

What's in a *ne*? Variable *ne* Deletion in the Spoken French of Two Canadian Politicians:

François Legault and Justin Trudeau

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ABSTRACT

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The French language in Quebec is deeply rooted in the province's francophone culture and identity (Oakes, 2004); consequently, some of its spoken features diverge from varieties spoken in Europe. One of these features is the variable deletion of the negation particle *ne* (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; e.g., “je ne parle pas”), which can be variably produced depending on a number of linguistic and social factors.

This study investigated whether Quebec French speakers employ variable *ne* deletion in their speech and the phenomenon's relationship to sociostylistic contexts (i.e., formal vs. informal styles), hypothesizing that this variable deletion may be connected to expressions of Quebec identity. To test this hypothesis, a variationist analysis was conducted to compare *ne* deletion in the speech of two prominent political figures in Canada: Justin Trudeau and François Legault. They were selected based on their respective French-Canadian backgrounds and prominence in Canada and Quebec. The corpus used for this analysis was collected and transcribed from a selection of each politician's political addresses regarding Covid-19. The researchers hypothesized that Legault would be more likely to delete *ne* than Trudeau, and that Legault would be more likely to delete *ne* in less formal settings. Following a variationist perspective for examining variable phenomena, an inter-speaker analysis compared *ne* deletion between speakers (Legault and Trudeau), while an intra-speaker analysis compared *ne* deletion between sociostylistic contexts (i.e., *formal* public addresses and *informal* question-and-answer periods).

Statistical results (Goldvarb Z; Sankoff et al., 2018) revealed that Legault was significantly more likely to delete *ne* than Trudeau. Additionally, Legault showed no significant difference in the likelihood of *ne* deletion in the adopted sociostylistic contexts. The patterns observed in Legault's speech reflect the variationist literature on Quebec French, in that French-Canadians almost categorically favour *ne* deletion (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007). One possible explanation for these results is that Legault's frequent use of *ne* deletion solidifies his link to the Quebec identity, whereas Trudeau's patterns deviate from the Quebec French norm, perhaps to reinforce his role as a *Canadian* leader, thus appealing to Canada's francophone population on a more national level.

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Chapter 1

What's "Right" in Language? A Personal Exploration of Quebec French

I always believed I spoke French incorrectly, which is one of the reasons I decided to study Applied Linguistics: to better understand second language use. Before this program, my academic background was in theatre and, as a trained actor, I chose to pursue acting here, in Montreal. However, I never worked on French productions and did not try to, as I believed I did not speak French correctly. I thought that if I learned more about the acquisition and use of second languages, I would understand more about my use of French as a second language and, eventually, work as an actor on French productions. One of the issues I had with the French language was its negation system, as I never used the *ne* particle when speaking. In French, standard negation typically consists of two parts: a preverbal particle *ne* and a second negative marker, such as *pas*, *plus*, or *jamais* (e.g., *je ne parle pas* 'I do not speak'; see forthcoming discussion). I knew that I spoke Quebec French, due to my upbringing, extended family, social circles at various points in my life, and because I sounded like the Quebec French speakers around me, except with a slight anglophone accent. One of the issues was that, according to what I was taught in school, not using *ne* wasn't "right".

I believed this deletion of *ne* to be wrong, even though the Quebec French speakers around me did not use it either. At that time, I had a slightly negative perception of Quebec French, as I never identified as a Quebecer, or a francophone, in the way that those French speakers around me did. As a result, I never liked the French I spoke or heard. Since it differed from the French I was taught at school, I thought it was wrong and that I did not speak French properly. Years later, through my deletion of *ne*, I learned that I was employing the norms of Quebec French, like a *near native* speaker of this variety. I discovered this in a variationist

linguistic class that I took in the first semester of my master's program. This realization ignited my interest in language variation and identity, specifically Quebec identity, and how it is linked to language use. So, before explaining the current study, I must provide some context on Quebec identity and the target phenomenon examined in this study. This background is important, as this thesis explores the hypothesis that variable *ne* deletion may serve as an identity marker within the Quebec context - particularly among the target participants: two prominent political figures.

Quebec Identity

Quebec identity is an interesting identity. It is deeply rooted in language, which serves as a reflection of Quebec's history and culture (Létourneau, 2002; Oakes, 2004). When a Quebecer identifies themselves as a *Francophone*, it does not simply mean they are a French speaker; rather, it serves as an identity marker for being a French Canadian (Oakes, 2004). This identity is also rooted in the politics surrounding the rise in pride and protection of its language, which can be seen through the Quiet Revolution, where the language became a representation of Quebecers and their culture (Oakes, 2004), and the Nationalist movement, with the rise of their national identity as Quebecers or *Québécois* rather than Canadians (Kircher, 2012). These movements were especially important given the historical negative perceptions of Quebec French and the preference for European varieties of French (Lappin, 1982; Genesee & Holobow, 1989; Kircher, 2009; Kircher, 2012; Lindberg & Trofimovich, 2020). By embracing their distinct variety of French, Quebecers have solidified their Quebec identity, an identity that is inherently married to the way Quebec French is spoken.

Variable use of *Ne*

The variable use of *ne* in French negation is a commonly studied morphosyntactic feature. In spoken French, the pre-verbal particle *ne* is often deleted (Ashby, 1981; Armstrong,

2002; Donaldson, 2017; Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; van Compernelle, 2009) with its absence having no impact on the negation's meaning or function (Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). As a result, *ne* is often deleted in everyday spoken French (Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017; van Compernelle, 2009), and this deletion is especially prevalent in spoken Canadian French (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). An interesting aspect of this phenomenon is that its use is often influenced by speech style. For instance, *ne* deletion has been found to be used more frequently in informal settings such as everyday conversations (e.g., Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017), and less frequently in more formal contexts, such as interviews, speeches, or academic discourse (e.g., Armstrong, 2002).

