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The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in French as a foreign language: An overview

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ABSTRACT

The present contribution presents an overview of studies in French as a second (L2) and/or foreign language that consider the effects of extralinguistic variables (mostly instructional, experiential and situational factors) on the development of sociolinguistic competence. It focuses specifically on variation between informal and formal variants in phonology, morphology, morpho-syntax and the lexicon.

1 INTRODUCTION

The study of sociolinguistic competence in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) started to attract the attention of a growing number of researchers in the late 1980s (Preston, 1989) and was broadly situated within a Labovian tradition (Labov, 1972). Several special issues in international journals have been devoted to the development of sociolinguistic competence in the L2 in the last two years (Bayley and Regan, 2004; Dewaele and Mougeon, 2002; 2004).

The concept of sociolinguistic competence is linked to Hymes' notion of communicative competence. The rationale for this notion was the redressing of what Hymes regarded as the narrowness and inadequacy of Chomsky's definition of linguistic competence (Davies, 2003: 98). Hymes argued that language users need to be able not only to create and understand grammatical utterances, but also need learned knowledge about cultural norms in order to judge the social situation correctly so as to produce appropriate speech:

> the position taken up by communicative competence is that knowing what to say is never enough; it is also necessary to know how to say it. And by 'how' is not meant the performing of the speech that is getting the words out; rather what is meant is using the appropriate register, variety, code, script, formula, tone and formality (Davies, 2003: 23)

We define the notion of sociolinguistic competence as 'the capacity to recognize and produce socially appropriate speech in context' (Lyster, 1994: 263).

Labov's work (1972) has linked linguistic variation to independent variables such as the speaker's social characteristics and the amount of attention paid to form. Following this approach, variationist sociolinguists deal with probabilities

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of particular variants appearing in specific contexts. Preston (2000) illustrates the probabilistic approach as follows: 'For a two-way variable, a speaker (. . .) is equipped with a coin, the two sides of which represent the options for that variable; it is flipped before the product appears' (p. 11). He points out that in this context 'fair' tosses are unlikely; the chances of obtaining 50 per cent occurrences of each variant are remote. Indeed, several factors contribute to the probability of one variant being selected. Variationists' preferred tool is a logistical regression analysis, the VARBRUL program, which allows for simultaneous analysis of a variety of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors. The program calculates which factors have a statistically significant effect, as well as the relative importance of each one. The deterministic nature of variable rule probabilities has been criticised (see Young, 1999) as well as 'the failure of the approach to engage such "real" psycholinguistic factors as memory, attention, access, processing and the like' (Preston, 2000: 28).

A large amount of research into the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in the L2 has been situated within this paradigm. Dickerson (1975) was among the first to adopt the variationist approach to account for variable phonological production in the English interlanguage of Japanese learners, she postulated, 'Like NS, second-language speakers use a language system consisting of variable rules' (1975: 407).

The interest was fuelled not only by purely theoretical considerations, i.e. the need to situate SLA within a social context (Tarone, 1997), but also by practical concerns. Most SLA researchers have experience in language teaching and are familiar with language learners' difficulties in acquiring the full range of speech styles in the target language (TL) and being able to vary between them. Having spent years learning 'the orthoepic standard norm' (Valdman, 2003), instructed L2 learners might find themselves at a loss when they suddenly become L2 **users** (Cook, 2002) unable to produce vernacular speech. They might be distressed when having to use highly formal speech in authentic situations. Learners appear to be monostylistic at first, stuck somewhere in the middle of the speech style continuum (Dewaele, 2001; Tarone and Swain, 1995). Continued learning and frequent authentic interactions with native speakers (NS) of the TL allow them to gradually extend their stylistic range in written and oral production and develop a fully-fledged sociolinguistic competence (cf. infra).

The crucial problem that faces any researcher interested in analysing the development of sociolinguistic competence in the L2 is the interpretation of the variation observed for specific sociolinguistic markers. As Beebe (1988) underlined in her overview of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA, there is an important limitation in importing sociolinguistic methods designed to measure subtle variation in the speech of NS as L2 performance 'involves using a repertoire that is both limited and in a state of flux' (1988: 44).

