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The branching onsets of Acadian French: A hint from schwa

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I. *Proposal*

At first sight the initial and internal clusters of Acadian French appear to be similar to those of many (if not most) other French dialects.[1] On the surface words have internal coda-onset (RT) and branching onset (TR) consonant sequences. A closer look however, reveals that while AF has a schwa-like vowel on the surface, this vowel never follows a branching onset cluster. Words which are pronounced with a schwa following a TR cluster in most dialects of French, are realised as TəR in AF (e.g. *brebis* [brəbi], AF: [bərbi] 'sheep'). In this talk I look at AF words with initial and internal TR clusters and concentrate on the vowels which follow those clusters, viz. schwa vs other vowels. I propose that if schwa is not a lexical vowel, but the interpretation of an empty nucleus failing to be p-licensed, its distribution reveals that AF does not have branching onsets.

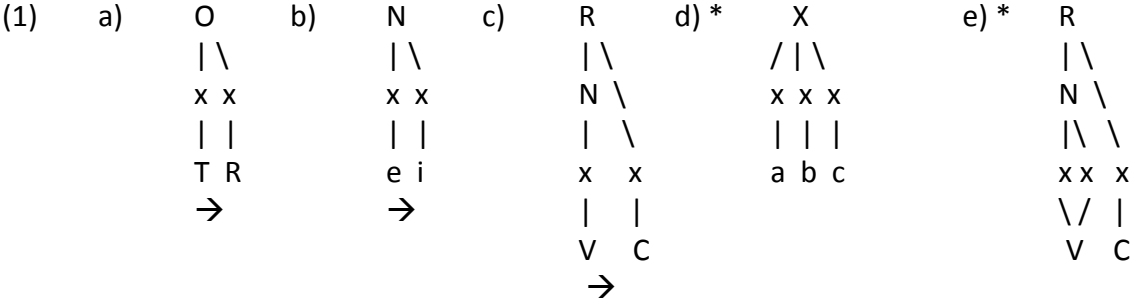
II. *Theoretical tools*

A. What is a constituent?

A constituent is a domain where the positions it dominates are in a governing relation. The relation is subject to the following formal and substantive conditions:

Formal: The head is initial and must be strictly adjacent to its complement.
Substantive: The governor must dominate a headed expression and the governee a headless one (KLV 1990) or, according to Harris (1994), the governor may not be less complex than its governee. Very roughly, stops are good governors and liquids good governees.

(1)



Ternary branching is excluded by the conditions on strict locality and strict directionality.

In CV phonology (Lowenstamm 1996, 1999, Scheer 1996, 1998, 2004) a constituent is a closed domain where A governs B and where the empty position occurring between A and B

[1] There are different varieties of Acadian French. Here, I am referring to the variety spoken in the South-East of New-Brunswick (near Moncton).

is buried (i.e. p-licensed) within the domain. See also Scheer (1998b) who claims that governing domains are head-final.

(2)

C	V	C	V		
|		|	|		
[t		r]	u	*trou*	'hole'

B. Bogus clusters:

Consonants which are adjacent on the surface may not be adjacent lexically. E.g. *atlas*, *choc'lat*, *sam'di*

(3) a) Lenition due to stress

i)	O	N	O	N	O	N	O	N	ii) *	O
	|	|	|	|	|	|	|	|		|\
	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x x
	|	|	|		|	|	|		| |
	č	ɔ	k		l	ʌ	t			k l

b) Not a possible branching onset (phonotactics)

i)	O	N	O	N	O	N	O	N	ii) *	O
		|	|	|	|	|	|	|		| \
		x	x	x	x	x	x	x		x x
		|	|		|	|	|		| |
		a	t		l	ʌ	s			t l

c) Cannot be a coda-onset cluster, nor a branching onset.

i)	O	N	O	N	O	N	
	|	|	|	|	|	|	
	x	x	x	x	x	x	
	|	|	|		|	|	
	s	a	m		d	i	(NC ≠ homorganic)

C. Empty nuclei:

(4) Proper Government. A properly governs B iff:

i) A is adjacent to B on the nuclear projection
ii) A is not itself p-licensed
iii) A is not a government-licenser (i.e. no governing domain intervenes between A and B)

Consider the (Québec French) pronunciation of the words *semeler* [səmle] 'to put a sole' and *semelle* [smɛl] 'sole'.

(5) a)

|---------//------| |--------<------| Proper Gov.

O	N^1	O	N^2	O	N^3
|	|	|	|	|	|
x	x	x	x	x	x
|		|		|	|
s	[ə]	m		l	e

b)

|--------<--------| |-------//-------| Proper Gov.

