Interlocutor effects on sociolinguistic variables in L2 French: Symmetry in the system?

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Summary:
Two French sociolinguistic variables, *ne*-deletion and subject-doubling, were analyzed in lower and higher proficiency speakers of L2 French. Lower-proficiency study-abroad learners demonstrated significantly more nativelike use of *ne*-deletion and subject-doubling in informal dyadic conversation with native French speakers than in conversation with other study-abroad learners. Higher-proficiency near-natives’ *ne*-deletion/subject-doubling frequencies were only marginally different across both types of conversations, suggesting an interlocutor effect on these variables diminishing in influence as proficiency increases.

Abstract:
As Geeslin and Long (2014) posit, the ability to speak in a second language (L2) requires a certain level of linguistic proficiency, but the ability to live in a second language requires a certain level of sociolinguistic proficiency. Sociolinguistic variables may pose acquisitional challenges for learners, especially discourse markers absent from classroom-based input but present in native speakers’ informal communication.

I examine how L2 sociolinguistic performance may be influenced by manipulating a specific social dimension: the interlocutor’s native language status vis-à-vis the language of communication. I question how this effect interacts with two sociolinguistic variables in French: *ne*-deletion (ND) and subject-doubling (SD; see 1-2 below). Since ND and SD are not part of standard (written) French, non-native speakers desiring high proficiency in spoken French must navigate the linguistic and social contexts conditioning these structures frequently occurring in informal settings. To measure use of these variables, I recorded two groups of L1-English L2-French speakers (study-abroad (SA) learners and near-native speakers (Near-NSs)) in informal dyadic conversations with a native and non-native French interlocutor.

SA learners demonstrated higher rates of both ND and SD (i.e., more informal and nativelike) in conversation with native French speakers but significantly lower rates when speaking with other SA learners (ND: $\chi^2 (2, 10.1, p < .01)$; SD: $(\chi^2 (2, 7.73, p < .03))$. An Rbrul variationist analysis furthermore revealed interlocutor language status as the most significant social factor influencing variation, for both ND and SD. Following Howard (2012), some SA learners show asymmetries in the acquisition of the informal variants, but only in one direction (exhibiting more nativelike ND than SD, but not vice-versa).

In Near-NSs, only marginal differences in ND and SD frequency were detected across different interlocutor L1s, suggesting that interlocutor effects diminish in influence as proficiency increases. The results demonstrate that this interlocutor characteristic can have consequences on how sociolinguistic performance is measured, across multiple stylistically conditioned variables, in certain learner groups.
Ne-deletion:
1a) Standard French:  
\[ Je \ ne \ parle \ pas \ allemand. \]
I NEG speak not German

1b) Spoken French:  
\[ Je \ parle \ pas \ allemand. \]
I speak not German

‘I don’t speak German.’

Subject doubling:
2a) Standard French:  
\[ Ma \ mère \ habite \ en \ Angleterre. \]
my mother lives in England

2b) Spoken French:  
\[ Ma \ mère \ elle \ habite \ en \ Angleterre. \]
my mother she lives in England

‘My mother lives in England’
Specificity and the French subjunctive in L1 and L2 speakers:
When textbooks teach too much

Charlène Gilbert

Summary:
This paper examines the nature of the sensitivity of L2 French learners and native speakers to the semantic interpretations of noun phrases indexed by mood alternation in French relative clauses. Interpretive constraints on noun phrases modified by a subjunctive clause are shown to not automatically influence their indicative counterparts.

Abstract:
As a later-acquired form with idiosyncratic lexical licensing, the subjunctive presents a learning challenge for L1 English L2 French speakers (e.g. Bartning & Schlyter 2004; Ayoun 2013; McManus & Mitchell 2015), although subtle semantic knowledge is clearly learnable (e.g. Slabakova 2006). The indicative and the subjunctive do not generally form minimal pairs, except in relative clauses (Portner 2018:109) as in (1) and (2).

(1) Jean cherche une secrétaire qui sait parler russe.
3SG seek.IND a secretary who know.3SG.IND speak Russian.
'Jean is looking for a secretary who can speak Russian.'

(2) Jean cherche une secrétaire qui sache parler russe.
3SG seek.IND a secretary who know.3SG.SUBJ speak Russian.
'Jean is looking for a secretary who can speak Russian.'

In (1) and (2), the relative clause [CP qui sait/sache parler russe] modifies the NP [NP une secrétaire]. The subjunctive, licensed in the scope of the intensional verb chercher in (2), forces a [-specific] interpretation of the noun phrase. No such semantic restriction exists with the indicative: The noun phrase can take scope over or be in the scope of the intensional verb. However, the indicative can pragmatically identify the noun as [+specific], since not using the subjunctive marking [-specific] in (1) might suggest a [+specific] interpretation following Gricean reasoning. English-speaking learners are incorrectly instructed that the contrast reflects the (non)existence of the object in question, which overstates the interpretive flavors.

A past experiment showed that textbook representation of the (non)specificity through subjective/indicative mood choice is completely overstated. On a preference task with 30 items, 30 native speakers showed said distinction only marginally. 70% of responses were consistent with a [-specific] interpretation with the subjunctive, but indicative relative clauses allowed both specific and non-specific interpretations equally. The current study reports on a preference task testing 20 L1 French and 20 L2 French speakers. It investigates their knowledge of mood alternation in the relative clause as indexing different semantic interpretations. Following Bruhn de Garavito’s (1995) study of the effect of pedagogical overstatement about obviation constraints on the subjunctive, it is hypothesized that learners’ acquisition is guided by language design that includes semantic-pragmatic relations correcting for the incorrect noun-interpretation rule provided by instruction.