

IRREALIS MOOD IN A DECLINING DIALECT:
The Case of French in Maine's Saint John Valley

**Monday,
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◆
10:00am
◆

**IMU, Walnut
Room**

**DISSERTATION
COMMITTEE**

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A Dissertation Defense by Carly Bahler

The Saint John Valley (SJV) is an international region at the intersection of three geopolitical units: northern Maine in the US and two Canadian provinces (northwestern New Brunswick and eastern Quebec). The US side of the SJV is home to a francophone community which, due to geographic isolation and its proximity to francophone Canada, has been able to persist as a relatively hermetic enclave of French speakers, whose variety is the product of contact among Acadian French, Quebec French, and English. However, the French in Maine's SJV has historically lacked the institutional support of its Canadian counterparts and has existed primarily in the oral domain. Furthermore, as the result of oppressive language policies, negative language attitudes, and the progressive Americanization of the region over the course of the 20th century, local French has been undergoing shift to English, especially since WWII. Today it is a steeply declining variety as older fluent speakers are dying without (fully) transmitting French to younger generations, who are increasingly English-dominant. This gradual shift to English has produced a proficiency continuum that is roughly age-graded, with speakers of different generations varying in fluency, grammatical mastery, and overall functional capacity in French. This dissertation examines the structure of the French in Maine's SJV, specifically with regard to irrealis mood in the verbal system (future, conditional, and subjunctive) with the objectives of first establishing the fluent speaker norm and then determining how less proficient speakers deviate from it. My study shows that irrealis mood provides consistent evidence for this proficiency continuum. If the fluent speaker norm mirrors that of other North American French varieties with respect to irrealis mood, less proficient speakers exhibit increasing difficulty producing the complex structures characterizing this mood, with the result that they are often unable to make semantically meaningful distinctions.