The Current Study

This study aims to examine the variable phenomenon of *ne* deletion in Quebec French, exploring its sociolinguistic implications. It is hypothesized that the variable of *ne* is connected to Quebec identity, serving as a linguistic marker of linguistic, cultural, and regional affiliation. As such, this study will look at this hypothetical connection through the investigation of this morphosyntactic feature in the speeches of two prominent French speaking Canadians, Justin Trudeau (the Prime Minister of Canada) and François Legault (the Premier of Quebec). These two politicians represent, hypothetically, two distinct linguistic, cultural, and regional identities within the Canadian French landscape, making them ideal participants for exploring the *ne* deletion phenomenon and testing the proposed hypotheses. It is also hypothesized that *ne* deletion is influenced by speech style, with the phenomenon occurring more frequently in informal contexts, such as everyday conversations and spontaneous discourse, and less frequently in formal settings, such as political addresses, interviews, or official statements.

To explore the social stratification of the *ne* deletion phenomenon, the following two research questions were addressed: (1) Which speaker is more likely to apply *ne* deletion in his speech? (2) In which speech style is *ne* deletion more likely to occur, in a more formal style (in a direct address) or in a less formal situation (a question-and-answer period)?

As per the guidelines for a manuscript-based MA thesis, the following section constitutes “a full submittable draft of a manuscript” that presents the full literature review, methodology, results, and discussion of the abovementioned research.

Chapter 2

The variable deletion of the *ne* particle in the negation of spoken French is a well-known and widely investigated linguistic phenomenon (e.g., Armstrong, 2002; Armstrong & Smith, 2002; Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017; Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). Through these studies, it has been shown that French speakers, especially speakers of Quebec French, tend to delete *ne* in speech depending on various sociolinguistic factors such as age, speech style, and the level of attention paid to speech (e.g., Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977; van Compernelle, 2009).

The current study aimed to investigate this variable use of *ne* deletion in the public speech of two prominent French-speaking Canadian politicians, François Legault and Justin Trudeau. Specifically, the study examined the variable occurrence of French negation in these two politicians' public addresses regarding Covid-19 in 2020, while considering two stylistic speech settings. First, the focus was on an inter-speaker comparison of *ne* deletion, allowing us to investigate how these two speakers of Quebec French employ this feature, and speculate on the reasons behind any observed differences. Then, through an intra-speaker comparison, we conducted an analysis of how *ne* deletion manifests in Legault's speech while considering two sociostylistic speech settings: (1) a formal style, as found in a direct address, and (2) a less formal style, as is typical in question-and-answer (Q&A) sessions. This second comparative analysis focused exclusively on François Legault's data, as the available recordings of Justin Trudeau's public appearances are limited to direct addresses, which are presumed to represent a more formal style compared to Q&A sessions.

This thesis uses the term “style” to refer to variable changes that occur in speech with regard to social context, audience, and communicative intent, as is customary in the variationist

sociolinguistic framework established by Labov (1984), and adopted by other variationist linguists (e.g., Armstrong, 2002; Cardoso, 2011; Eckert & Rickford, 2001; Howard, 2022; Li & Gut, 2024; Morison, 2005; Wu et al., 2023).

Background

French Negation: Morphosyntactic Variation

Negation in the French language consists of two elements, a pre-verbal particle *ne* and a post-verbal marker, such as *pas*, *jamais* or *plus*. For example, *I don't know* in French would be expressed as *je ne sais pas*. However, in spoken French, the *ne* particle of the negation is commonly deleted (Ashby, 1981; Armstrong, 2002; Donaldson, 2017; Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; van Compernelle, 2009) such that *je ne sais pas* is variably realized as *je sais pas*.

This variation is well-known in the French language and has been widely studied in both the French of France and in Canadian French. In spoken French, the use of *ne* has been shown to be redundant (Donaldson, 2017; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977), with its use not being mandatory, as its absence does not change the meaning of the negation in a sentence (Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). As such, the pre-verbal element of negation does not appear frequently in one's everyday speech (Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017; van Compernelle, 2009). Particularly in Canadian French, the *ne* particle is rarely present (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977), leading researchers to believe that it is disappearing from spoken French (Ashby, 1981). Moreover, Martineau and Mougeon (2003) found that *ne* deletion rates increased in plays, texts, and letters throughout the 19th century, with Quebec French exhibiting more frequent rates than European French. According to Poplack and St-Amand (2007), this change is functional as “*ne* has become a sociostylistic marker of formality.” (p. 725).

Many studies have explored the sociostylistic speech settings in which *ne* occurs. According to Sankoff and Vincent's (1977) study of Montreal French, the *ne* particle appears mainly in stylistic settings, such as formal speech settings and public speeches, and when the topic of discussion was one of importance (e.g., Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017). Additionally, the pre-verbal particle is often present through the use of an emphatic *ne*, to add emphasis to one's negation (e.g., when pre-verbal *ne* is retained to strengthen the negation) (van Compernelle, 2009). Regarding formal speech, there is also evidence that the rates of *ne* deletion in these settings have increased (Armstrong & Smith, 2002). In a comparison of two differing speech settings, Armstrong (2002) examined how *ne* is used in two formality styles: interviews and conversations. He found that, although interviews are considered to be of higher formality, *ne* was more often deleted than retained, regardless of the level of formality in which the language was produced. What proved to be important in Armstrong's analysis were the minor style-shifts that occurred within the discourse itself, as opposed to the broader speech styles.

When considering the French language in Quebec, and the variable use of *ne*, the history that the province has with its language cannot be overlooked. Poplack and St-Amand (2007) investigated the difference of *ne* usage overtime in Quebec French, comparing its use in the 19th century with the 20th century. They found that not much has changed. In their view, this "stability may be attributed [...] to the validation and adoption of the vernacular as a symbol of Quebec identity" (p. 728), as will be discussed next.

