Francoprovençal: Documenting contact varieties in Europe and North America

Kasstan, J. and Nagy, N.

Jonathan Kasstan* and Naomi Nagy

Introduction

This special issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* brings together articles from an international set of authors that situate the family of Francoprovençal (FP) dialects in terms of formal structures, contexts of contact, practice and policy. FP has been the subject of little scholarly attention. This dearth of research is largely the result of its ambiguous status. Ever since it was introduced by Ascoli (1878 [1874]), the notion of FP has been questioned. There has long been disagreement over its linguistic borders and the linguistic criteria used for demarcation. As late as 2007, scholars have asked: *le francoprovençal existe-t-il ?* [does FP exist?] (Tuaillon 2007: 9).

This is the first collection describing FP across its entire geographical distribution and assembling varied sociolinguistic approaches. Previous collections include a dialectology volume focusing on the status and structure of FP (Marzys (1971); a posthumous volume focusing on Lyonnais (Gardette 1983); and Fréchet (2009), consisting of descriptions of both FP and Occitan. These works – though important contributions to FP linguistics – provide little quantitative substance. Moreover, little work on FP has been produced in English, which limits access to researchers worldwide who might be interested in the sociolinguistic context of FP or comparison with other minority-language contexts. To begin to fill this void, we introduce FP, then outline the key themes of this issue and the range of sociolinguistic traditions covered.

FP can be described as a highly fragmented grouping of Romance varieties spoken in parts of France, Switzerland, and Italy by less than 1 % of the total regional population. Martin (1990) and Tuaillon (1993) report that between 120,000 and 200,000 speakers are thought to exist. FP is also maintained by diasporic communities in the USA and Canada, though numbers are significantly smaller than in Europe (Nagy 2011; Zulato et al. this issue). This original collection of articles is significant in that contributions describe and compare FP in all these countries.

*Corresponding author: Jonathan Kasstan,** Queen Mary University of London, Mile End Rd, London E1 4NS, UK, E-mail: j.kasstan@qmul.ac.uk
Naomi Nagy, University of Toronto, 27 King's College Cir, Toronto ON M5S, Canada, E-mail: naomi.nagy@utoronto.ca

Figures 1 and 2 show where FP is spoken in Europe and North America, as well as indicating the sites of research reported in this issue.
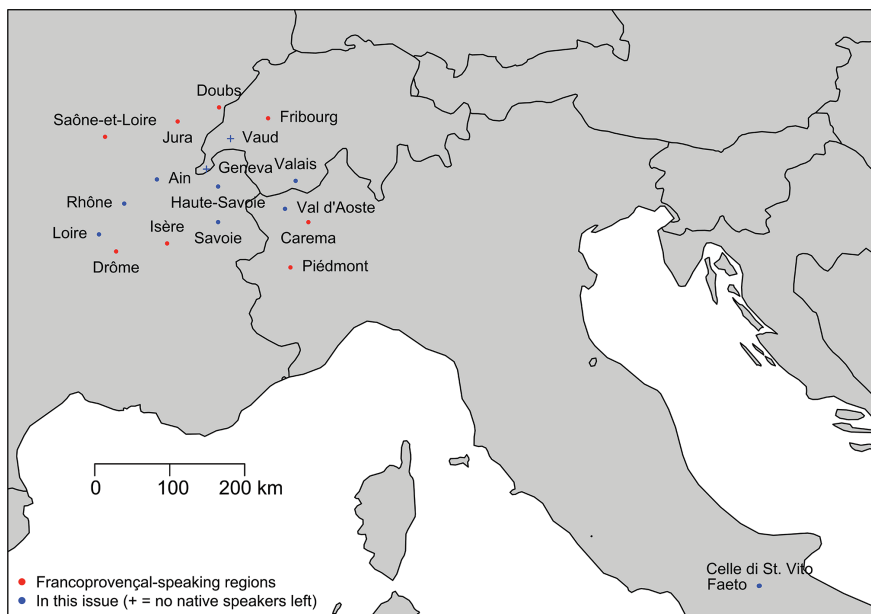
Figure 1: Francoprovençal spoken in Europe.

