaching near-categorical levels, and in so doing, may be assuming an increasingly neutral status in such contexts. Notwithstanding the traditional differential status of liaison as a hyperformal / neutral variable compared to the more formal / informal status surrounding ‘ne’ and /l/ deletion, the increasing overlap between some uses of each

¹⁰ A not dissimilar finding is offered by Coveney (2000) who attributes the status of a ‘hyperstyle variable’ to the minimal use of ‘nous’ in metropolitan French which is almost categorically replaced by ‘on’ in everyday language.

variable in terms of their status makes for an interesting area of comparison to be further outlined in the study presented here.

A further difference between the variables concerns precisely their differential complexity. For example, unlike the other two variables, liaison is characterised by considerable syntactic complexity due to the role that syntactic factors play in its usage. In this regard, some syntactic links call for obligatory realisation of liaison, others allow for variable realisation whereby the speaker has the choice between realisation and non-realisation, while others again are contexts of forbidden liaison, not allowing for its realisation at all.

In contrast to such syntactic complexity surrounding liaison usage, the other variables are perhaps less complex. For example, in the use of /l/ deletion, the variable is more contained within the individual word in which the /l/ occurs, and is not constrained in the same way by the syntactic link holding between that word and the word that follows¹¹. However, as previously noted, such deletion, as in the case of ‘ne’, is seen to be at odds with the prescriptive rules of Standard French. Nonetheless, such informal variants are not socially-restricted, but rather are found to occur across all social categories.

While acknowledging the distinctive traits of each variable, such that they are not wholly similar for comparative purposes, the study presented here naturally expects that there will be differences in their respective levels of usage. Notwithstanding such differences, the study aims to illuminate aspects of the sociolinguistic variation at work in spoken media language. While the comparative insights which the study provides are perhaps less important in view of the differential status of each variable, the need to study a range of variables in the same data is nonetheless an important one, and has not been the focus of previous studies. In particular, while there exist ample studies of each individual variable in the case of everyday French, they have only been minimally investigated in the case of media language, with the important exception of Ågren’s (1973) and Smith’s (1998) respective studies of liaison usage among discussants on formal radio programmes in the 1960s and 1990s, and Armstrong & Smith’s (2002) study of ‘ne’ deletion on similar programme types in the late 1990s. Furthermore, the comparative perspective adopted here has generally not been the focus of previous studies of

¹¹ That is not to say, however, that the characteristics of the following word do not play a role –they do, but in different terms, such as whether it begins with a vowel or consonant phoneme. For example, ‘ne’ and /l/ deletion are found to be more frequent when the following word is consonant-initial.

media language in France. Since the focus of the existing studies mentioned is primarily concerned with the influence of linguistic factors, there is a clear need for a study that now focuses on some of the more extralinguistic and stylistic factors which will be analysed here. Since we will draw on the findings of these studies for comparative purposes later in our analysis, we will forgo discussion of their results here.

Having provided some background detail on the sociolinguistic variables which are the focus of our investigation here, the following section will outline the study undertaken.

4. Study and data analysis

The study is based on an analysis of data collected as part of a research project investigating sociolinguistic variation in the spoken language of the French media, yielding over 20 hours of data from approximately 100 speakers. The data were recorded from a range of national television and radio programmes in France, including both news and discussion programmes. These programmes were chosen in view of the formality which is typically seen to surround their status, in contrast with other programmes where a less formal style prevails. That formality characterising news and discussion programmes was a means, therefore, of ensuring that our data best reflected as wide a range of liaison contextual uses as possible. That is to say, as we previously noted, some liaison uses are seen to be restricted to very formal speech styles. We, therefore, wished to investigate how such uses might be evident in the prototypically formal programmes that are news and discussion programmes. Regional programmes were not included so as to avoid any geographical effect, such that the journalists might adopt more regional speech norms in an attempt to approach the speech norms of their more local audience. Indeed, on this count, Bell (1984) reports on a study of New Zealand journalists whereby their discourse was seen to reflect some local speech norms, in spite of the fact that the journalists were not necessarily natives of a particular region. Thus, by restricting our analysis to national programmes, our study is less concerned with regional differences than with the characteristics of the sociolinguistic variables which the general French public accesses on their national airwaves.