Quebec French and the Quebec Identity

An important point to keep in mind when considering the French spoken by Canadians, especially in Quebec, is the overall perception of their language. For a long time, as Lappin (1982) explains, the Quebec variety (sporadically referred to as *Quebecois*) was looked down

upon, with the French of France being viewed as a more international, standardized, prestigious, and generally more accepted way of speaking the language. Several studies examining attitudes towards Quebec French have consistently found a clear preference for speakers using the European French variety over those using Quebec French (Genesee & Holobow, 1989; Kircher, 2009; Kircher, 2012; Lindberg & Trofimovich, 2020). Lappin (1982) also states that speakers of Quebec French negatively perceive the way they speak and are even embarrassed by it. Similar views are also shared by Oakes and Warren (2007), who discuss how Quebecois speakers often downplay or modify their speech when interacting with speakers of European French, reflecting a sense of linguistic inferiority.

To mitigate some of these negative perceptions, there was a proposal for a standard pronunciation of spoken Quebec French, known as the *modèle radio-canadien*, which was valued by Quebecers, yet it did not reflect their everyday spoken French (Bigot & Papen, 2013). However, that has shifted, as younger Quebecers began to reject this negative perception of their own language variety (Lappin, 1982). It has since been suggested that the local variety of the language should be taught in schools, as opposed to the *modèle radio-canadien* (Bigot & Papen, 2013).

The French language for francophone Canadians, specifically Quebecers, is more than a language used to communicate; it reflects their culture, history, and memory (Létourneau, 2002; Oakes, 2004). Even the term *francophone* does not simply mean having French as a first language, but it is a source of identity “by and large reserved for those of French Canadian decent” (Oakes, 2004, p. 548). The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s strengthened the connection between the French language and the Quebec identity. During this period, French came to represent French-Canadian culture (Oakes, 2004) in a way that emphasized a distinct Quebec

identity over the traditional French-Canadian one (Bigot & Papen, 2020), leading to the language spoken in Quebec being referred to as *le joual* rather than simply French (Bigot, 2021). With the rise of Quebec nationalism in the 1970s, Quebecers began to take pride in their language and started to identify as *Québécois* rather than Canadians to promote their national identity, which further promoted the use of their French as the standard of French in Quebec (Kircher, 2012).

Clearly, the review of the literature above suggests a potential link between Quebec French and its speakers' identity in relation to their language and culture. Is a speaker with strong ties to Quebec more likely to adhere to the regional norms that are in line with this variety of French (e.g., *ne* deletion)? Consider the speech of two Canadian politicians, one with seemingly stronger ties to Quebec and its culture (François Legault), and one with comparably weaker ties to the province, being the Prime Minister of Canada (Justin Trudeau). Because of his representation as an above-all Quebecer, is François Legault more likely to delete *ne* than Justin Trudeau, a representative of Canada? These are some of the questions and hypotheses addressed in this thesis.

Two Politicians and their Histories

François Legault

Quebec's Premier, François Legault, was born on May 26th, 1957, in Sainte-Anne-de-Bellevue, Quebec, where he grew up modestly with his family (Assemblée Nationale du Québec, 2018). As a young adult, he chose to study business at HEC Montréal where he became a certified accountant and later pursued an MBA in finances (Legault, 2013). He worked as an accountant at Clarkson Gordon before becoming the director of finances and administration for Nationair where he gained the necessary experience to successfully co-found Air-Transat

(Legault, 2013). He reached financial independence after selling his shares of the company in 1997 (Legault, 2013), after which he ventured into a career in politics.

As Legault outlined in his book, *Cap Sur Un Québec Gagnant* (2013), he always identified as a proud French speaking nationalist. Many of his experiences growing up, in which he encountered the English language, allowed him to recognize the need to defend and protect Quebec's French language and identity (Legault, 2013). So, it is no surprise that he began his political career with the Parti Québécois, Quebec's sovereigntist party, as this aligned with his political beliefs (Legault, 2013). During his time with the party, he served as minister for several departments, including Education and Health and Social Services, ending his time with the party as the opposition critic for Finances and the Economy (Legault, 2013).

Moving away from the sovereigntist party, Legault created a new political party, the Coalition Avenir Québec. This new party moved away from the separatist movement, but still put Québec, its development, language, and culture, first. Although still a Québec nationalist, Legault decided to put aside his separatist beliefs, as he realized that most of Québec's youth are bilingual and may not view language as much of an issue when compared to past generations (Meagher, 2018) and that Québécois are not ready to embark on this movement today nor the near future, and focus on Québec's success (Legault, 2013).

As can be seen from the above overview of his life, Québec (along with its language and identity) has deeply shaped Legault's life. Based on his background, political history, and beliefs, one might assume that Legault would speak French according to the norms of Québec French (e.g., using features such as *ne* deletion more frequently in his speech). Could the same be said about Justin Trudeau when we consider his background, political history, and beliefs?

Justin Trudeau

Canada's current Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, was born in Ottawa, Ontario, on December 25th, 1971 (Prime Minister of Canada, n.d.). He is the son of Pierre-Elliot Trudeau, another well-known Quebecer, who was also the Canadian Prime Minister under the Liberal Government from 1968-1979 and 1980-1984 (Whitaker, 2023). Having lived in Ottawa during his father's terms in Parliament, Trudeau followed a French Immersion program in primary school and continued his studies in French once his father retired from politics and returned to Montreal (Bosworth, 2019; Trudeau, 2014). Despite being born in Ottawa and living there as a child, Trudeau himself identifies as a Quebecer who grew up in Montreal (Trudeau, 2014). In Trudeau's (2014) memoir, he makes clear that he is bilingual and that both English and French were spoken in his daily life, be it in school or at home. With his father, only French was used. However, he only began thinking of the issue between language identity in Quebec, specifically Anglophone vs. Francophone identity, once he was in secondary school in Montreal at College Jean-Brébeuf, with both languages always being dear to him (Trudeau, 2014).

The importance of both languages has been clear throughout Trudeau's life and can be seen in his teaching of French in Vancouver before entering politics (Prime Minister of Canada, n.d.) and his choice to return to his French speaking province when it came time to settle down, as he wished to be with someone who shared his roots in language and culture (Trudeau, 2014). Only once settled back in Montreal did Trudeau pursue a career in politics with the Liberal Party of Canada, after their defeat in 2006 (Azzi, 2019). He had always seen himself "as a Canadian federalist" (p.94) while also being a proud Quebecer who valued the French language and culture (Trudeau, 2014). For Trudeau, the best way to protect Quebec's language and culture was not

through sovereignty but by "strengthening and sharing our language and culture" (Trudeau, 2014, p. 189).