The state of flux might be linked, as Rehner (2002) pointed out, to the larger number of independent variables that affect the variation in the L2, and not simply the social characteristics of the speaker combined with situational variables. Additional independent factors include the students' first language(s), the degree of

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curricular and extra-curricular exposure to the L2, and the type of input received through teachers and pedagogical materials. Rehner (2002) further warned that L2 studies should not blindly adopt the Labovian approach in equating 'correct' L2 forms with 'standard' or 'prestige' L1 forms. She suggests a differentiation between two kinds of variable production observable in L2 data, namely 'Type 1' variation, i.e. an alternation between native-like and non-native like forms (errors), and 'Type 2' variation that manifests itself via an alternation between forms that are each used by NS of the TL.[1] She argues that the measure of learner success in relation to 'Type 1' variation is increasingly error-free production. Measuring success is more difficult in relation to 'Type 2' variation. It can be made in terms of:

> a) learners' use of the same expressions as NS; b) their use of such expressions at levels of discursive frequency similar to those found in the speech of NS in the same situation; and c) the correlation of such uses with similar independent factors, both social (e.g., social class, sex and style) and linguistic (e.g., the surrounding lexical and syntactic context), affecting the uses by NS (Rehner, 2002: 15–16).

Yet, as will be demonstrated in the present overview, even 'Type 2' variation can be linked to incomplete grammatical knowledge, or to limited input, and only among the highly advanced speakers does 'Type 2' variation truly reflect an awareness of sociolinguistic rules in the L2. Finally, some near-native or native speakers may possess full sociolinguistic competence and yet consciously wish to avoid informal variants, thereby creating a false impression of incomplete competence (Koven, 1998).

Any overview is by nature incomplete and arbitrary. Beebe (1988) decided to include five approaches while admitting that it is 'simplistic to lump sociolinguistics (broadly defined) into five (and only five) traditions' (p. 45), she argues that it is 'equally misleading to treat every researcher as a totally independent voice' (p. 45). Most research has been carried out in the Labovian tradition, which has gradually been expanded to combine ideas and methodologies from other approaches. Beebe criticised the variationists for emphasising the *what* and ignoring the *why* (p. 44). Recent sociolinguistic research in L2 pays more attention to both the *what* and the *why*. The present study will thus concentrate on studies that borrowed from the Labovian theory.

The focus will be on advanced learners of French. In the first part of the study, some key concepts will be defined. In the second part, a series of empirical studies on French interlanguage (IL) will be reviewed that include situation, type and frequency of exposure to French as independent variables. The studies have been ordered roughly by function of the type of dependent variable that was investigated (phonological, morphological, morpho-syntactic and lexical). The third and final

[1] Nadasdi *et al.* (2003) proposed yet another type of variation which partakes of both 'type 1' and 'type 2', namely an alternation between forms that are used by L1 speakers and forms that are non-native.

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part will present some general patterns that emerge from these studies and will point to possible causes.

2 EMPIRICAL STUDIES

2.1 *Studies on phonological variants*

Thomas (2002) analysed the linguistic progress made in French L2 by two groups of advanced Canadian English-speaking students (N = 87), one group of which had spent its third year of university in France. The author measured the students' progress by means of a proficiency test including a semi-directed test of oral expression and a reading of two texts administered both at the beginning and at the end of the academic year. The analysis focused on French *liaison*, schwa and pre-consonantal *il*. Comparisons between the learner data and corpora of native French showed that NS use the liaison more frequently than NNS. NS also omit the schwa and the pre-consonantal *il* more frequently than NNS. Surprisingly, the progress of the experimental group and the control group went in opposite directions. The experimental group approximated to the NS norm for obligatory liaison but moved away from the standard NS norm for *liaison* after *est*, and deletion of schwa and pre-consonantal *il*. In contrast, the control group made steady progress towards the standard NS norm. The values of the experimental group did in fact approximate to those of vernacular French, an unknown variety before their study abroad. In a follow-up study with the same population, Thomas (2004) found that the L2 learners delete schwa less frequently than NS in non-categorical contexts. In connection with this, both studies also found that the L2 learners follow the hierarchy of phonetic contexts that constrains schwa deletion in L1 speech. Thomas found that after eight months in a French Second Language program in a university in France the L2 learners had not changed their rate of schwa deletion in a significant way. However, Uritescu, Mougeon and Handouleh (2002) found that Canadian immersion students who had had the opportunity of staying with a Francophone family displayed significantly higher rates of schwa deletion than the remaining students. Similar patterns emerged in Uritescu, Mougeon, Rehner and Nadasdi (2004) who analysed the presence or absence of schwa in unaccented open non-final syllables of eight anglophone students from Grade 9 and Grade 12 in French immersion programs in Ontario. Immersion students were found to employ the mildly-marked variant of schwa deletion much less often than L1 speakers (21 per cent versus 68 per cent) but observed the same phonetic constraints as L1 speakers. Schwa deletion was positively correlated with exposure to spoken NS French outside the school context. The authors also found that immersion students did not attach a clear social value to schwa deletion.

