

The Sociolinguistic Competence of Immersion Students

Raymond Mougeon, Terry Nadasdi
and Katherine Rehner

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Series Editor: David Singleton, Trinity College, Dublin, Ireland

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This series brings together titles dealing with a variety of aspects of language acquisition and processing in situations where a language or languages other than the native language is involved. Second language is thus interpreted in its broadest possible sense. The volumes included in the series all offer in their different ways, on the one hand, exposition and discussion of empirical findings and, on the other, some degree of theoretical reflection. In this latter connection, no particular theoretical stance is privileged in the series; nor is any relevant perspective – sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, neurolinguistic, etc. – deemed out of place. The intended readership of the series includes final-year undergraduates working on second language acquisition projects, postgraduate students involved in second language acquisition research, and researchers and teachers in general whose interests include a second language acquisition component.

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Preface

This book is designed for three kinds of readers. First, it will be of interest to graduate students who are interested in sociolinguistic variation within the field of second language acquisition. We hope this volume will provide a solid foundation and theoretical orientation for scholars wishing to examine variation in a wide variety of languages in different settings. The second target audience for this volume are teachers of French as a second language. It is rare indeed for faculties of education to provide second language teachers with information concerning the variable use of linguistic forms, their frequency of use and the linguistic/social factors that govern their usage. Our book not only provides French as a second language (FSL) teachers with such information, but also offers them opportunities to reflect on the factors that condition the learning of sociolinguistic variation by French immersion students. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our research is intended for those responsible for curriculum development. Policy-makers need to be made aware of the variable use of language in order to develop pedagogical materials that promote the acquisition of such use by classroom learners.

The idea for the present volume began more than 10 years ago when we extended the sociolinguistic methodology we had used to investigate variation and change in the speech of Francophone bilingual students residing in minority communities to research on the learning of variation by French immersion students. During the writing of this book, we have been fortunate enough to have interacted with a number of individuals who, contemporaneously, pursued research projects similar to our own. These researchers have helped through their own research, through their interest in our work and through various exchanges at conferences. We would like to express our gratitude to them here: Julie Auger, Bob Bayley, Hélène Blondeau, Jean-Marc Dewaele, Naomi Nagy, Denis Preston, Vera Regan, Gillian Sankoff, Pierrette Thibault and Alain Thomas.

We would also like to express our thanks to our family members, Françoise Mougeon, Paula Kelly and John Ippolito for their support and encouragement. We gratefully acknowledge funding support received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and would also like to express our thanks to the French immersion teachers in

the Greater Toronto Area, who allowed us to gather the student speech corpus on which our research is based. Finally, we would like to thank Roy Lyster and Dalila Ayoun for providing insightful comments that have greatly improved the quality of our manuscript.

The present volume builds largely on previous work of scholars such as Elaine Tarone, Doug Adamson, Denis Preston, Bob Bayley and Vera Regan who initially conducted research on the variable use of target and non-target forms by second language learners. In our own research, we have extended the study of variation to a large number of variables involving target-language forms whose sociolinguistic status differs. By raising awareness of the sociolinguistic challenges that second language learners face, we hope to pave the way to new developments in second language pedagogy that pay greater attention to sociolinguistic variation. By doing so, we can expect the next generation of French immersion students to make even greater progress acquiring a native-like mastery of French.

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Chapter 1

Introduction¹

More than three decades of research focused on the second language outcomes of French immersion programs has produced a wealth of studies documenting the successes and limitations of French immersion students' communicative proficiency [see notably Calvé (1991), Harley (1984), Lyster (2007) and Rebuffot (1993) for overviews]. For the most part, these studies have concentrated on grammatical competence, that is the receptive and productive knowledge of the target-language system, and to a lesser extent on discourse competence, that is the receptive and productive knowledge of coherent and cohesive target-language discourse. However, considerably less research has been devoted to French immersion students' sociolinguistic competence, that is the receptive and productive knowledge of sociolinguistic variants and of the linguistic, social and stylistic factors that govern their usage.