Clearly the French language has a strong presence in Trudeau's life, which can be seen in his use and love for the language. Nevertheless, his use of the French language has been met with criticism despite speaking the Quebec French variation of French (Bosworth, 2019) and being able to switch effortlessly between both French and English, as demonstrated in several of his public addresses. Furthermore, despite identifying as a Quebecer, his bilingualism does not always align with the Quebec French identity, an identity that is based in the Quebec French language and culture (Bouchard, 2012). How might these factors influence his use of *ne* deletion, and what might that reveal about his use of Quebec French?

The Current Study

Drawing on these insights into the sociolinguistic variation and potential identity markers inherent in Quebec French, this study explored the following two research questions:

- (1) Which speaker is more likely to apply *ne* deletion in his speech?
- (2) In which speech style is *ne* deletion more likely to occur, in a more formal style (in a direct address) or in a less formal situation (a question-and-answer period)?

The hypothesis for the first research question posited that François Legault would delete *ne* more frequently than Justin Trudeau, given their differing backgrounds, language landscapes and political orientations. The hypothesis for the second research question, involving exclusively Legault's speech, was that *ne* would more likely be deleted in the question-and-answer portion of the interviews than in the direct (usually scripted) address. This is based off the assumption that formal sociostylistic settings trigger higher retention of the *ne* particle (Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). Although some of the research suggests that the discourse itself, as opposed to the style of

speech, is more of a deciding factor (Armstrong, 2002 – see earlier discussion), the assumption of this study was that the differing formality of the speech styles would influence the use, or lack thereof, of the *ne* particle.

Method

Speakers

The speakers for the study were Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, and François Legault, the Premier of Quebec.

Justin Trudeau is a native speaker of Canadian French and was 48 years of age when the Covid-19 conferences in 2020 originally aired. He has a Bachelor of Arts in literature from McGill University as well as a Bachelor of Education from the University of British Columbia (Prime Minister of Canada, n.d.). He was elected to the Liberal Party of Canada in 2008, becoming the party's leader in 2013 (Prime Minister of Canada, n.d.). He first became Canada's Prime Minister in 2015 (Prime Minister of Canada, n.d.) and has remained in the position since. However, on January 6, 2025, Trudeau announced his resignation and will continue to serve until his successor is chosen, with the Liberal Party expected to complete its leadership race and select a new leader by March 2025 or shortly thereafter.

François Legault is also a native speaker of Canadian French and was 62-63 years of age when the Covid-19 conferences in 2020 originally aired. He has a Bachelor's and Master's degree from HEC Montreal, both in business administration focusing on public accounting and finance, respectively (Assemblée Nationale du Québec, 2018). He was elected to the Parti Québécois in 1998 and remained with the party until 2009, holding various minister positions including Minister of State for Education and Youth and Health and Social Services (Fontaine & Lambert, 2022). He created the Coalition Avenir Quebec party in 2011, taking on the role of its

leader at inception. He became the Premier of Quebec in 2018 (Fontaine & Lambert, 2022) and has remained in the position since.

Procedure

The data for each politician was collected from a sample of recordings of the politicians' Covid-19 conferences from 2020, that are freely accessible on YouTube or through government websites. These recordings were selected quasi-randomly in that the dates of the conferences selected for analysis were not preselected. However, to maximize comparability across the corpus of data, the conferences selected for analysis were near in date and in length of the politicians' French speech. Selecting recordings with similar dates was done to increase the comparability of the politicians' speech, as there was a higher likelihood that these conferences would address similar issues surrounding Covid-19. Additionally, selecting recordings that were close in speech length, for each politician, ensured that there is equal opportunity in the potential occurrences of the *ne* variable.

As these conferences were presented in both English and French, only the French portions were considered when accounting for speech length and thus only the French portions were used for analysis. As such, due to variability in the length of conferences between politicians, a different number of recordings was used for each speaker: three recordings were analyzed for Legault, and six recordings were analyzed for Trudeau. That being said, the amount of speaking time analyzed approximated 30 minutes per politician and was taken from a direct address speech setting.

The inter-speaker analysis only focused on a direct address speech setting for both politicians. This decision was made due to the recordings available on the internet of the Covid-19 conferences in 2020 for Trudeau only including this type of stylistic speech setting.

Meanwhile, Legault's recordings also included a question-and-answer period. For this reason, Trudeau was only included in the inter-speaker analysis and the intra-speaker analysis compared Legault's speech across the two speech styles, a direct address portion and a question-and-answer period.

The same recordings that were selected for Legault for the inter-speaker analysis were used for this intra-speaker analysis. However, unlike the data that was collected for the inter-speaker analysis, speaking time was not taken into consideration for this analysis, as many factors might influence the length of speech in a question-and-answer period. In addition, the length of speech was of less importance in this analysis, as the same politician was being analyzed across speech styles.

After data collection, adhering to the protocols outlined above, the recordings were transcribed and prepared for analysis. The transcriptions for the selected recordings included all possible occurrences of the *ne* variable. This means that the transcriptions included both the occurrences of *ne* deletion and *ne* retention for each politician. These transcriptions included a few words before and after all possible occurrences of *ne*, to demonstrate the speech styles in which the variable is deleted or retained at the discourse level for further qualitative analysis.

Data Collection

Once all possible occurrences of *ne* were transcribed, the data was coded for analysis. The entire corpus was coded for the deletion or retention of the *ne* particle. Additionally, the data for the inter-speaker analysis was coded for speaker: Justin Trudeau or François Legault. While the data for the intra-speaker analysis was coded for style: direct address or question-and-answer period. Consequently, Legault's data was coded for both speaker and style, however this coding was adjusted accordingly before the different analyses. The data for the inter-speaker analysis

included approximately 30 minutes of speech for both Trudeau and Legault in a direct address speech style. For the intra-speaker analysis, Legault's speech was compared across two styles (i.e., direct address and question-and-answer sessions) without regard to the length of speech.