Sax (2003) used a cross-sectional design to study the development of socio-linguistic competence among thirty-five American students at three different levels of French study: second year university French, fourth year French and graduate students. None of the second year students had spent time abroad, half of the

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fourth year students had spent time abroad (from several weeks to a year) and all of the graduates had spent time abroad (from several weeks to four years). She also obtained data from a control group of five NS who were teaching assistants in French at Indiana University. She gathered her data through two role plays: one a simulated formal situation and the other a simulated informal situation. The two interviewers were NS of French. One of Sax's dependent variables is /l/. She found that the learners as a combined group deleted /l/ less frequently than NS but that they were sensitive to stylistic variation: deleting slightly less in the formal role play than in the informal role play. Time abroad in France emerged as the strongest predictor of /l/ deletion. The longer the time learners had spent abroad, the more they deleted /l/. Learner level also emerged as an important factor with second-year learners deleting much less frequently than fourth-year and graduate learners. The second-year learners showed no evidence of stylistic variation, while more advanced learners did vary significantly between the formal and informal contexts.

2.2 *Studies on morphosyntactic variants*

2.2.1 *Omission of ne*

Trévise and Noyau (1984) is one of the first studies on the omission of *ne* in French IL. The authors did not use a variationist approach and their data were not analysed statistically but they did shed light on this issue. They interviewed eight adult L2 users (with Spanish as an L1) in a formal and an informal situation. They found non-systematic interstylistic variation and a large amount of interindividual variation linked to the L2 users' linguistic history in French. Length of stay, age of arrival, attitudes towards the French and frequency of use of French were all linked to omission rates.

Regan (1995, 1996, 1997, 2004) focused on the development of omission rates of *ne* in the French IL of five Hiberno-English speakers before and after spending a year in a francophone region. She found that three out of five students omitted the *ne* considerably more in sociolinguistic interviews after their stay abroad (65 per cent versus 38 per cent). She observed a great deal of interindividual variation, especially in the corpus collected before the year abroad. Some students had overgeneralised the omission of *ne* after their stay abroad, which Regan interprets as a sign that they were eager to adopt TL sociolinguistic norms and 'sound native' in order to integrate into the TL community (1997: 206). Regan (2004) looked at the omission rates of her students one year after their home-coming and found that they had been maintained: 'Essentially, despite a year away from the French-speaking community, and having input only from formal classroom French, they do not forget what they have learnt about native speaker behaviour' (p. 24). She reports that two of the five speakers continued to increase in their rates of deletion after a year in their home institution.

Rehner and Mougeon (1999) analysed omission rates of *ne* in their corpus of oral IL of forty-one young immersion students in Ontario. Mean omission rate of

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ne for the group was 28 per cent. Omission rates were linked to the home language (English L1 speakers omitting more than L1 speakers of other languages), to the amount of time spent in a francophone environment (longer stays linked to more omission), and to amount of contact with French media and amount of formal instruction in French (more contact linked to more omission). Gender and social class had weaker effects. The formality of the conversational topic (ranged by the authors on a continuum) was not significantly linked to omission rates. The findings suggest that students need either explicit instruction, or a minimum of authentic interactions with native francophones before starting to omit the *ne*.

Thomas (2004) also studied the omission of *ne*. He compared omission rates in a group of forty-eight anglophone Canadian students who spent a year of study in France to that of a control group, thirty-nine classmates who continued their studies at home. His corpus, based on semi-directed tests of oral expression, contained a total of 1,365 occurrences of negation. The omission rates of *ne* for the experimental group had increased significantly from 21.3 per cent to 27.3 per cent after the study abroad, while those of the control group had dropped significantly from 32 per cent to 19.7 per cent.

Sax (2003) also analysed the omission of *ne*. A VARBRUL analysis showed that time spent in a French-speaking environment contributed to the omission of *ne*. Learners who had spent little to no time abroad almost never omitted *ne* in both an informal and a formal situation. However, mean omission rates for the intermediate group were 25 per cent and 23 per cent respectively and they rose to 75 per cent and 63 per cent respectively for those who had spent the longest time abroad. Length of pre-university French study also affected the use of *ne*; learners with more than five years of instruction deleted *ne* less frequently (23 per cent) than learners who had only three to four years of previous instruction in French (55 per cent).

Prolonged authentic use of French with NS thus seems to kick start the development of stylistic variation. Students who had never been abroad did not adapt their omission rate according to the situation. Stylistic variation appears in the intermediate group and it becomes statistically significant in the group that spent most time abroad. Finally, Sax found that the five NS displayed both higher omission rates and more stylistic variation than the group of learners.