The publication is motivated in part by the fact that, wherever it is spoken, FP is undergoing "gradual death" (Campbell and Muntzel 1989: 184–185): speaker numbers have been in terminal decline for some time, as long term language shift in the direction of the dominant national language(s) occurs, accompanied by migration from rural areas. Therefore, FP faces many challenges similar to those of other minority varieties, particularly in those states, such as France, where heavy legislation defends the national language at the cost of regional or minority varieties (cf. Hawkey and Kasstan 2015). However, unlike many neighboring minority languages, FP is characterized by its unique standing in the Romance linguistics literature as only having been recognized, with significant reticence from the academic community, at the turn of the twentieth century. FP was first proposed as a set of discrete and coherent linguistic varieties (Ascoli 1878 [1874]) spoken in a transitional area between the *langue*
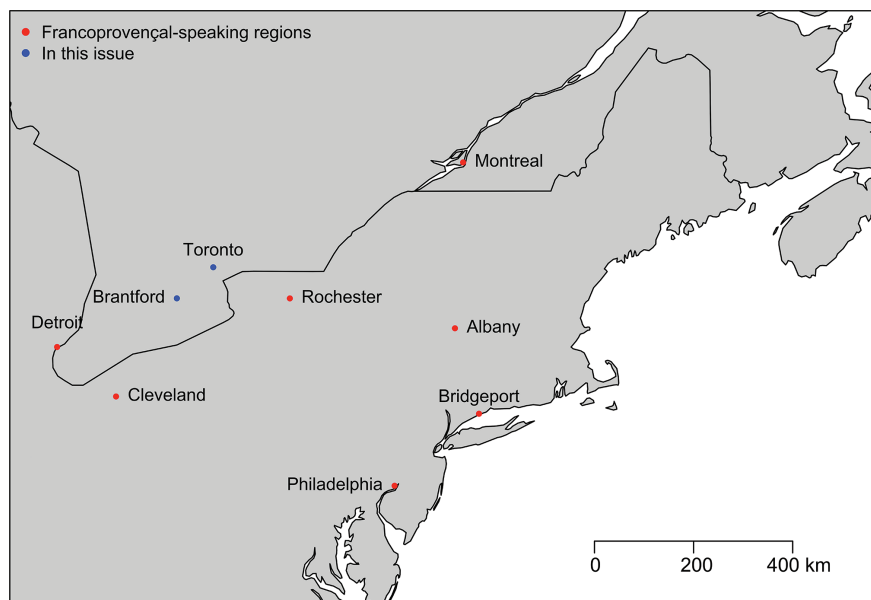
Figure 2: Francoprovençal spoken in North America.

d'oc (southern French and Occitan varieties) and *langue d'oïl* (northern French varieties),[1] under the following definition:

> [...] un tipo idiomatico, il quale insieme riunisce, con alcuni suoi caratteri specifici, più altri caratteri, che parte son comuni al francese, parte lo sono al provenzale, e non prioviene già da una tarda confluenza di elementi diversi, ma bensì attesta la sua propria indipendenza istorica non guari dissimile da quella per cui fra loro si distinguono gli altri principali tipi neolatini
>
> [(...) a linguistic system which reunites its own specific characteristic features with other defining features partly common to French, and partly common to Provençal, and which did not come from a late confluence of different elements, but rather which attest to its own historic independence not very dissimilar from the one for which the other main neo-Latin types are distinguished from each other]
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> (Ascoli 1878 [1874]: 61)

Ascoli's combination of phonetic features that define FP is based solely on the development of Latin tonic free A. In delimiting FP from the *oïl* varieties,

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1 The linguistic geography of France is conventionally viewed as being divided between these two masses. The terms *oïl* and *oc* date back to at least 1284, when the poet Bernart d'Auriac first used them to describe variation in the speech of France (Plazanet 1913: 167).

when preceded by a non-palatal consonant, Ascoli holds that, in FP, Latin A is conserved as /a/, while in Standard French (SF) Latin tonic free A gave rise to /e/in open syllables and /ɛ/ in closed syllables, as in (1) and (2) below:

(1)   *pratum*
       /pʀe/ (SF), /pʀa/ (FP)
       'field'

(2)   *pater*
       /pɛʀ/ (SF), /ˈpaʁə/ (FP)
       'father'

Further, in distinguishing FP from Occitan, Ascoli states that when the same vowel is preceded by a palatal consonant (i.e., those consonants resulting from the palatalisation of Latin C + A), Latin A is raised in FP, while in Occitan /a/ is maintained (see [3] and [4] below; for additional examples, see Martin 1990: 674]).