Instances where the occurrence of the *ne* particle is either unclear or invariable were not kept for analysis. This included any occurrence of /n/ liaison and fixed expressions. Occurrences of /n/ liaison were excluded as, in this context, it would be impossible to know whether the /n/ sound occurred due to the presence of the *ne* particle or due to the final /n/ consonant sound connecting to the following vowel sound (Donaldson, 2017). Expressions, such as popular expressions or a paraphrase of an expression, were also excluded from analysis as they do not represent contexts in which the *ne* particle is variable (van Compernelle, 2009).

Data Analysis

As is customary in variationist research, the data for this variationist study was quantitatively analyzed using Goldvarb Z (Sankoff et al., 2018). Goldvarb Z is a specialized statistical software designed for analyzing linguistic variation. It employs multivariate regression analysis to identify and weigh the influence of various linguistic and extralinguistic factors (e.g., syntactic context, speech style) on the occurrence of a variable linguistic feature; in this case, the deletion of the *ne* particle in French negation. By calculating factor weights (ranging from 0.0 to 1.0) and significance levels, Goldvarb Z allows researchers to determine which factors significantly constrain the variation and to what extent, providing a robust framework for understanding patterns of language use.

The inter-speaker analysis compared the *ne* deletion patterns of both politicians, Justin Trudeau and François Legault, in a direct address speech style. Thus, the independent variable was *Speakers*, and it had two levels, one per politician, with the dependent variable consisting of

ne deletion. The intra-speaker analysis compared François Legault's patterns of *ne* deletion across two styles, a direct address portion and a question-and-answer period. Thus, the independent variable was *Styles*, again with two levels, one per style, and the dependent variable remained *ne* deletion. Table 1 below summarizes the factor groups included in this research.

Table 1

Summary of Factor Groups and Factors in the Study: Ne Deletion in Quebec French

Factor Groups	Factors	
Speakers	Justin Trudeau	François Legault
Style	Direct Address	Q&A Session*

Note. The Q&A Session (*) only includes data from François Legault.

Results

As is customary in variationist studies due to its exploratory nature (e.g. Young & Bayley, 1996; Tagliamonte, 2006), the data were stratified among two independent variables and, subsequently, two separate analyses were conducted for this study. The first analysis was an inter-speaker comparison of *ne* deletion between François Legault and Justin Trudeau. For this first analysis, as previously mentioned, the hypothesis was that Legault would be more likely to delete *ne* than Trudeau. This was followed by an intra-speaker comparison of *ne* deletion for Legault in two differing speech styles, a more formal direct address and a less formal question and answer period. As stated in the above section, the hypothesis for this second analysis was that Legault would be more likely to delete *ne* in the less formal question and answer period.

Goldvarb Z

The results of a typical Goldvarb Z analysis should be interpreted as embracing the whole of the corpus that is being investigated. The output of a typical Goldvarb analysis contains the following information:

1. The raw number (N) and the percentage (%) of the application of the phenomenon under investigation, including the same information for all the factors considered in the variable analysis. These results, however, do not provide enough information since they do not express the influence of each factor independently of the others. The raw numbers and percentages obtained in the present study are provided in the results illustrated in Tables 2 and 3 below.
2. The factor weight (FW), which measures the influence that each factor has in the process under investigation, based on the corpus analyzed. It provides the most accurate view of the likelihood of variant occurrence; consequently, the discussions presented here will be based on these probabilistic weights. More specifically, the factor weight consists of a list of values associated with each factor independently of others in the same factor group. The value indicates the degree to which a factor promotes the occurrence of each variant for the process being investigated: the factor weight of .50 is the cut-off-point between the weights that enhance the likelihood of a certain variant's occurrence (above .50), and those that inhibit its appearance (below .50) (see Major, 1996 and Preston, 1996 for a detailed discussion of Goldvarb's *modus operandi*).
3. Finally, the input probability is the likelihood that each variant has of occurring in general, regardless of the specific contribution of particular factors. In other words, it represents the general propensity of the process to apply on its own, without the interference of the other factors included in the investigation.

The Goldvarb Z probabilistic results are described below, where significant factors (i.e. those that favor *ne* deletion) are shaded for expository purposes. There was a total of 88 tokens

used for the analyses, 52 tokens were included in the inter-speaker comparison (Justin Trudeau and François Legault), while 63 tokens were included in the intra-speaker comparison (formal direct address and less formal question and answer sessions in François Legault’s speech).

Inter-speaker Results

In this study, the only factor group selected as significant in both stepping-up and stepping-down runs of Goldvarb with a statistically significant effect ($p < .05$) was *speakers*, corroborating the hypothesis that this factor group contributes to the patterns of variation targeted by the study.

The results of the inter-speaker analysis, the comparison of *ne* deletion between François Legault and Justin Trudeau, showed that there was a significant difference between the deletion of *ne* for both politicians (see Table 2). Legault was significantly more likely to delete *ne* (0.85) than Trudeau, who was in turn significantly less likely to delete the negation particle (0.13). These results correspond to the original hypothesis for the inter-speaker comparison of *ne* deletion, as will be discussed later in more detail.

Table 2

Goldvarb Z: Inter-speaker results

Speaker	<i>ne</i> deletion	<i>ne</i> retention	Total
Justin Trudeau			
N:	10	15	25
%:	40%	60%	
FW*:	0.13		
François Legault			
N:	26	1	27
%:	96.3%	3.7%	
FW*:	0.85		

*Factor Weight; Input Probability: 0.82

Intra-speaker Results

The results of the intra-speaker analysis, the comparison of *ne* deletion for François Legault in two differing speech styles, showed that there was no significant difference between the likelihood of Legault deleting *ne* more frequently in either speech style (see Table 3). As a result, the politician was just as likely to delete *ne* in his formal direct addresses (0.56) as he was in his question-and-answer sessions with the media and the public (0.46). As mentioned earlier, despite the variation in FW values, this generalization was confirmed by Goldvarb's binomial step-up and step-down procedures: only the factor group *speaker* was selected as contributing to the variable patterns of *ne* deletion observed. Accordingly, *ne* deletion occurs almost categorically in Legault's speech, regardless of stylistic speech setting.