The goal of this volume is to bring together and discuss from both a theoretical and applied perspective the results of a research project that focuses on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by French immersion students.² In so doing, we hope to make a significant contribution to this understudied aspect of French immersion students' communicative competence. In the chapters that follow, sociolinguistic competence will be examined in relation to the learner's knowledge of sociolinguistic variation. More specifically, we will be assessing the extent to which French immersion students master a full repertoire of sociolinguistic variants, acquire their discursive frequency and observe the same linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints on variant choice adhered to by first language (L1) speakers of French. We will also assess the extent to which the French immersion students' learning of sociolinguistic variation is affected by a number of crucial independent variables (e.g. the learners' extra-curricular exposure to L1 French and the treatment of sociolinguistic variation in the educational input of the French immersion students). It should be pointed out at the outset that the present volume constitutes a unique and original contribution to research on

the learning of sociolinguistic competence by advanced second language learners in an educational setting. To our knowledge, there has not been any book written on this topic before and the findings reported upon in the present volume are based on more than a dozen detailed studies on the learning of a wide range of sociolinguistic variants pertaining to the different components of language (phonology, lexicon, morphology and morphosyntax). Furthermore, ours is the only research of which we are aware that investigates the effect of educational input on learners' sociolinguistic competence.

Before we provide more specific information about the goals and methodology of our research, we will situate the research on the learning of sociolinguistic competence by advanced second language learners in the broader fields of variationist sociolinguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) research. We will also provide a state-of-the-art review of studies that have focused specifically on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by advanced learners of French as a second language.

Sociolinguistic Variation in First Language Speech Communities

Language variation is observable in all components of every human language (syntax, morphology, lexicon and phonology). It involves an alternation between different elements of a given language whose meaning (or phonological status, if they are sounds) is identical. There are two types of language variation: linguistic and sociolinguistic. With linguistic variation, the alternation between elements is categorically constrained by the linguistic context in which they occur. With sociolinguistic variation, speakers can choose between elements in the same linguistic context and, hence, the alternation is probabilistic. Furthermore, the probability of one form being chosen over another is also affected in a probabilistic way by a range of extra-linguistic factors [e.g. the degree of (in)formality of the topic under discussion, the social status of the speaker and of the interlocutor, the setting in which communication takes place, etc.].

An example of linguistic variation is the grammatical notion of plurality in spoken English, which can be conveyed by various affixes whose use is constrained categorically by the linguistic context in which they occur: *finger* versus *fingers* [z]; *cheek* versus *cheeks* [s]; *bridge* versus *bridges* [əz]; *foot* versus *feet*; *ox* versus *oxen*, etc. By 'constrained categorically' we mean that in a given linguistic context L1 speakers of English will always use the same form to convey a notion. Thus, in the above example, with nouns that end in a voiceless consonant, L1 speakers will always use the plural affix [s], with nouns that end in a voiced occlusive consonant, they will always use the affix [z], etc. An example of linguistic variation in French is the alternation between full and contracted forms of the definite

article. The full form occurs before all consonant initial nouns (e.g. *le livre* 'the book' and *la table* 'the table'), whereas the contracted form is found categorically before words beginning with a vowel (e.g. *l'avion* 'the plane' and *l'assiette* 'the plate'). In linguistics, the different forms that speakers alternate between are referred to as 'variants' and the notion they convey is referred to as the 'variable'.