The data were produced by a range of journalists in different roles, such as newsreader, special correspondent reporting from outside the studio, and discussion programme host. The data therefore allow an insight into how the use of a number of sociolinguistic variables may vary as a function of the journalist's reporting role, as well as according to their gender. For example, it is hypothesized that newsreaders,

reading from a ready-prepared text, will make greater use of the more formal sociolinguistic variants than their counterparts in the role of special correspondent or discussion programme host¹². In relation to the factor of style, the latter speakers may adopt a relatively less formal style, in view of the fact that they do not necessarily read from a text in front of them. In order to further illuminate the issue of style, we also included data from the public audience participating in the discussion programmes. In so doing, we aimed to consider how differences might arise between the professional media discourse of the journalists and members of the general public speaking in a presumably formal style, given the formality of the programmes. Following their recording, the data were transcribed into standard orthography following the transcription conventions proposed for French by Blanche-Benveniste & Jeanjean (1987).

For the purposes of this comparative study, we extracted from the data tokens of the three variables under investigation, namely liaison, /l/ deletion, and ‘ne’ deletion. Since we are only concerned with the variation surrounding such phenomena in media language, we did not include tokens where categorical use was observed, such as in the case of obligatory liaison use (*e.g.* ‘les enfants’ [the children] / ‘vous avez’ [you have])¹³. We did not observe any cases of hypercorrect liaison usage. Thus, in the case of liaison, all loci of variation were identified in the data, and the tokens subsequently extracted for the purpose of their analysis here. Following Ashby’s (1981a) classification of variable liaison contexts, we did not exclude any potential contexts where liaison was realised. The contexts have been generally presented in Figure 1 above, but can be fully listed as follows: following negative particles, following forms of ‘avoir’ or ‘être’, following monosyllabic / polysyllabic prepositions, following conjunctions, between an adverb and a modified element,

¹² One reviewer questions the reasons for including newsreaders in the study, since their reading from a set text does not constitute speech in the traditional sense. However, they are nonetheless confronted with the sociolinguistic choices in their reading of a text, whereby, for example, in the case of liaison they too have the choice to realise this variable or not. In particular, as previously noted, since some liaisons are seen as occurring in quite formal speech, the data collected from newsreaders may provide the only occurrences of such liaison usage which the French public ultimately accesses. A further reason for including the data produced by newsreaders concerns the important comparative insights which such data provide in relation to the more spontaneous speech collected in other contexts. All in all, to exclude the newsreader data in a study of media language would have seemed strange.

¹³ While Ashby (1981a) and Green & Hintze (2002) find some evidence of variation in the case of prescriptively categorical contexts of liaison usage, we did not find any such evidence in the case of the data investigated here.

between a noun and adjective in the plural, between a noun and a verb, and between verbs and their complements¹⁴.

In the case of /l/ deletion, variation was generally found to be restricted to word-final position on third person subject pronouns, whereas categorical /l/ realisation was observed in word-initial and word-medial position in the case of other potential contexts of variation such as definite articles and (in)direct object pronouns, and other lexical words involving consonant clusters. Such categorical contexts of /l/ realisation were, therefore, not included in the data.

For the study of ‘ne’ deletion, we extracted all tokens of negation where ‘ne’ could occur in pre-verbal position. Following Dewaele & Regan (2002), we did not include those cases where ‘ne’ realisation was categorical, such as in the expressions ‘n’importe’ (whichever) and ‘n’est-ce pas’ (tag-question marker), where ‘ne’ realisation is not possible, as in ‘pas du tout’ (not at all), or where the post-verbal negator was missing.