In sum, the results of the intra-speaker analysis do not show support for the original hypothesis that predicted that François Legault would delete *ne* more frequently in the less formal speech style of the question-and-answer period than in the more formal direct address speech style. This unexpected result will be explored in more detail in the discussion section, proposing potential reasons for these findings.

Table 3*Goldvarb Z: Intra-speaker results*

Style	<i>ne</i> deletion	<i>ne</i> retention	Total
Direct Address (formal)			
N:	26	1	27
%:	96.3%	3.7%	
FW*:	0.56		
Question & Answer (less formal)			
N:	34	2	36
%:	94.4%	5.6%	
FW*:	0.46		

*Factor Weight; Input Probability: 0.95

Discussion

The main goal of this study was to examine the variable pattern of *ne* deletion in the speech of two prominent French-speaking Canadian and Quebec politicians, while also investigating its use in two differing stylistic speech settings. This investigation was done through two analyses: an inter-speaker analysis, where there was a comparison of François Legault’s and Justin Trudeau’s *ne* deletion patterns, and an intra-speaker analysis, where there was a comparison of François Legault’s patterns of *ne* deletion when engaged in two different speech styles: a direct address and a question-and-answer period. Following insights from variationist research (e.g., Armstrong, 2002; Cardoso, 2011; Eckert & Rickford, 2001; Howard, 2022; Li & Gut, 2024; Morison, 2005; Wu et al., 2023), the direct address represents a more formal style, whereas the question-and-answer period is less formal. As discussed earlier, this distinction is operationalized based on the degree of attention paid to speech, with the most formal style requiring greater attention to speech.

It was hypothesized that, in the inter-speaker analysis, Legault would delete *ne* more

frequently than Trudeau. In the intra-speaker analysis, on the other hand, it was expected that Legault would delete *ne* more frequently during the question-and-answer sessions than in his direct addresses. The results of the inter-speaker analysis support the hypothesis, as the analysis showed that Legault was significantly more likely to delete *ne* than Trudeau. However, the results of the intra-speaker analysis did not support the hypothesis, as the analysis indicated no significant difference in *ne* deletion for Legault across the two speech styles.

These findings will be discussed further in the following sections, starting with the results of the first analysis which focused on the comparison of *ne* deletion between François Legault and Justin Trudeau.

Inter-speaker Variation: *Ne* Deletion

The inter-speaker results clearly show a distinct difference between the patterns of *ne* deletion in the speech of the two target politicians. As discussed earlier, *ne* deletion is extremely common in Canadian French in that *ne* rarely occurs in this spoken variety (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977); when it does occur, it is often in formal sociostylistic settings, in utterances that are considered highly important (Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017), or to provide emphasis (van Compernelle, 2009). Being cognizant of the fact that formal sociostylistic settings and emphasis are associated with higher occurrences of the *ne* particle in speech, one would presume that press conference settings, such as those targeted by this study, would trigger a higher use of *ne* since the politicians are making important (sometimes lifesaving) points throughout their speeches. This pattern is seen quite clearly with Justin Trudeau, as he retains *ne* significantly more frequently than he deletes *ne* in his direct addresses. Contrastively, Legault does not follow the same trend as Trudeau.

In the analyzed sample of Legault's direct addresses, he uses *ne* only once and its use is

emphatic. He uses *ne* to express a regulation that is in place at a hospital, in which certain accompaniment to the hospital is not permitted: “*qu’il y a un seul hôpital qui ne permet pas d’avoir un accompagnateur*”. The *ne* in this case is used to reiterate this regulation and to add emphasis to its importance, in line with the literature on the phenomenon (Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017). However, one might wonder why there is such a drastic difference between the two speakers and what this might suggest.

Considering the politicians’ significantly differing rates of *ne* deletion, these results may be interpreted in light of their backgrounds, as well as their (intentional or unconscious) affiliations with Quebec and its linguistic identity. The patterns of *ne* deletion in Legault’s speech may be a result of his *Québécois* roots and related Quebec identity. This would show his alignment with Quebec and his value of the French language and culture in Quebec, an alignment that is clear in his upbringing and political history, which reflects the evolving attitudes and identity of Quebecers amid the rise of Quebec nationalism (Kircher, 2012). Although not claiming that *ne* deletion serves as a definitive marker of Quebec identity, his patterns align with those characteristic of Quebec French, potentially reflecting his closer association with Quebec identity in comparison to Justin Trudeau.

As for Trudeau, who has been criticized for the way he speaks French and consequently his Quebec identity (see Bosworth, 2019), his retention of *ne* could be part of the root of these criticisms as his patterning, in terms of producing *ne*, deviates from the one seen in Quebec French. Although *ne* has been shown to appear more frequently in formal situations, in Canadian French *ne* is still often deleted (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). Moreover, as previously discussed, this deletion is also carrying over to these more formal settings (Armstrong & Smith, 2002).

In Trudeau's speech, *ne* is deleted significantly less than it is retained. This might indicate that his French aligns more with an international or pan-Canadian French, and less with the Quebec variety. Perhaps, by retaining *ne* in his public speeches, as the Prime Minister of Canada, he wishes to maintain a higher level of formality when addressing the country. Interestingly, Trudeau's *ne* deletion followed a discernible pattern even within the small speech sample of this study: Out of all possible occurrences of the *ne* variable in the corpus, he deleted it 36% of the time; notably, 24% of these deletions occurred in the expression *c'est pas* (it is not). This phrase is a lexicalized expression in French (*ce n'est pas*) which naturally aligns with *ne* deletion patterns among native French speakers (Ashby, 1981; Donaldson, 2017). Therefore, despite his overall *ne* deletion rates not fully aligning with those of Quebec French speakers, Trudeau still demonstrates patterns of *ne* deletion consistent with those of native French speakers.