(3)   *manducare*
       [ˈmãʒaʁ] (Occitan), [ˈmiʒie] (FP)
       'eat'

(4)   *vacca*
       [ˈvaka] (Occitan), [ˈvaʃi] (FP)
       'cow'

As a result of this narrow definition, based on one feature, FP's status and linguistic borders have been repeatedly called into question (cf. Lüdtke 1971; Martin 1990; Tuaillon 2007). This is reflected in the very label "Franco(-)provençal",[2] which suggests a French/Occitan hybrid.

The official status of FP varies considerably. In France, FP was not recognised by the government as a *langue de France* [language of France] until 1999. It is still not accorded privileges in the national education system, as it is not deemed sufficiently different from French (Bron 2011). In Switzerland, where multilingualism is safeguarded by the constitution, FP remains absent from Article 70 which accords status to the Confederation's official languages, including Rumantsch (see

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2 Since the 1950s "Franco-Provençal" is conventionally written without a hyphen, signaling that these varieties are not simply a mix of French and Provençal (see Martin 1990: 672), though many labels have since been suggested (see Kasstan 2016: 82).

Camartin 1985). In the Aosta Valley, an autonomous region in northern Italy, we do find FP in the regional education system, though only at elementary and maternal levels (Josserand 2003). Moreover, there is no accepted pan-regional codified orthographical norm. The effects of its different status in different locations is compared in this issue by Bichurina, Diémoz, and Regis.

Among its traditional native-speaker base, we find a further series of challenges to language maintenance: these speakers have never known their language by the label "Francoprovençal" (Sériot 1997), nor have they ever consciously embraced membership in a unified larger linguistic system. There has been no international or even trans-regional sense of FP identity (Grinevald and Bert 2013), though trans-regional cooperative efforts are beginning to emerge (see Diémoz, this issue). Instead, native speakers refer to their own varieties as "patois" (Kasstan 2016; Meune, this issue), the same term used to refer to other non-standard varieties (see Blanchet and Armstrong 2006). Their attitudes are focused at the highly localised level only (Nagy 2000; Kasstan 2015), where, in the context of France at least, it has been argued that FP is only deployed as "post-vernacular" practice (cf. Bert and Martin 2013; Pivot 2014), invoking a terminal decline. In short, it is perhaps unsurprising that FP has been described as *une langue méconnue* [an unknown language] (Stich 1998), or, worse still, *une langue oubliée* [a forgotten language] (Tuaillon 1988).

While clearly obsolescent, FP is nevertheless experiencing revitalization. This renewed interest is not led by native speakers, but instead by a revitalization movement made up of so-called *new speakers* (O'Rourke and Ramallo 2013). These speakers differ in social and economic terms from the native speakers of FP, and as such the current sociolinguistic climate in which these varieties are spoken is beginning to change: traditional linguistic practices are in flux and issues pertaining to authenticity, legitimacy and language ownership are emerging (Kasstan 2017). New speakers are discussed in this issue by Bichurina, Dunoyer, Kasstan and Müller, and Meune.

The context of FP therefore offers new ground on which to explore a series of research questions at the interface of the sociology of language and other fields of linguistic inquiry:

– Variation and change in formal structure: What observable language change can be identified across varieties? Do common patterns emerge?
– Language contact: Do we find similar linguistic phenomena in the context of an obsolescent language in contact with different languages? How can these phenomena be characterised?
– Practices and representations: Are practices changing? If so, what impact is this having linguistically? Does conflict arise between native and non-native speakers?

– Language planning and the future: How can a severely endangered language realistically be maintained in an increasingly globalised world? Can recent FP practices provide a model?

Addressing the above questions produced contributions from a range of (socio) linguistic fields of inquiry, applying methods in variationist and comparative sociolinguistics, regional dialectology, dialectometrics, discourse analysis, formal structural description, and contact effects to the analysis of a severely endangered language. Therefore, the contributions to the issue offer formal and theoretical approaches that complement those few works that already exist on FP.[3]

The issue opens with a much-needed overview of the current levels of vitality of FP in all regions in which it is spoken, both in Europe and North America. Zulato, Kasstan and Nagy give details organized by region, presenting outlines of the linguistic history, current glottopolitical status of FP and demographic information. They describe each variety's vitality using Brenzinger et al.'s (2003) UNESCO scale as a framework. While all varieties clearly show a dwindling speaker-base, there is substantial variation in ethnolinguistic vitality scores, with the varieties of the Aosta Valley fairing better than, e.g., France, where speaker numbers are much higher. Following this overview, the issue is organized into three sections: (i) structural descriptions; (ii) contact effects; and (iii) practices and representations.