Dewaele and Regan (2002) analysed omission rates of *ne* in a cross-sectional corpus of oral IL of twenty-seven Dutch L1 students at the Free University of Brussels. Participants were interviewed in an informal (conversation) and a formal (oral exam) situation. The corpus contained 992 negations. Omission rates in the formal situation (12 per cent) were not significantly different from those in the informal situation (15 per cent), which was interpreted as an indication of the incomplete mastery of sociolinguistic rules in the TL by the learners. Omission rates were lower in the formal situation for a majority of participants but they went up for a small number of participants. Length of formal instruction in French did not affect omission rates of *ne* but the amount of authentic use of French outside the classroom and contact with French through radio and

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television were linked with higher omission rates. More extraverted participants also tended to omit *ne* more frequently. The amount of interindividual variation was very high. Dewaele and Regan (2002) argue that the omission of *ne* in French IL follows a U-shaped development. Beginning and intermediate learners opt for the more salient post-verbal particle to express negations. Incomplete grammatical knowledge rather than complete sociolinguistic competence would be responsible for the absence of *ne* in their negations. As learners progress, they may gradually understand the morpho-syntactic rules for the negation in French and start to produce preverbal and post-verbal particles categorically. Highly advanced learners finally grasp the sociolinguistic rules that allow the particle *ne* to be omitted in certain situations. Given the heterogeneous nature of learner groups in terms of linguistic development, the causes underlying omission are likely to be varied, which would account for the large within-group variation in omission rates.

Dewaele (2004a) analysed interindividual variation in omission rates of the preverbal particle *ne* in 991 negations produced in conversations between seventy-three NS and NNS of French who were students at Birkbeck College, London. Both endogenous (user internal) and exogeneous (user external) extralinguistic factors were found to be linked to omission rates of *ne* (mean = 64 per cent for the nine NS, and 27 per cent for the sixty-four NNS). Whereas age and gender were found to have little effect, the degree of extraversion of the speaker, the frequency of use of French and the native/non-native status of the speakers were significantly correlated with omission rates. Among the exogeneous factors, the composition of the dyad was found to be linked to omission rates: NNS interacting with NS omitted the *ne* more frequently than NNS in conversation with other NNS. It was argued that this accommodation effect among NNS might in fact trigger a development towards NS-like omission rates.

2.2.2 *Pronouns of address*

Pronouns of address are probably one of the most salient sociolinguistic markers in French. Yet, they are also notoriously difficult to master as speakers must resolve the 'inherent sociopragmatic ambiguity whereby the same linguistic behavior may be interpreted as following either from perceived status difference or from desire to index social distance' (Kinginger, 2000: 24). The *vous* can be used as a form of respect, but it can equally serve to indicate a social distance between the interlocutors and the superiority of one of them. The *tu* on the other hand, can be perceived as a sign of solidarity, but it can also carry a value of familiarity or inferiority.

Lyster (1994) used a functional-analytic approach to enhance the sociolinguistic competence of learners of French in immersion programs in Toronto. He showed that the experimental group which had received seven weeks of instruction based on a combination of an analytic approach with its focus on correctness, awareness of the variable rules through explicit instruction, and a communicative approach outperformed the control group, which had received standard experiential

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instruction,[2] in appropriate use of the address pronoun *vous* in formal written and oral French (1994: 279). Lyster and Rebuffot (2002) further investigated the acquisition of pronouns of address in French in Canadian French immersion programs. An analysis of a corpus of audio recordings of teacher-student interaction in immersion classrooms revealed an absence of singular *vous* from classroom discourse. The authors show that *tu* serves as a second-person pronoun of address to indicate singular and familiar reference, but it also indicates indefinite reference as well as plural reference. The latter adds to the difficulty already experienced by these young learners of French whose L1, English, uses only one pronoun to encode the functions fulfilled by *tu* and *vous*. The authors also point to a morphological explanation: the over-use of *tu* might be the result of the learners' preference for the morphologically simpler and more frequent verb forms with *tu* which are homophonous for the first, second, third person singular and third person plural in regular verbs, whereas the second person plural is a different verb form.

Dewaele (2004b) analysed the effects of situational and sociobiographical variables on the self-reported and actual use of pronouns of address in native and non-native French. A corpus of interviews between NS and NNS of French provided data on the actual use of address pronouns. Data were not normally distributed, i.e. a significant number of participants used either *tu* or *vous* categorically. These data were complemented with self-reported pronoun use in five situations collected through a written questionnaire from 24 NS and 101 NNS. Both groups were found to differ in their reported use of *tu*. More specifically, the NS used *tu* much more frequently with known interlocutors but almost never with unknown interlocutors. The NNS followed this pattern, but not as consistently: they reported occasional use of *vous* with known interlocutors, but also *tu* with unknown interlocutors. Older NS and NNS reported using fewer *tu*, frequent users of French reported a slightly higher use of *tu* overall. NNS with a system of multiple address pronouns in their L1 were also found to use more *tu*. The results showed that the exogeneous variables had similar effects on NNS and NS. A strong interlocutor effect was discovered, with female and younger interlocutors being reportedly addressed more often by *tu* than male and older interlocutors. Both NS and NNS reported using *vous* almost exclusively with strangers.