Continuing with the hypothesis that these differences can be linked to identity, one might infer, based on the politicians' backgrounds, that both speakers identify as Quebecers. Yet, it is interesting that Trudeau, who identifies as a Quebecer, does not exhibit the typical rates of *ne* deletion found in Quebec French, while Legault adheres more closely to these norms. Drawing on insights from Bigot and Papen's (2020) study on Franco-Ontarian identity, one might consider that the politicians' differing behaviour could reflect variations in how they define or embody their Quebec identity. In Bigot and Papen's (2020) study, among the seven factors shaping Franco-Ontarian identities, one distinguishing factor is precisely the absence of a Quebecois identity, suggesting that even subtle differences in identity alignment can have measurable effects on language use.

Based on this, one could speculate that an individual's identification as Quebecois is

deeply rooted in their own characterization of their identity. Thus, a potential hypothesis when linking identity and language use, would be that those identifying as Quebecers would employ the norms of Quebec French, as seen in other Quebec French speakers. However, since we are unable to know what exactly Legault and Trudeau associate with being a Quebecer, it is not possible to determine how they each define Quebec identities. Thus, while it is difficult to make any claims about how their variable use of *ne* relates to their Quebec identities, we hypothesize that one politician's characterization of their Quebec identity (Legault) might be stronger than the other (Trudeau), as Legault's speech aligns with Quebec French norms, a pattern not observed in Trudeau's speech.

Another hypothesized explanation for these differences is the influence of the audience (interlocutor), which may affect both the speakers' speech and the way they portray their identity. In a study looking at Jean Chrétien, another prominent French-Canadian politician (Prime Minister of Canada from 1993 to 2003), and his variable pronunciation of voiced dental fricatives ("th" sound) when speaking English in two differing speech stylistic settings, Morison (2005) found that "th" was produced more frequently in informal interviews than in his more formal speeches, challenging the assumption that formal stylistic environments are more likely to produce target-like forms (e.g., Cardoso, 2011; Eckert & Rickford, 2001; Howard, 2022; Li & Gut, 2024; Wu et al., 2023). In his discussion, Morison (2005) attributed this style-driven variation to the audience in each setting; for instance, during a one-on-one interview, where the audience is limited to a single interlocutor, the speaker might adopt a more informal speech style. He also speculated that the act of reading speeches may have been more stressful, and therefore had a greater impact on pronunciation, than a one-on-one interview, suggesting that stress also influenced Chrétien's speech patterns. Considering the audience of the current study (i.e.,

Trudeau addressing the entire Canadian population versus Legault speaking to the population of Quebec), one might expect Trudeau to project a more Canadian identity to his Canadian audience. As a result, he may be less inclined to follow the norms of *ne* deletion in Quebec French. Contrastively, since Legault was addressing Quebecers in our corpus, it is reasonable to assume that *ne* deletion would be more frequently employed in this context, further reinforcing his alignment with the Quebec identity.

Intra-speaker Variation: *Ne* Deletion

The results of the intra-speaker analysis of François Legault's speech were surprisingly different from the initial hypothesis, as he almost categorically applied *ne* deletion in both formal and informal contexts. These results align with Armstrong's (2002) findings, which indicated that the use of *ne* depended more on the topics discussed rather than the level of formality of different speech styles. Although Legault significantly deleted *ne* across both speech styles, the form was deleted less (albeit not statistically significantly) during the question-and-answer session, where it was originally hypothesized to occur more frequently. The assumption that the question-and-answer portion would act as a less formal style of speech may have actually been flawed, as this setting could resemble a formal interview, one in which the speaker may carefully self-monitoring their language (Armstrong, 2002).

Another reason for the high rates of *ne* deletion in both speech styles could be even simpler. As highlighted in the literature review, *ne* deletion is a well-documented phenomenon in spoken French (Ashby, 1981; Armstrong, 2002; Donaldson, 2017; Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; van Compernelle, 2009), especially in Canadian and Quebec French (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977). Moreover, research suggests that *ne* is increasingly being deleted across all stylistic contexts, encompassing the full stylistic hierarchy (Armstrong &

Smith, 2002). Whether this constitutes a pattern of language change or stable variation is a topic for another study.

When considering the results of the intra-speaker analysis in relation to Quebec French and, by extension, Quebec identity, these results become less surprising when viewed in the context of the target speaker's profile. As discussed earlier, Legault has consistently demonstrated his alignment with Quebec and its identity throughout his life and political career. His stance as a Quebec nationalist and his commitment to protecting Quebec's language further solidifies his Quebec identity, which is also suggested through his adherence to Quebec French norms, in this case *ne* deletion. Although the expectation was that *ne* would be deleted significantly more frequently in a less formal style, the lack of a significant difference only further asserts François Legault's strong link to Quebec and its linguistic norms.

Conclusion

The current study examined the patterns of variable *ne* deletion in the speech of two prominent Canadian politicians, François Legault and Justin Trudeau, through an inter-speaker analysis during direct addresses and an intra-speaker analysis that looked at two speech styles for Legault. The findings revealed that the *ne* deletion patterns in spoken French is different amongst both politicians, with Legault demonstrating significantly higher rates of *ne* deletion than Trudeau. Additionally, Legault showed no differences between formal and informal settings, where his rate of *ne* deletion were high regardless of the stylistic context. It is hypothesized that these findings further reinforce Legault's stronger link to Quebec identity through his consistent use of Quebec French norms (i.e., *ne* deletion) in his speech.

These findings add to existing research in the field of sociolinguistic variation with empirical data that supports a link between linguistic behavior, style, and identity. In particular,

they indicate that language is intricately connected to both social and political identities, demonstrating how linguistic norms and cultural affiliations shape this relationship.