In the first, three articles discuss structural aspects of FP morpho-syntactic and phonological systems. Nagy, Iannozzi and Heap employ comparative sociolinguistic methods to explore the subject-pronoun system of the FP variety Faetar. Through variationist analyses of data collected from homeland Faetar (Faeto, Italy) and heritage Faetar (Toronto), and then comparison with patterns of subject-pronoun usage in FP in France, in Toronto English and in Italian, they show that – despite the very small size of its speech community – Faetar shows little evidence of accommodation towards the dominant languages with which it is in contact. Hinzelin explores the sound system of FP. As he notes, there is little empirically-grounded literature that adequately explores the synchronic shape of FP phonetics and phonology, certainly not from a structuralist phonological analysis. Employing comparative and dialectometric methods, Hinzelin makes use of several corpora to show that the FP of France evidences striking levels of phonetic accommodation to the dominant language, contrary to Nagy et al.'s findings regarding the pronoun system in Italy. Kristol's contribution uses a forthcoming atlas of the Canton of Valais (the *Atlas linguistique*

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3 A list of post-2000 FP studies is available at: http://projects.chass.utoronto.ca/ngn/HLVC/1_8_refs_FP.php – bibliographies for pre-2000 works can be found in *Revue de Linguistique Romane* (e.g. Sala and Reinheimer 1967).

audiovisuel du francoprovençal valaisan) to show that Valaisan FP has developed a subject-clitic system with neutralized gender marking and allomorphy based on the phonological structure of the following verb. This apparent complex-ification of the subject-clitic system in a minority contact variety would appear to contradict long-held assumptions about obsolescence and tendencies towards simplification (e.g. Grinevald Craig 1997: 260).

Three articles then follow which focus on language contact phenomena. Kasstan and Müller explore variation in the realization of obstruent + lateral consonant clusters in Lyonnais FP. The study shows a tendency for native speak-ers of FP to converge on SF, reinforcing Hinzelin's claims. Similar patterns have been observed elsewhere in France (e.g. Pooley and Kasstan 2016). Conversely, an emerging category of "new speakers" (see above) signal instead the use of new vernacular forms that do different social work to traditional forms. Regis examines contact in the Aosta Valley between FP, Piedmontese, and Italian. He sketches the sociolinguistic context of the Aosta Valley, before discussing contact effects in the lexicon, phonology and morpho-syntax. He identifies potential changes in pro-gress that would be fruitful for further (variationist) sociolinguistic exploration. Dal Negro and Angster report reciprocal lexical contact effects between FP and two severely endangered Walser minority group dialects, also spoken in the Aosta region. They show that lexical distance reveals patterns of contact, isolation and asymmetries contrasting with expectations from geographical distance and socio-linguistic dominance.

Sociolinguistic practices and representations are examined in the final articles. Through comparison across France, Switzerland and Italy, Bichurina explores "focused" and "diffuse" (Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985) linguistic practices. She describes the changing sociolinguistic representation of FP for new speakers, and efforts made to reclaim the language, invoking an upward trajectory towards revitalization. Diémoz focuses on language policy and plan-ning strategies in Switzerland. She notes that language attitudes towards FP are increasingly positive, and that there is an increased interest in the language, drawing parallels with other contexts in the language death literature. Dunoyer's contribution proposes a typology of four speaker-types for FP. The distinctions are based on ethnographic observations and participant interactions. Lastly, Meune examines representation of FP in Switzerland in the *Journal de Genève*. He explores the differential use of glottonyms referring to linguistic practices. He notes a rise of embryonic nationalism tied to use of an alternative label for FP – Harpetan (or Arpitan, see also Kasstan and Müller [this issue]) – which invokes a pan-regional linguistic identity in a region that has historically had no unity, linguistic, political, or otherwise. This perspective contrasts sharply with the lack of a unified view of FP among native speakers, alluded to above. The issue

ends with Costa's review of Hornsby (2015), which synthesizes the impact of non-native speakers on revitalization efforts in endangered minority languages elsewhere, noting the relevance to the FP context.

These topics will be of interest to speakers, scholars and language activists working on FP and other small language varieties, which share many challenges discussed in the issue.

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