The analysis of the spoken corpus revealed that the nine NS used *tu* more frequently than NNS in that specific interaction. Age and gender of the speaker had no effect. Frequency of use of French was clearly positively correlated with the use of *tu*. NNS with a system of multiple address pronouns in their L1 were also found to use more *tu*. Among the exogeneous variables, gender of the interlocutor was not linked to the use of *tu*, but a strong effect for age of the interlocutor emerged, with higher use of *tu* in same-age dyads. Dewaele (2002b) argued that the phenomenon of instability or free variation in the choice of pronouns of address can be approached

[2] 'Instructional practices that emphasize topics, tasks, activities, and substantive content rather than the language itself in order to create opportunities for implicit language learning similar to those offered by a natural target language environment' (Lapkin, 1999: xiv).

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through Chaos and Complexity Theory (CCT).[3] The system of pronouns in IL is a complex, dynamic and non-linear system. It is first determined by learners' levels of grammatical competence and second by the amount of sociolinguistic knowledge. Using the CTT metaphor, one could say that the developing pronoun system goes through stable states or 'equilibrium points' (categorical use of a variant) before varying freely without any apparent systematicity and finally reaching a state where the variation becomes more NS-like.

An illustration of this development can be found in Kinginger (2000) and Belz and Kinginger (2002) who explored the effect of telecollaborative learning via electronic interaction on the development of L2 pragmatic competence in American learners of French. The researchers, who work within the sociocultural paradigm (cf. Lantolf and Pavlenko, 2001) argue that telecollaborative language classes allow learners to interact and negotiate social meaning with NS peers and thus develop a wider range of registers. The NS partners pointed to instances of inappropriate use of address pronouns during email exchanges, and this led to changes in the learners' language use. A microgenetic[4] analysis of a limited number of learners showed that increased opportunities for interaction and assistance from peers led to a disambiguation of the numerous sociopragmatic meanings of the pronouns of address. Learners became more aware of the use of the informal forms of solidarity (Belz and Kinginger, 2002). Kinginger and Farrell (to appear) explored the development of meta-pragmatic awareness and, more specifically, social indexicality of the address pronouns in French among eight American students in study abroad programs. The authors used a Language Awareness Interview to investigate learners' awareness of pronouns of address in French before and after a sojourn in France. Results suggest that the greatest area of growth was in development of address-form awareness in relation to age-peers.

2.2.3 *Subject pronouns 'nous' versus 'on'*

The variable use of subject pronouns *nous* and a subgroup of *on* (which designates a group of persons including the speaker) has also been well researched in French IL. In L1 French, '*nous* + 1st person plural verb' is characteristic of formal styles while '*on* + 3rd person singular verb' is typical of informal styles. A number of studies have been carried out on the use of *nous* versus *on* in the French IL of Canadian students in French immersion programs. Swain and Lapkin (1990) found that students in a late immersion program used *on* much more frequently than students in an early immersion program. Harley (1992) compared the use of *on* first in groups of learners from early immersion, late immersion and extended French, and

[3] Chaos and complexity theory (CCT) deals with complex, dynamic and non-linear systems, focusing on processes rather than states, and it considers the synthesis between systems by looking at interactions between individual components. Some linguists have welcomed CCT as a means to broaden their paradigm and overcome internal divisions (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 1997; Herdina and Jessner, 2002).

[4] The observation of skill acquisition during a learning event (Belz and Kinginger, 2002).

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proceeded then to a comparison of the learner corpora with a corpus of NS from Quebec. Harley found that the early immersion students used substantially more *nous*. Late immersion students appeared to use *on* more frequently, but the NS used *on* exclusively in the first person plural context. Rehner, Mougeon and Nadasdi (2003) analysed the proportion of *nous* versus *on* in their corpus of spoken French gathered among forty-one immersion students in Ontario. It contained 810 tokens of *on* and 642 tokens of *nous*. The formal variant *nous* thus accounted for 44 per cent of the 1st person plural contexts, the informal variant *on* for the remaining 56 per cent. Exposure to French, through radio and television or through extended stays with Francophone families or in Francophone environments, was found to be linked, though not linearly, to a proportional increase in the use of *on*. Students speaking Spanish or Italian at home were also found to favour the use of *nous*, which could reflect the presence of *noi* and *nosotros* in these languages and the absence of variants similar to *on*. The authors speculate that preference of the English L1 students for *on* could be linked to the fact that English use a subject pronoun *one*, which is morphophonetically similar and semantically related to the French *on*, or that the English L1 students simply did not have another L1 variant pulling them in the direction of *nous*.