Despite these contributions, it is important to note the study's limitations and consider them for future research in this area. First, the corpus for both speakers is quite small, which limits the generalizability of the findings. A replication study with a larger speech sample would be beneficial to compare results and see whether similar results are found with a larger corpus. Furthermore, including other Quebec French speaking politicians in Quebec and in the rest of Canada, who are affiliated to Quebec, would provide valuable insight into whether similar variable patterns emerge among politicians who have varying degrees of alignment with the Quebec Identity, as per our hypothesized link between the target phenomenon and this identity. Another limitation is the lack of recordings to compare *ne* deletion across different sociostylistic settings for Justin Trudeau; this restricts the depth of our understanding of his *ne* deletion patterns and potential link to his Quebec identity. Since we cannot interview the politicians for a more in-depth view of their personal histories, for now, we can only make assumptions about these connections based on their backgrounds, their speech in media addresses, and how this information relates to the literature on French *ne* deletion. Moreover, to fully examine the *ne* deletion phenomenon and claim it as a marker of Quebec identity, a similar analysis would need to be conducted with a speaker of a non-Quebec French variety, such as President Emmanuel Macron of France. Including an additional speaker who uses a different variety of French could help determine whether the target phenomenon truly functions as an identity marker. Finally, this study focused only on the occurrence or *ne* deletion without the broader linguistic and extralinguistic contexts surrounding the morphosyntactic target. Linguistic contexts could include various factors such as syntactic structure (e.g., negation phrases, subordinate clauses),

phonetic or phonological environments (e.g., the influence of preceding/following vowels or consonants), and verb type (e.g., copular, stative vs. dynamic verbs). Similarly, extralinguistic contexts could include factors such as age, gender, and the speaker's status in their linguistic market (Popp, 2006).

Chapter 3

This final chapter provides an overview of the study's findings and discussed their implications for future research and development.

Summary of Goals and Findings

The goals of this study were threefold, first, to explore the process of variable *ne* deletion in the speech of two prominent Canadian and Quebec politicians: Justin Trudeau (the Prime Minister of Canada) and François Legault (the Premier of Quebec); second, to examine whether speech style influences the variable deletion of *ne*; and lastly, to explore how this variable phenomenon may relate to Quebec Identity, a hypothesis that was tested through an analysis of linguistic patterns of *ne* deletion and stylistic variation in their public speeches.

The two politicians in this study were selected due to their connection to the province of Quebec and their identities as Quebecers: While Trudeau identifies himself as a Quebecer (Trudeau, 2014), Legault strongly asserts his Quebec identity through both his upbringing and political stance (Legault, 2013).

Through an inter-speaker analysis, it was observed that Legault deleted *ne* significantly more than Trudeau. This likely suggests that Legault demonstrates a stronger linguistic alliance with Quebec identity compared to Trudeau. His near categorical deletion of *ne* aligns with the rates of *ne* deletion in Canadian French (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007; Sankoff & Vincent, 1977), reinforcing the proposal that *ne* deletion is a key linguistic marker of Quebec identity, and an integral feature of Quebec French (Poplack & St-Amand, 2007).

The intra-speaker analysis, which compared Legault's rates of *ne* deletion in both his direct addresses (formal) and question-and-answer period (informal), revealed that style did not affect his *ne* deletion rates. This finding suggests that style may not be an influencing factor for

the variable use of *ne*, aligning with research indicating that speech style does not necessarily influence rates of *ne* deletion in French (Armstrong, 2002). In fact, it is possible that the phenomenon is so deeply embedded in Quebec French (and possibly in other French varieties) that it is becoming categorical – an indication of an ongoing syntactic change that has been in progress for at least the last 50 years, as Ashby (1981) observed in his study on *ne* deletion in spoken French.

Implications for Education and Research

Although this research has no direct implications for second language acquisition, it would be beneficial for second language learners of Canadian French to be exposed to real examples of the language in use. Showcasing prominent speakers such as Trudeau and Legault can help illustrate how *ne* deletion is used across different contexts and by individuals with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, thus providing a more authentic and nuanced understanding of and experience with Quebec French. As a student of French as a second language who naturally adopted a native-like pattern of *ne* deletion, yet always believed I was speaking incorrectly, I would have benefited from being introduced to how this variable functions in Quebec French. This knowledge would have provided me with valuable insight into this *natural* variable phenomenon and reinforced the idea that such usage is not incorrect; rather, it is a marker of authenticity and linguistic identity.

The research implications of this study suggest that language use and identity are potentially linked. This study demonstrated that linguistic norms associated with a specific vernacular are employed by those who align with the identity associated with that language. In this case, the relationship between Quebec identity and variable *ne* deletion was evident, as the

observed rates of deletion aligned with the norms of Quebec French, a variety that serves as a key identity marker for its speakers (Oakes, 2004.)

Future Development

There are several avenues that can be further explored in relation to this study. First, an expansion of its scope would be beneficial for the generalizability of the results and to further explore the variable use of the target phenomenon by the politicians in question. A larger sample would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of how their linguistic patterns align with their presented Quebec identities, offering further insight into the relationship between language use and sociolinguistic factors.

Another interesting avenue for further research is to compare rates of *ne* deletion among a wider range of French-Canadian speakers, including other politicians or prominent people in the media with clear ties to Quebec. Investigating their linguistic patterns alongside their Quebec identity would provide deeper insights into this phenomenon and how it is utilized by the larger speech community. Such research could contribute to the field of French as a second language education in Canada by exposing students to how their local variety is spoken in real-life settings.

Lastly, it would be beneficial to broaden the scope of this study to look at the *linguistic* contexts (i.e., morphological, syntactic) that can affect *ne* deletion in Quebec French. Analyzing factors such as syntactic structure (e.g., whether *ne* is more frequently deleted in declarative sentences vs. interrogative sentences), phonetic or phonological environments (e.g., whether *ne* occurs in pre-vocalic vs. pre-consonant contexts), and verb type (e.g., whether *ne* precedes an auxiliary vs. a lexical verb) could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the variable phenomenon under investigation. Such an analysis would not only contribute to the study of *ne*

deletion in Quebec French, but also have pedagogical implications, particularly in second language education, by helping learners better understand the authentic spoken norms of the variety they are immersed in.

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