In the case of all tokens extracted from the data, we included those where each variable was both realised and non-realised, so as to allow an investigation into the journalists’ use of each variant of the variables under investigation. Ambiguous cases, where it could not be identified whether the variable was realised or not, were not included in the subsequent analyses. For example, it could not be identified whether ‘ne’ was realised or not in tokens where it was preceded by /n/ and followed by a vowel, such as in ‘on (n’)a pas compris’ (we didn’t understand). Similar ambiguity arises in the case of /l/ in third person subject pronouns which are followed by a word beginning with /l/, such as in ‘i(l) les a achetés’ (he bought them). Following their extraction from the data, the tokens to be included in our analyses were coded for a range of factors, with a view to illuminating some characteristics of their usage. Those factors included the programme and media in which they were produced, the journalist’s reporting role and gender, as well as some contextual detail concerning the linguistic environment in which the variables were produced. As such, it was possible to identify how certain contexts of use of each variable might be more frequent than others.

¹⁴ One reviewer points out that liaison is not possible in the case of the syntactic link holding between nouns and verbs, as outlined by various authors (see, for example, Bybee, 2001 and Malécot, 1975). However, since Ashby (1981a) reports its usage in such contexts, albeit at a minimal level, we decided to include it in the analysis here.

5. Results

We will firstly compare the overall levels of use of each variable, before considering some differences in how the individual variables are used. Table 1 presents the general level of realisation of each variable among the journalists, irrespective of the programme type concerned

Table 1. Overall realisation of each variable by the journalists.

Liaison		'ne'		/l/	
n	%	n	%	n	%
287	56	142	86	322	88

We firstly note that the general levels of use of 'ne' and /l/ are similar, such that these variables demonstrate considerably high levels of realisation, in contrast with the more reduced level of use of liaison. Given their differential sociolinguistic status, that is perhaps not surprising. However, it is noteworthy that, while some researchers see 'ne' deletion in particular as evolving from an informal variant to a more neutral variant, such evolution is not evident in our media data, where far higher levels of 'ne' retention are evident compared to liaison. Nonetheless, we note that in each case, the levels of use of each variable are much higher than those previously observed in everyday Hexagonal French. For example, in the case of liaison, Ashby (2003) reports an average rate of use of 28%, which is in fact twice as low as that which we report here. In the case of 'ne' realisation, Ashby (2001) reports a rate of less than 20%, which is lower again than his earlier study, Ashby (1981b), where he reports a rate of 60% in a formal situation and 39% in an informal situation. Similarly, Armstrong (2001) reports an average rate of 2% in the case of 'ne' realisation, with only a slight effect for style. In the case of /l/ realisation, he reports near-categorical non-realisation in the subject pronouns 'ils' and (im)personal 'il' in pre-consonantal position. Otherwise, levels of realisation on 'il' reach 88% before a vowel, with lower rates reported for 'elle' in general.

Our findings, therefore, point to the much greater use of each variable in the speech of the media presenters we have analysed here, which contrasts with their more reduced use in everyday speech. However, such general levels of use of each variable in Table 1 conceal a number of differences in how the variables are used by the media presenters. Table 2, therefore, presents the level of use of each variable as a function of the speaker's gender and reporting role, such as whether they were news-readers, special correspondents, or discussion programme hosts speaking more spontaneously. Perhaps as might be expected, we did not find any effect for the

media type concerned, whereby no significant differences emerged between the levels of use of each variable in the television and radio news programmes. In the case of the results for the discussion programmes, the table also makes a distinction between the professional interviewees and the members of the general public participating in these programmes. In the former case, they were professional experts on a topic of discussion participating in interviews with the discussion programme host, while in the latter case, they were members of the audience who were giving their comments to the host on the topic of discussion¹⁵.

Table 2. Realisation of each variable as a function of the speaker's role and gender.¹⁶

	Liaison		Liaison		'ne'		'ne'		/l/		/l/	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
News-Reader	63	56	72	55	15	100	22	100	63	96	59	98
Special Correspondent	71	69	35	52	48	92	22	93	74	100	49	97
Discussion Programme Host	25	57	21	45	20	61	15	85	30	83	47	78
Interviewee	35	55	3	19	10	50	11	69	51	82	22	69
Public audience	21	33	17	24	36	16	115	22	31	65	30	57

Once again, a number of tendencies can be identified based on the results presented in Table 2. With regard to gender, we note that differences between levels of use of each variable by news-readers and special correspondents are minimal, such that both male and female speakers in such roles seem to adopt similar levels of

¹⁵ One reviewer points out that the distinction between professional interviewees and members of the audience should not be made, since they ultimately have the same status as interviewees replying in some way to a question put to them. However, the distinction has been maintained here in view of the differences that emerge between their use of the variables concerned, as presented in Table 3.

