

# Tendencies in Contemporary French Pronunciation

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## 1. Introduction

At the present stage of development the French language is undergoing an emancipation in all directions, and above all in phonetics. There are numerous cases where orthoepic norms are gradually becoming optional, changing into tendencies rather than stable pronouncing norms. The problem of the correlation between a norm and a tendency of pronunciation is of major importance for foreigners learning French outside France. Hence the goal of my research is to study the pronunciation tendencies which are quite obviously revealing themselves in the pronunciation of standard French.

To achieve the goal I have studied different sounds both separately and in groups, both on the phonetic and the phonemic levels, e.g. nasal vowels and their oral counterparts, semivowels, /ə/ caduc, the opposition /a-a/ and /œ-ě/ and also the variphones of the phoneme /r/ (apical and uvular).

## 2. Method

The sound composition of French was studied on the basis of the phonological distribution of the given phonemes. The speech material used consisted in the recordings of 24 French people in Paris 1972. The phonemic analysis was based on listening tests and questionnaires. The experimental research was carried out by applying spectral analysis, synthesis, oscillography, X-ray analysis, using the facilities of the laboratories of the Moscow Institute of Foreign Languages, the Tbilisi State University as well as the Paris Institute of Phonetics (in 1982).

My aim was to detect articulatory shifts, state their direction, and show their effect on the timbre of vowels.

## 3. Results and discussion

The spectrum and the X-ray analysis revealed that the back sound /a/ has shifted forward to a centralized position. The degree of this shift is so considerable that instead of the former back vowel /a/ we can now speak of the centralized /a:/. Since the tongue position is more fronted, the centralized /a:/ and the front /a/ show almost similar configurations for both the oral resonators and the palatopharyngeal cavities.

It was likewise established that the difference in the articulation of /œ/ and /ɛ/ is vanishing, leading to the dephonologization of /œ/ which points to a tendency towards open articulation, towards delabialization and towards the reduction of the number of nasal vowels to three.

The fact that /ɑ/ and /œ/ undergo dephonologization shows that although a minimal physical distinction remains in the opposition pairs of /ɑ-a/ and /œ-ɛ/, the distinctive function in speech is erased, or else it is transferred from one phoneme to the other: in our case from /ɑ/ to /a/ and from /œ/ to /ɛ/.

The frequency statistics of the occurrence of the French vowels allow us to suppose that the reason why /ɑ/ and /œ/ are vanishing lies in the overloading of these vowels with grammatical functions which entails their frequent repetitions in different contexts, the confusion of their articulation with that of the other member of the opposition and eventually the complete disappearance of these oppositions. For example the functional overloading of the phoneme /œ/ is seen in several grammatical functions: the indefinite article 'un' the numeral 'un franc' the indefinite pronoun 'pas un', 'l'un', 'un entre mille' the noun 'un', 'l'un deux', 'il est arrivé un hier', also 'pas un n'est venu', 'un que je plains de tout mon coeur' etc. Comparing the frequency of occurrence of /ɑ/ and /a/, the proportion is 8 to 1 in favour of the front vowel /a/. The phoneme /ɑ/ also has several grammatical functions: those of a preposition, a verb ('avoir', 3rd p. sg., 'il a'), an adverb 'il est là', etc. Thus the overloading with the grammatical functions leads to an articulatory similarity with the opposition counterpart and, eventually to the loss of the opposition /ɑ-a/.

The normative course of contemporary French maintains the co-existence of the apical /r/ and the uvular /r/ or 'r grasseyé'. The replacement of the apical /r/ by the uvular /r/ has been registered in various West European languages: French, German, Swedish, Dutch, Norwegian and others. This transformation of the variphones of the phoneme /r/ introduces new problems to linguists.

The analysis of the recorded speech material suggests that in some non-northern regions of France the apical /r/ is still observed as a relic form of pronunciation. As for the uvular /r/, we can confidently state that it has established itself in pronunciation in the north of France and in Paris.

In the languages of those West European countries where the uvular /r/ is pronounced there is a tendency towards the front pronunciation of vowels. This fact suggests that the uvular /r/ appears in those languages that are rich in vowel phonemes, with front vowels prevailing over back vowels, i.e. in the vocalic-type languages tending towards front articulation. The physiological reason could be that the tip of the tongue is too busy pronouncing the front vowels, so the trill has to be pronounced elsewhere.

#### 4. Conclusion

On the basis of the phonetic experiments carried out, I can sum up by saying that there are the following tendencies in contemporary French pronunciation:

1. in the vowel system:
  - a. There is a tendency towards front articulation, as seen in the disappearance of the opposition /ɑ-a/ to the advantage of /a/ i.e. in the forward shift of the sound /ɑ/.
  - b. A tendency towards open articulation as seen in the loss of the opposition /œ-ɛ/ to the advantage of /ɛ/.
  - c. A tendency towards delabialization, e.g. the sound /œ/ is transformed into the sound /ɛ/, besides there is a trend to confuse the sounds /œ/ and /ə/ caduc, where the neutral /ə/ is frequently replaced by /œ/.
2. in the system of consonants:
 

A tendency to stabilize the 'r grasseyé' variphone which ousts the apical /r/ into a position of a mere relic form.