Sax (2003) investigated the use of *nous* versus *on* by her American learners of French. Time abroad emerged as the most significant factor. Learners having two weeks or less abroad used very few *on* (9 per cent); this proportion jumped to 47 per cent for the intermediate group and reached 93 per cent for the learners having spent the most time abroad. The three groups used *on* more frequently in the informal situation, which suggests that awareness at some level of stylistic variation exists even before the learners have fully grasped the extent of use in NS speech. Comparing the emergence of *nous/on* variation with the other variables in her study, Sax concludes that *on* is the first stylistic variable to appear.

Lemée (2002) analysed the *nous/on* variation in the French IL of forty-eight Irish students. The participants belonged to four proficiency groups ranging from intermediate (high school leavers) to highly advanced (at the end of three years of university study and a year in France). She found relatively little variation across groups, but students who had spent little time in France used more *nous*. Male participants favoured *on* but there was no effect for social class. The author argues that the relatively high proportion of *on* in the low proficiency groups was due to incomplete grammatical competence while the proportion of *on* in the highest group was linked to their growing sociolinguistic competence. Surprisingly, the choice of variant did not vary with the formality of the topic, which suggests that the participants still had some way to go before achieving a full understanding of sociostylistic variation.

Dewaele (2002a) investigated the use of *nous* versus *on*, in the advanced oral and written French IL of thirty-two Dutch L1 speakers (532 tokens of *nous/on*). A quantitative analysis of the oral corpus revealed that the amount of authentic interaction in the TL positively correlated with use of *on*, as do greater morpholexical accuracy rates, fluency, omission of *ne* in negations and use of

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colloquial vocabulary. A similar analysis of the written corpus revealed proportions of *on* equal to the oral corpus, which suggests that as a group, the learners have not yet completely acquired the variable constraints on the use of *nous/on*.

2.2.4 *Gender neutralisation*

The article by Blondeau, Nagy, Sankoff and Thibault (2002) offers a good overview of their previous work on the French spoken by the first generation of young adult Anglophone Montrealers to have been socialised in an officially francophone Quebec and the first generation to have experienced 'French immersion' programs in the English schools. The authors analysed the relationship between L2 competence (grammar, mastery of the local variety, control of socio-stylistic variation) and the type and extent of contact with francophones and with the French language and culture. The general finding is that speakers who are more integrated into the francophone community, use French in more contexts, and are generally better speakers, are more likely to use L1 vernacular variables. Recent studies considered subject-doubling (Nagy, Blondeau and Auger, 2003) and gender neutralisation in the speech of twenty-nine young Anglo-Montrealers (Blondeau and Nagy, 2004). The researchers found that L2 variation resembles that of L1 even though the overall rates of use of the non-standard variants are lower (example: *J'aime pas les maisons là* ***ils*** *sont* ***tout'*** *dirty*. 'I don't like the houses (fem.) there, they're all dirty' (masc.)). More integrated speakers use more of the non-standard variants, while the less integrated speakers, whose French is based on what they have learned in the classroom, use few or none of the non-standard variants.

2.2.5 *Tense*

Harley (1992), Lyster (1996) and Swain and Lapkin (1990) reported that the grammatical complexity of verb forms might limit their use in French IL. Their immersion students clearly preferred the present tense although this is the informal option rather than using the more formal *conditionnel* in requests. In the case of the Swain and Lapkin study the students had no trouble associating *s'il-vous-plaît* or polite openers such as *pardon*, or *pardonnez-moi* with the formal register.

Nadasdi, Mougeon and Rehner (2003) studied the expression of the future in a corpus of oral IL of sixteen French immersion students. They looked at three constructions in particular: the *futur périphrastique* (periphrastic future) and the *présent de l'indicatif* (present) which are considered informal and the *futur fléchi* (synthetic future), considered to be more formal. Overall the *futur périphrastique* accounted for 78 per cent of the cases, with 11 per cent for the two other variants (p. 205). A VARBRUL analysis revealed that length of stay in a francophone environment (ranging from 0 to 'more than 3 weeks') had a strong effect, with a linear positive relationship between length of stay and use of the *futur périphrastique*, an equally negative relation emerged between length of stay and the use of the *futur fléchi*, and, to a lesser degree, the present tense. Girls were found to use more *futur fléchi* than boys. Students from non-anglophone backgrounds used more *futur périphrastique*. The second part of the study focused on the use of informal French-Canadian

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variants of the *futur périphrastique*, (*je vais*, *je vas* and *m'as*). A negative correlation was found between length of stay in a francophone environment and the proportion of the *je vas*. No student used the variant *m'as*.