¹⁶ Given that the number of tokens of each variable produced by some speakers was low, even within long streams of speech, we present the results for all speakers as a function of their reporting status and gender. Given the nature of the data concerned, it is not possible to ensure that each speaker individually produces a large number of tokens of each variable, such as in the case of naturally-elicited interviews.

formality through their use of the variables under investigation here. This is generally true with the exception of liaison usage by the special correspondents, where a gender effect is evident. That effect concerns the greater liaison usage by male speakers than by female speakers, and is reflected across the different groups of speakers. A similar trend is also evident in the case of /l/ realisation, where use of this variable is more frequent among male speakers than among female speakers, irrespective of their role. Finally, while an effect for gender is also apparent in the case of ‘ne’ realisation, the effect is not the same as in the case of the other variables. That is to say, male speakers are seen to realise the ‘ne’ less frequently than female speakers.

With regard to the speaker’s role, we further note that the use of the variables under investigation is by no means a uniform phenomenon, but rather important differences emerge. For example, we generally find that use of the variables is more frequent among news-readers and special correspondents than in the case of the other speakers. We also note that use of the variables is generally lower among the professional interviewees and the discussion programme audience than among the news journalists, such that the former speakers make less frequent use of the less formal variants. However, it is also noteworthy that differences between the male interviewees and the discussion programme hosts are minimal in the case of liaison and /l/ realisation. A final difference concerns the higher use of each variable among the professional interviewees than among the discussion programme audience. This is true irrespective of the speaker’s gender, with the exception of female speakers in the case of their usage of liaison, whereby female audience members realise liaison more frequently than their professional interviewee counterparts.

Apart from the speakers’ sociobiographic characteristics, we finally considered the linguistic characteristics of their contextual use of each variable. In particular, we were interested in identifying whether use of each variable tends to occur when particular linguistic features are present in context. From this point of view, we observed a general tendency for liaison to be more frequently realised in the case of all forms of ‘être’ (to be) and ‘avoir’ (to have), as well as bisyllabic prepositions (‘pendant un an’ [for a year]). Whereas such frequent usage with ‘être’ and ‘avoir’ was observed on both present tense and other tense verb forms in the case of the news programme journalists, this was much less true of the discussion programme hosts and their interviewees, who tended to restrict their liaison realisation to the forms ‘est’ (is), ‘sont’ (are-3rd person singular), and ‘ont’ (3rd person plural). Less frequent contexts of usage across the speakers included the syntactic link holding between nouns and verbs (*e.g.* ‘les enfants entraient’ [the children were coming in]), between verbs and their complements (*e.g.* ‘il sortait avec ses amis’ [he was going out with his

friends]), between adjectives and nouns (*e.g.* ‘les bons enfants’ [the good children]), and following negative particles (*e.g.* ‘jamais arrivé’ [never arrived]) and qualifying adverbs (*e.g.* ‘vraiment ambitieux’ [really ambitious]). We also examined the data for more marked uses of liaison which are not found in everyday speech, but which are considered to be restricted in usage to highly formal discourse. We did not, however, find any tokens of such liaison realisation, such as in the case of infinitives, suggesting that, in spite of the formal quality of our data, their usage is restricted to speech of an even more formal quality.

Similar to such differential contextual usage of liaison, we also observed a similar distinction in the contextual use in the case of ‘ne’ deletion. In particular, we found that deletion was restricted to its co-occurrence with ‘pas’, whereas other negative particles such as ‘jamais’ (never), ‘plus’ (no longer), and ‘rien’ (nothing) seemed to favour retention of the ‘ne’. In the case of /l/ deletion, we found a distinct tendency for this variant to be restricted in usage to the lexicalised expression ‘il y a’ (there is / are), with deletion being observed less frequently in the case of other lexical verbs. Nonetheless, its usage was also observed in the case of ‘il’ (he / it-masc.), especially in pre-consonantal position. While occurring when this pronoun carries both a personal and impersonal value, /l/ deletion, however, categorically did not occur with ‘ils’ (they-3rd person plural masc.), ‘elle’ (she / it-fem.), or ‘elles’ (they-3rd person plural fem.), which have generally been observed as contexts of more infrequent usage in earlier studies.