An example of sociolinguistic variation is the *-ing* variable, which involves the alternation between two pronunciations of the final sound of English words ending in *-ing*, such as *morning*, *nothing* and *doing* (e.g. *good morning* [n] versus [ŋ] or *nothing* [n] versus [ŋ]). L1 speakers of English tend to use variant [n] more frequently when *-ing* occurs in verbal forms, as in *he's eatin'*, than in nouns, such as *morning* or *Kipling*, where it is less likely to occur (a probabilistic linguistic constraint), see Houston (1985). L1 speakers of English also use [n] more often when discussing an informal topic, telling a funny story, etc. or if they hail from the lower social strata (probabilistic extra-linguistic constraints), see Trudgill (1974) and Downes (1998). A similar example from French is the variable use or non-use of /l/, which is also influenced by linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints. L1 speakers of Canadian French delete /l/ much more frequently when it occurs in a subject pronoun (e.g. *i(l) faut* 'it is necessary') than in definite articles (e.g. *dans (l)a cave* 'in the basement'). Also, male speakers and speakers from the lower social strata tend to delete /l/ more often than female speakers and speakers from the upper social strata (across all linguistic contexts), see Sankoff and Cedergren (1976) and Poplack and Walker (1986). It should be noted that these probabilistic linguistic and extra-linguistic constraints are shared across speakers in a given speech community and are a feature of their native language competence. Furthermore, to distinguish the variants that are involved in linguistic variation from those involved in sociolinguistic variation, the former can be referred to as 'linguistic variants' and the latter as 'sociolinguistic variants'. Likewise, the notions conveyed by linguistic variants are, as pointed out above, referred to as linguistic variables, while the notions expressed by sociolinguistic variations are referred to as sociolinguistic variables.

Sociolinguistic variants are of special interest to linguists and language educators because they can be used as markers of style or register, social status, group membership, etc. For instance, returning to the *-ing* variable, speakers of English may elect to use variant [n] along with other informal variants (e.g. informal content or grammatical words such as *pal* for *friend*, *juice* for *electricity*, *gonna* for *going to*, etc.) to reduce the psychological distance between themselves and their interlocutors, to impart a humorous tone to their speech, etc., and, in contrast, they may choose to use [ŋ] and the other formal variants mentioned above to heighten the psychological distance, to show respect to their interlocutor, because they are delivering a formal speech, etc.

Given that the use of sociolinguistic variants is governed by a complex set of linguistic and extra-linguistic factors, sociolinguistic variation presents a special challenge to L2 learners and consequently it is, as a rule, introduced late, if at all, in L2 syllabi. Be that as it may, because sociolinguistic variation is commonplace and because it is a crucial property of all human languages, L2 learners must come to grips with it sooner or later in their learning of the target language. Therefore, it is important to conduct research on the learning of sociolinguistic variation by such learners, which could bring to light useful data for program assessment, curriculum and materials development and implementation. It is precisely this type of research that the present volume reports upon.

Variation in Second Language

Research on the learning of sociolinguistic variation by L2 learners is part of a large body of research investigating various dimensions of the communicative competence of L2 learners, a concept originally defined by Canale and Swain (1980) and refined and further developed by others (e.g. Bachman, 1987; Brown, 1987). Within this body of research, the study of the learning of sociolinguistic variation is usually recognized as belonging to the set of studies that investigates the sociolinguistic competence of L2 learners. Interestingly, research on the learning of sociolinguistic variation, as we have just defined it, by L2 learners has only recently developed. Prior to this, numerous studies investigated the variable nature of the interlanguage of L2 learners (e.g. Dickerson, 1974; Ellis, 1987; Gatbonton, 1978; Huebner, 1983, 1985; Tarone, 1988). They focused on L2 learners' alternation between native and non-native usages or between more than one non-native usage to express a given notion, and not on L2 learners' use of sociolinguistic variants. For instance, Gass and Selinker (2001, p. 254) provide examples of alternating forms of native and non-native interrogative sentences in the past tense documented in the speech of a young Japanese learner of English as a second language (e.g. **Do you saw these peppermint?; Did you see the ghost?; *What do you do?; What did you do?*). Such alternations represent a transitional stage before the L2 learners use the native forms categorically.

In order to avoid confusion between sociolinguistic variation, as is observable in L1 speech, and variable interlanguage production, some SLA researchers have referred to the latter as 'variation along the vertical continuum' (see Andersen, 1981; Corder, 1981; Young, 1988) and to the former as 'variation along the horizontal continuum' (Corder, 1981; Young, 1988). In our own work, we refer to the first type of variation as Type 1 variation and the latter as Type 2 variation (Rehner, 2002, 2004), terminology that has been adopted by researchers such as Dewaele (2004a) and Bayley and Regan (2004).