2.3 *Lexical research*

Mougeon and Rehner (2001) and Rehner (2002) considered the development of discourse and linguistic competencies by Ontario French immersion students. Both studies focus on polysemous and polyfunctional words. Mougeon and Rehner (2001) considered *juste* versus *seulement* versus *rien que*; Rehner (2002) studied *comme/like*; *donc/alors/(ça) fait que/so*; *bon*; *là*) which play key roles in the expression of fundamental semantic notions and discursive functions. She compared the students' discursive and non-discursive uses of these expressions with native and teacher norms. The students' frequency of use of the expressions and the range of discursive functions this use fulfills were found to be influenced by the existence of equivalent expressions in their L1. Students' sex and/or social class appeared only to affect the use of those expressions with English discursive equivalents. Frequency of exposure for the students was positively correlated with use of four of the six French expressions. Finally, Rehner (2002) showed that, while the students' rank order of frequency of use of the expressions matches almost exactly that of the immersion teachers, it is far from approximating NS norms.

Dewaele and Regan (2001) addressed the issue of underrepresentation or avoidance of colloquial words in the advanced French IL of twenty-nine Dutch L1 speakers and of six Hiberno-Irish English L1 speakers before and after spending a year in a Francophone environment. Colloquial words were found to be very rare in the two corpora as learners preferred more formal synonyms (the word *argent* instead of *fric* 'money', *travailler* instead of *bosser* 'to work'). Even learners who reported frequent active authentic communication in French used significantly fewer colloquial lexemes in the cross-sectional corpus than in a comparable corpus from a control group of six NS of French. While the proportion of colloquial lexemes increased significantly after a year abroad in the longitudinal corpus, the values remained significantly below those obtained from the control group. It was argued that only prolonged authentic contact with the TL community might allow learners to develop the kind of implicit, proceduralised sociopragmatic knowledge that would allow an increased use of colloquial words. An additional explanation for the relative infrequency of colloquial variants in the speech of advanced learners of French may be that the social-psychological costs of using them inappropriately is higher than that of using formal variants inappropriately since the use of formal variants is what is expected of L2 learners (Mougeon, personal communication).

In a further study on colloquial vocabulary in French, Dewaele (2004d) analysed a corpus of interviews between sixty-two NS and NNS of French. Statistical analyses revealed a positive relation between the use of colloquial words and extraversion level, frequency of contact with French and proficiency level in French. It was argued that the extraverts' inclination to take risks, combined with

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lower communicative anxiety, might explain the higher use of colloquial words. Proficiency seems to be a pre-requisite, but not the only factor, for actual use of colloquial vocabulary. Indeed, NS were found to use only marginally more colloquial words than NNS.

3 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This final section will first consider some methodological issues about the studies that were reviewed. Some general trends in the results will then be identified and they will be interpreted by considering the complex interaction between exogeneous and endogeneous factors.

The first methodological point to be made is the general preference for cross-sectional studies on relatively large samples rather than longitudinal studies. This means that groups of different proficiency levels are distinguished and the results are interpreted as an illustration of on-going development. Longitudinal studies tend to have smaller sample sizes, which could lead to questions about the generalisability of the results, as outliers might obscure or accentuate group patterns. More longitudinal studies with large groups are needed (cf. Thomas, 2002; 2004).

Another methodological difficulty lies in the sample size of the NS baseline data. As the researchers usually work in French departments with L2 learners, they usually have access to larger numbers of learners than NS, which are typically language teachers or assistants who might be tempted to produce hyper-correct speech when recorded in interviews. Authors generally refer to studies carried out in native French, allowing them to compare values for certain variables. However, inter-corpora comparisons are often difficult to carry out because of the different methodologies used to collect the data, different categorisations of dependent and independent variables, different times, populations and tasks. Using someone else's corpus means that one is in the dark about certain aspects that might be crucial for the interpretation of data and results. The inclusion of even a small number of NS in the original design, provides a valuable base-line value. Some statistical tests such as t-tests are quite robust and can be used to compare samples of unequal size.