Notwithstanding the differences that have emerged in use of each variable as a function of the various factors considered, the question arises as to how the journalists’ highly frequent use of each variable may have changed over time, to reflect the decrease in use of each variable that characterises everyday French. In order to consider this question, we chose to compare our results with those of some earlier studies, namely Ågren (1973), Armstrong & Smith (2002), and Smith (1998). These studies are based on an analysis of ‘ne’ deletion and liaison realisation in the spontaneous discourse of journalists and professional speakers on radio discussion programmes of a similarly serious and formal nature as ours, respectively collected in 1960-61, 1997, and 1995-96. Since they do not consider the variable of /l/ deletion, and are restricted in their analyses to spontaneous discourse on radio programmes, Table 3 presents by means of a comparison, their findings for rates of ‘ne’ and liaison realisation, along with our findings for the use of those variables in the spontaneous discourse of the radio programmes we recorded in 2004.

Table 3. Longitudinal comparison of rates of ‘ne’ and liaison realisation in the spontaneous discourse of speakers on radio discussion programmes.

	Ågren, 1960-61	Smith, 1995-96; Armstrong & Smith, 1997	This study, 2004	
	%	%	N ¹⁷	%
Liaison	62	47	47	48
‘ne’ realisation	93	72	15	48

By comparing the findings over time, Table 3 suggests both a difference and a similarity between the two variables concerned. On the one hand, the drop in the use of liaison that is apparent between the 1960 data and the 1995-96 data seems to have stabilised between 1995-96 and 2004, insofar as a further drop in usage is not apparent in our data collected in 2004. While this may reflect the short time period concerned of just 8-9 years since Armstrong and Smith’s study, the decrease in ‘ne’ realisation which first emerges in Armstrong and Smith’s 1995-96 data further emerges in our 2004 data, such that a further decrease seems to have occurred between 1995-96 and 2004. Thus, while the media journalists certainly use both variables to a higher extent than their public, the journalists nonetheless reflect the decrease that characterises everyday Hexagonal French. However, while the drop in liaison realisation seems to have stabilised between 1995-96 and 2004, that is not true in the case of ‘ne’ deletion, whereby ‘ne’ deletion is seen to have further increased in the same time period. We further note that, while levels of ‘ne’ realisation are greater than in the case of liaison in both previous studies, levels of use of both variables emerge as being similar in our 2004 data. That similar level of usage arises due to the continued drop in ‘ne’ realisation that has occurred since 1997, such that further data in the future will be required to see whether levels of ‘ne’ realisation continue to fall below those of liaison realisation. In summary, however, the similarities in levels of use of both ‘ne’ and liaison constitute some evidence for the increasing neutral status surrounding the sociolinguistic variable of ‘ne’ deletion, as is well documented in the case of liaison.

6. Discussion

This paper had as its aim to provide a preliminary investigation of the manifestation of sociolinguistic variation in media language. Our results show that

¹⁷ N refers to the number of tokens where liaison was realised.

such variation is by no means a uniform phenomenon, but rather considerable differences emerge in relation to the specific variable under consideration, as well as some characteristics surrounding the speaker, such as his/her reporting role and gender. Our results further point to some differences between the journalists and the public's use of everyday French. Taken together, these results concerning extralinguistic and stylistic factors further corroborate those more linguistic factors investigated by Armstrong and Smith (2002). These issues will be discussed in more detail here.