O	N^1	O	N^2	O	N^3
|	|	|	|	|	|
x	x	x	x	x	x
|		|		|	
s		m	[ɛ]	l	

D. (Indirect) Government-licensing

An onset-head that has a complement to govern, does not simply need to be (onset)-licensed by its nucleus, it needs to be **licensed to govern** by this nucleus. In most dialects of French **only unlicensed nuclei can be indirect government-licensers for their onset word-internally** which explains why p-licensing fails when an empty nucleus follows a branching onset. In order for the onset cluster to be licensed and interpreted, the nucleus following the onset-governor fails to be p-licensed to act as its government-licenser.

(6) a)

|---<---|

O	N	O	N	O	N
|	|	| \	|	|	|
x	x	x x	x	x	x
|	|	| |		|	|
v	ã	d r	[ə]	d	l

b)

|---<---|

O	N	O	N
| \	|	|	|
x x	x	x	x
| |		|	|
k r	[ə]	v	e

III. *Acadian French: the facts*

(7) #TRV / -TRV-

patrie	[patri]	‘nation’	*brasser*	[brɑse]	‘to shake’
brocher	[brɔše]	‘to knit’	*grosse*	[grʊs]	‘big (f)’
place	[plas]	‘site’	*troua*	[trʊɑ]	‘pierced’
sacrer	[sakre]	‘to swear’	*après*	[aprɛ]	‘after’
Anglais	[ãglɛ]	‘English’	creuser	[kröze]	‘to dig’
gloire	[glʊɛr]	‘glory’	*grand*	[grã]	‘tall (m)’
bride	[brɪd]	‘attach’	*vraiment*	[vrɛmã]	‘really’
obligé	[obliže]	‘obliged’	*plâtreux*	[plɑtrö]	‘bricklayer’
abri	[abrɪk]	‘shelter’	*ouvrir*	[ru:vrir]	‘ to open’

(8) -TRə/TəR	*Standard*	*Acadian*	*Gloss*
grenouille	[grənuj]	[gərnuj]	‘frog’

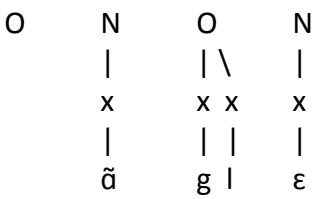
brebis	[brəbi]	[bərbi]	‘sheep’
grelot	[grəlo]	[gərlo]	‘little bell’
vendredi	[vãdrədi]	[vãdərdi]	‘Friday’
mercredi	[mɛrkrədi]	[mɛrkərdi]	‘Wednesday’
crever	[krəve]	[kərve]	‘to blow-up’
Angleterre	[ãglətɛr]	[ãgəltɛr]	‘Britain’
comprenais	[kɔ̃prənɛ]	[kɔ̃pərnɛ]	‘understood’
grenier	[grənje]	[gərnje]	‘attic’
espièglerie	[ɛspjɛgləri]	[ɛspjɛgəlri]	‘mischievousness’
sacrement	[sakrəmã]	[sakərmã]	‘sacrament’
prenais	[prənɛ]	[pərnɛ]	‘took’
bretelle	[brətɛl]	[bərtɛl]	‘suspenders’

IV. *The Analysis*:

A. Branching onsets?

(9) a)

b)

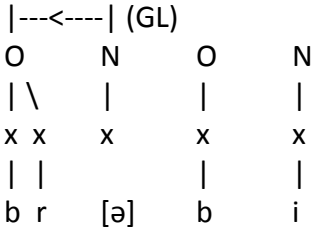


Gov. Lic.

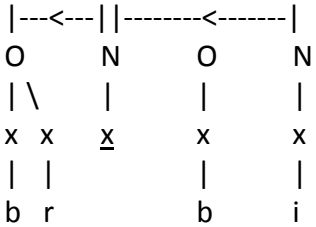
If AF has branching onsets and if schwa is a lexical vowel, then we expect forms like *[brətɛl] next to forms like [brɪd].

If AF has branching onsets and if schwa is the realisation of an un-licensed empty nucleus, then we expect either forms like *[brəbi] or like *[brbi].

(10) a) *



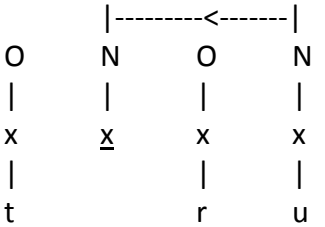
b) *



GL / PG

B. Are the TR clusters of AF bogus clusters?

(11) a)



PG

b) |---------<-------| PG

O	N	O	N	O	N	
	|	|	|	|	|	
	x	x	x	x	x	
	|	|		|	|	
	ɑ̃	g		l	ɛ	

c) |--------//------| |--------<-------| PG

O	N^1	O	N^2	O	N^3	
|	|	|	|	|	|	
x	x	x	x	x	x	
|		|		|	|	
b	[ə]	r		b	i	[bərbi]

The representation in (11c) contains a sequence of two empty nuclei. Both empty nuclei are subject to ECP. I.e. they will be unexpressed phonetically iff they are p-licensed. Starting from the end of the domain, N^3 is lexically filled and can properly govern N^2. Being p-licensed, N^2 is un-interpreted and cannot act as a proper governor for N^1 which must therefore receive a phonetic interpretation. This results in the surface form [bərbi], the form we find in AF.