One fairly consistent finding in our overview is the over-use of formal variants. It has been linked to restricted access to sufficiently diverse linguistic input. Lack of access makes it very difficult for L2 users to pick up the linguistic characteristics and variation patterns of their chosen community of practice within the larger group of TL speakers. Instructed L2 learners are mainly exposed to formal speech styles and written material. Mougeon, Nadasdi and Rehner (2002) refer to a corpus of recordings of seven teachers of immersion French in their classrooms in Ontario schools. The teachers were found to systematically avoid colloquial variants and to heavily favour formal variants in their speech. Learners often have very little authentic informal communication with NS of their own age group, where vernacular styles would be used and are also exposed to a great number of written sources where vernacular speech is absent, even though some of these sources claim

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to reflect oral language. Mougeon *et al.* (2002) disproved this claim in their analysis of a sample of French language arts course books used in the Toronto area. They looked at texts which were adaptations of oral French (dialogues, interviews) and texts that reflected written French (extracts from novels, newspaper articles). As expected, the texts reflecting written French in the course books did not contain a single informal variant. More surprising, informal variants were also almost absent in the texts supposed to reflect oral French. For instance, the rare cases where *ne* was omitted were in speech extracts produced by individuals who were devalorised (less intelligent or delinquents). Overall, formal variants were used in an almost categorical way (Mougeon *et al.*, 2002).

Only a prolonged and regular contact with NS of the TL seems to have a noticeable effect on the learners' sociolinguistic competence. A prolonged stay in the TL community, or intense contact with members of that community, has also been shown to affect not only grammatical, but also sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence. Some of the changes seem to happen without the user noticing, such as specific lexico-syntactic choices in the formulation of emotional speech acts (Pavlenko, 2002) which the author attributes to conceptual restructuring linked to the process of L2 socialisation. However, learners might consciously reject linguistic variants common in certain communities of practice. Dewaele (2004c) reported that L2 users often refrain from using swearwords in the L2 because they feel that NS display a proprietary attitude towards these words. L2 users who betray their non-nativeness through their accent but do use these words that characterise 'in-group' membership may be surprised by the unwanted illocutionary effects. The development of advanced language learners' sociolinguistic competence allows them to identify not only gender-specific variants, but also social or generational speech patterns used by groups of NS with whom they may wish to identify. The young learners' desire to stop sounding like their teachers at some point in their linguistic development probably reflects a similar process in the L1 where it is perceived 'uncool' to speak like one's parents. By consciously travelling up and down the continuum of speech styles learners can show their linguistic independence. However, learners may also consciously decide not to adopt certain variation patterns from the NS community if they judge them to be in conflict with their own ideological and cultural beliefs or sense of self.

Another recurrent finding in the literature is the relatively small amount of interstylistic variation which suggests that the L2 users have not yet identified (or differentiated) the sociostylistic value of the various sociolinguistic variants and do not style shift in a native-like way. However, interindividual variation between L2 users is generally much larger than such variation between NS. One possible explanation is that the L2 user's probability of choosing a variant will always differ from that of the NS as an extra set of independent variables enters the equation. Beebe (1988) was right to advocate caution in the use of sociolinguistic methods for the analysis of variation in the L2. Superficially similar patterns of variation may be the result of different underlying mechanisms. In the L1 the choice of a particular variant can be the result of a conscious or unconscious decision between

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alternatives, it is unlikely that L2 users always have much choice, and that choice may sometimes be guided by L1 or IL transfer.

One possible explanation for the wide amount of variation in L2 concerns the representation of knowledge in the L2 user. Paradis (1997) has suggested that in L2 acquisition the development of implicit knowledge, based in the procedural memory, lags behind the development of explicit knowledge, based in the declarative memory.[5] It thus takes time for grammatical knowledge to 'migrate' from the declarative memory system to the procedural memory where it can be used automatically. The participants in the studies that were reviewed had reached varying levels of proficiency and most were probably still developing their implicit knowledge, occasionally applying declarative knowledge to decide on the choice of sociolinguistic markers, hence the free variation and large interindividual variation at group level.[6] L2 users who had used their IL frequently in interactions with TL speakers were clearly ahead. Knowledge about sociolinguistic rules, and consistent use of these rules, probably crowns the acquisition process of the L2 grammar. Once this sociolinguistic knowledge has become proceduralised, users can make automatic decisions about appropriateness. At this point sociolinguistic variants will vary within relatively narrow bands, similar to the variation patterns of the NS.

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[5] Declarative memory is located in the temporal lobe structures and has been implicated in the learning, representation, and use of knowledge about facts and events. All the information in declarative memory can be explicitly recollected (Ullman, 2001). Procedural or implicit memory is rooted in frontal basal ganglia structures and has been implicated in the learning of motor and cognitive 'skills' or 'habits'. This information cannot be consciously recollected (Ullman, 2001).

[6] Declarative knowledge is knowledge 'that' or knowledge 'about the world'. Procedural knowledge is knowledge 'how' or the knowledge that underlies skilled behaviour.

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