With regard to the use of sociolinguistic variables in everyday Hexagonal French, previous studies have pointed to a general decrease in use of more formal variants that has taken place, reflecting the corresponding increase in use of more informal variants that has long characterised Canadian varieties of French. We, therefore, considered how such use of sociolinguistic variables might be reflected in media language. However, our findings have pointed to the important maintenance of the variables concerned among the journalists, such that their level of use is much higher than in everyday French. This trend is generally true across the variables investigated here, such that at a time when more formal variants are increasingly not in use in everyday French, they continue to be accessible in the media language variety investigated here. In relation to their language usage on the programmes investigated, journalists seem, therefore, not to approach the level of informality, or even neutrality, that characterises everyday French in terms of its important use of informal and neutral variants. Rather, in terms of their choice between the variants concerned, the journalists tend to opt more frequently for the more formal variant, reflecting awareness on their part of the formality which characterises the programme on which they are presenting. In spite of such important levels of use of each variable, however, our comparison of 'ne' and liaison realisation over time indicates that their usage by the journalists does reflect their decreasing usage in everyday French.

Notwithstanding such a longitudinal decrease in their usage, we also note that the still frequent use of the more formal variants by the journalists is not a uniform phenomenon, such that the more formal variants are not treated equally. We firstly note that their usage is by no means an 'all-or-nothing' phenomenon, demonstrating categorical levels of usage across variables. Rather, general levels of use of each variable differ between variables, reflecting an effect for the variable in itself. In particular, we note that level of use of the more hyperformal variant of liaison is lower than in the case of retention of the 'ne' and /l/. We further note that the general levels of use of 'ne' and /l/ retention are relatively similar, at 88% and 96% respectively. However, differences do emerge between the latter variables when

account is taken of their use as a function of other factors, such as the presenter's reporting role and gender, as well as the type of programme in terms of a distinction between news and discussion programmes.

With regard to the presenter's reporting role, we note that presenters engaged in more spontaneous speaking demonstrate lesser use of the more formal variants than their counterparts reading from a ready-prepared text. Nonetheless, irrespective of their role, the presenters generally make greater use of these variants than in the case of professional interviewees and members of the discussion programme audience. We further note, however, that differences emerge between the latter speaker groups, whereby the interviewees make greater use of the formal variants than the audience members, and, in so doing, more closely approach the levels of use of each variable by the discussion programme hosts.

Finally, gender has also emerged as an important factor whereby differences are evident in the case of some presenters, as well as among the professional interviewees and the discussion programme audience. In particular, in the case of liaison and /l/ retention by those presenters speaking more spontaneously, the use of the more formal variants has generally emerged as being more frequent among male speakers than among female speakers, reflecting similar tendencies observed among the public audience. However, that pattern is at odds with that reported in other recent studies of the variables. For example, in the case of liaison, Ashby (2003) finds that the gender-pattern he reported in an earlier study had curiously been reversed, where males realised liaison more frequently than females. In their more spontaneous, but nonetheless formal speech styles, the journalists in this study therefore reflect an earlier pattern of use. In so doing, they may be seen to less wish to adhere to the current 'gender norm', but rather their use of the variable not only reflects the higher level of use of the variable in the past, but also the gender pattern underlying the use of the variable at that time.

In the case of /l/ deletion, the gender-pattern we report differs from that observed by Armstrong (2001), who finds a minimal effect for gender in his study of speakers in the Moselle Valley. Similarly, minimal gender differences are also reported in the case of 'ne' deletion by Armstrong (2001) and Coveney (1996) in their respective studies in the Moselle Valley and Picardie. That minimal effect for gender on 'ne' deletion, however, is only reflected in our findings for its use by the news-readers and special correspondents, where differences between the male and female speakers are generally not evident. While findings for these speakers reflect those of other recent studies of 'ne' deletion, they differ nonetheless from those concerning the discussion programme hosts, where a gender effect is evident. In particular, we find that 'ne' retention is more frequent among the female hosts than

among their male counterparts. This pattern of use is, therefore, clearly different to that which we observe in the case of the other variables, and also in the case of other recent studies of ‘ne’ deletion. Thus, while gender emerges as an important factor in our study, we note that its effect reflects a pattern of gender-conditioned variation that is not observed in more recent studies of the variables. As alluded to in our discussion of liaison usage and gender, however, a possible interpretation concerns the fact that the journalists may be demonstrating an older gender-pattern detailed in earlier studies of ‘ne’ deletion. For example, just as in the case of ‘ne’ usage in the more spontaneous discourse of the journalists, Ashby (1981b) reports similarly more frequent ‘ne’ retention among his older female informants¹⁸.