(12) Why not:

O	R	O	R
|	|\	|	|
|	N \	|	N
|	| \	|	|
x	x x	x	x
|	| |	|	|
b	ə r	b	i

If (12) is the correct syllabification, then how about:

i) V-zero alternation in forms like: [ɑ̃glɛ] - [ɑ̃gəltɛr].
ii) Branching rhymes with a schwa would be the only ones to have “changed” in a TR cluster in other dialects (e.g. [parti] - *[prati].
iii) In the varieties where ‘schwa’ is realised [ɔ], words like [bɔrbi], [ɑ̃pɔrte] are realised [brəbi], [ɑ̃pɔrte], *[ɑ̃prɔte] in other dialiects.
iv) If schwa occurs in a branching rhyme it means that it is a lexical vowel. Why can’t it therefore, follow a branching onset like the other vowels (e.g. [truve], *[brəbi]?
v) If schwa can occur in branching rhymes in AF, why aren’t those branching rhymes not found word-finally along with the other VRT final sequences (e.g. [kuvart], *[kuvərt]?

(13) TT and TR clusters are always followed by a lexical vowel (and never by schwa).

[smɛn]	*semaine*	‘week’	[truve]	*trouver*	‘to find’
[mnir]	*revenir*	‘to come back’	[grʊ]	*gros*	‘big (m)’

[žval] *cheval* 'horse' [brıd] *bride* 'attach'

(14) PG

```
        |---------<--------|
O   N   O   N   O   N
|   |   |   |   |   |
x   x   x   x   x   x
|       |   |   |
ž       v   a   l
```

Conclusion:

i) The TR clusters of AF are bogus. AF doesn't have branching onsets.

ii) Empty nuclei are phonetically manifested when they fail to be properly governed.

V. *Excursus*

Do QF and SF have branching onsets or are their TR clusters bogus too?

Sequences of empty nuclei

(15) a) QF PG

```
        |--------<--------|
O   N   O   N   O   N
|   |   |   |   |   |
x   x   x   x   x   x
|       |       |   |
b       r   [ə] b   i
```

b) AF PG

```
        |-------//-------||--------<--------|
O   N   O   N   O   N
|   |   |   |   |   |
x   x   x   x   x   x
|       |       |   |
b   [ə] r       b   i
```

c) QF PG

```
            |---------<-------|
O   N   O   N   O   N   O   N
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
x   x   x   x   x   x   x   x
|   |   |       |       |   |
v   ã   d       r   [ə] d   i
```

d) AF PG

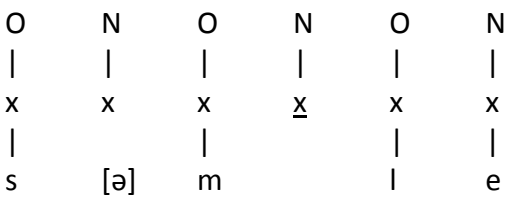
```
            |--------//-------||--------<-------|
O   N   O   N   O   N   O   N
|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
x   x   x   x   x   x   x   x
|   |   |       |       |   |
v   ã   d   [ə] r       d   i
```

Unlike in AF, where PG operates from right-to-left starting from the end of the word, in QF the two nuclei would be parsed in pair and the one on the right would act as a proper governor for the empty nucleus occurring on its left.[2]

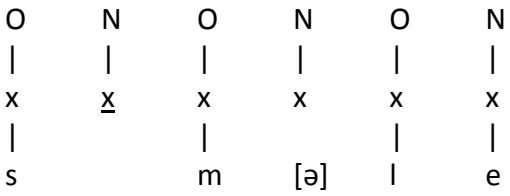
However, such parsing is not obviously present in other cases such as:

(16)	*devenir (fou)*	[dəvnir]	?[dvənir]	'to become (mad)'
	semeler	[səmle]	*[sməle]	'to put a sole'
	relevez-vous	[rəlvevu]	?[rləvevu]	'stand up (again)'

(17) a)



b) *



If QF doesn't have branching onsets, words like *brebis* [brəbi] show that in a sequence of two empty nuclei, p-licensing operates on the pair of EN with the second one failing to be p-licensed to act as proper governor for the first one.
However, in words with TT sequences (e.g. *semeler* [səmle], *[sməle]) p-licensing doesn't operate the same way. Proper government operates from the right-to-left starting from the end of the word.
It therefore seems likely that QF has branching onsets (closed domains in CV phonology) while AF does not.

Further research

Since lacking branching onsets does not tell us whether the rhyme is branching or not, I will now turn to the behaviour of RT clusters.

[2] See Rowicka (1999) and Cyran (2010) for more on sequences of empty nuclei.

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