While an effect for gender is at play in the case of the presenters speaking more spontaneously, a similar effect is not evident in the case of those presenters whose role does not call for spontaneous reporting, such as in the case of the news-readers and, to a lesser extent, special correspondents. In the case of these presenters, we note that, with the exception of liaison, not only does use of the more formal variants reach near-categorical levels, but differences in their level of use are not evident between these male and female presenters. The failure to find a difference suggests, therefore, that in less spontaneous speech styles, the effect for gender is neutralised such that the presenters adopt similar levels of use of the variables. Furthermore, a similarly neutral effect for their reporting role is evident insofar as minimal differences emerge in their levels of use of the ‘ne’ and /l/. Indeed, in the case of news-readers, no variation characterises their use of ‘ne’, such that they realise this variable at categorical levels which are similarly approached in the case of /l/ retention. Such (quasi-)categorical rates of ‘ne’ and /l/ realisation contrast with their more variable realisation among those presenters speaking more spontaneously.

While such very high levels of realisation of the formal variants are evident in the case of ‘ne’ and /l/ retention, they are not equally in evidence in the case of liaison, which may reflect an effect for its more hyperformal status in contrast with the traditionally formal status of the other variables. That is to say, as previously mentioned, non-use of liaison in such less spontaneous styles does not go against the rules of Standard French in the same way as non-realisation of ‘ne’ and /l/ would seem to. Nonetheless, however, liaison usage is more frequent in the less spontaneous styles characterising news-readers and special correspondents than in the case of those presenters assuming more spontaneous speech styles, reflecting a similar effect for the presenter’s role as evidenced in the case of the other variables. While such a finding suggests that the journalists concerned demonstrate lower

¹⁸ This was in contrast with his younger informants, where the reverse pattern was observed.

levels of linguistic formality than their news-reader counterparts, it is unclear whether this reflects an attempt to approach the less formal characteristics surrounding the use of the variables in everyday French, or simply reflects the spontaneity of their speech, which does not allow time for the same conscious attention to be paid to the realisation of the variables, unlike in the case of the news-readers reading from a text.

Whichever interpretation might prevail, it nonetheless remains the case that the journalists demonstrate higher levels of realisation of each variable than has been documented in everyday Hexagonal French. Since the members of the public participating in the programme concerned do likewise, albeit not to the same extent as the journalists, it seems that all concerned wish to present a level of linguistic formality which they perceive to be befitting of the general formality surrounding the programmes concerned. While a general longitudinal tendency towards the use of more informal / neutral variants has characterised everyday metropolitan French, such a tendency has yet to become entrenched in the media discourse analysed here, in which the French public can extensively access use of the more formal variants which are not present in everyday French to the same extent at all. There remains, therefore, a considerable gap between the linguistic formality of the programmes concerned and that surrounding everyday French, such that, given the general formality of the programmes analysed, the journalists concerned seem not to be tempted to forgo such linguistic formality in order to approach the linguistic informality characteristic of everyday French in relation to the variables concerned. This is in spite of the appeal that such linguistic informality might hold in French society in terms of its positive association with post-war values associated with the youth and social change.

7. Conclusion

As a preliminary investigation of sociolinguistic variation in media language, this study demonstrates some of the factors at play. For the future, however, a much wider range of programmes will need to be considered, so as to further illuminate the use of sociolinguistic variables in media language. For example, while a more diverse range of programme types is one area of potential investigation, others include the need to consider more local media in specific regions of France, as well as outside of France, so as to illuminate how factors other than those considered here may come into play. Those factors may be diverse, relating not only to the presenters themselves, but also to their target audience whose speech characteristics the presenters may try to reflect. Such key-issues relating to French, along with the

current scarcity of studies of such issues underline the need for much further research in the future of the manifestation of sociolinguistic variation in French media language, which can further add to the important trends already observed in the case of everyday spoken French.

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