

Sociolinguistic variation in French as a foreign language: a case study¹

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Résumé: Cet article étudie les relations entre la compétence et la performance sociolinguistique dans le cadre du français langue étrangère (FLE). Dix étudiants de l'université de Manchester, cinq en deuxième année et cinq en dernière année, ont été interviewés en français dans deux contextes se distinguant par leur niveau de formalité, l'intervieweur étant, respectivement, un professeur de langue maternelle française et une étudiante de langue maternelle anglaise, et on leur a demandé de remplir un questionnaire pour savoir si une période d'immersion en France avait eu un impact sur leur connaissance et leur production de trois variables sociolinguistiques : l'usage du *ne* de négation; l'usage de *on* / *nous* pour désigner la première personne du pluriel ; et la dislocation à gauche. Les résultats de l'étude sont surprenants : alors que les étudiantes de deuxième année font preuve d'un niveau de performance sociolinguistique inattendu, les questionnaires indiquent qu'elles ne maîtrisent pas toujours les règles derrière les variables. Les étudiants de dernière année, cependant, ont souvent appliqué les normes de la conversation informelle dans une situation inappropriée (formelle), malgré le fait qu'ils avaient un assez haut niveau de compétence sociolinguistique. Cela suggère que la variation diaphasique devrait être enseigné de manière plus systématique au niveau universitaire pour que les étudiants apprennent comment utiliser correctement de telles variables.

Mots-clés: français langue étrangère, compétence et performance sociolinguistique, immersion

Summary: This article investigates the relations between sociolinguistic competence and performance in French as a foreign language (FFL). Five 2nd year and five final year FFL students at the University of Manchester were interviewed formally by a French native speaker (NS) and informally by a non-native speaker (NNS) and asked to fill out a questionnaire in order to discover whether a period of immersion in France had impacted on their awareness and/or production of three sociolinguistic variables: use of *ne* in clause negation; use of *on* and *nous* to express 1st person plural referents; and left dislocation. The results show that while the 2nd Years showed unexpected levels of sociolinguistic performance, their competency questionnaires indicated that they did not always understand the rules behind the variables. Final year students, on the other hand, often over-applied NS norms in an inappropriate (formal) setting, despite relatively high sociolinguistic competency. These results indicate that sociolinguistic competence should be included in the teaching programme at this University in order for the students to learn how to use such variables correctly.

Key words: French as a foreign language, sociolinguistic competence and performance, immersion

1. Introduction

Until the late 1980s, sociolinguistics and second language acquisition (SLA) were considered separate research fields. Dennis Preston's *Sociolinguistics and Second Language Acquisition* (1989) aimed to address the overlap between these two fields and since its publication, several issues in international journals have been devoted to sociolinguistic variation in SLA (Bayley and Regan, 2004; Bayley, 2005). While we now have a wealth of information at our disposal regarding learners' awareness of the variable aspects of their target language (TL), the sociolinguistic variation of English FFL learners still remains relatively unresearched, with the main body of work stemming from studies on Canadian or Irish learners of French. This study was therefore designed to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the sociolinguistic variation of ten FFL students from the University of Manchester, including how closely they approach NS norms in informal and formal settings. At the end of this article, I also provide suggestions for future French teaching at the university with specific reference to sociolinguistic variation.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Variationist sociolinguistics

When I began interviewing and recording people, I found that their every-day speech involved a great deal of variation, which the standard theory was not equipped to deal with. (Labov, 2007: 1)

This is how the widely regarded father of variationist sociolinguistics, William Labov, viewed the state of linguistics in the early 1960s. From this standpoint, he developed a subfield of sociolinguistics whose central aim is to not only observe but also quantify sociolinguistic variation from within the linguistic repertoire of an individual (intraspeaker variation) or from speaker to speaker (interspeaker variation). The present study will examine both of these types of variation. Before we can discuss previous SLA studies conducted using a variationist framework (Section 3) as well as the methodology used to investigate variation in this study (Section 4), we must first consider the working principles of variationist sociolinguistics:

- (1) There are no single style speakers.
- (2) Styles can be ranged along a single dimension, measured by the amount of attention paid to speech.
- (3) The vernacular, in which the minimum attention is paid to speech, provides the most systematic data for linguistic analysis.
- (4) Any systematic observation of a speaker defines a formal context where more than the minimum attention is paid to speech.
- (5) Face-to-face interviews are the only means of obtaining the volume and quality of recorded speech that is needed for quantitative analysis.

(Labov, 1984: 29)

Relating the above to this study, NNSs of French who are beginning to pick up on different varieties may also exhibit variation in their own speech, which will be linked to attention to speech, as with NSs. If, by following (5), researchers interview their participants and record them via Dictaphone, this defines a situation in which more than the minimum level of attention is paid to speech, meaning that the least monitored speech style is inaccessible. Indeed,

“[we must] find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed; yet we can only obtain these data by systematic observation.”

(Labov, 1972: 209)

The quality of the data must therefore be compromised in order to collect it (Observer's Paradox). Nonetheless, there are methods of manipulating the amount of attention paid to speech which can give way to more informal styles. The SPEAKING model (Hymes, 1967: 21) accounts for a multitude of extralinguistic factors that may affect attention to speech and was therefore chosen as a basis for constructing the informal and formal interview settings for this study (see Sections 3.2 and 3.3).

2.2 Second language acquisition

2.2.1 Sociolinguistic competence and performance

For many SLA researchers (e.g. Lyster, 1994; Dewaele, 2004), sociolinguistic competence and performance are often treated as one under the heading of ‘communicative competence’ following Hymes (1966), who developed the theory as a reaction to the inadequacy of Chomskyan ‘linguistic competence’ and its applications for SLA. For Hymes, it was important to not just consider the speaker's awareness of forms in a language and whether they were grammatical or not, referred to as “intraspeaker variation” or the “vertical continuum” (specifically in SLA), but also awareness of their contexts of usage, aptly termed the “horizontal continuum” (Adamson and Regan, 1991: 2) or “interspeaker variation”. As this study centres on possible discrepancies between what FFL learners' know about the language and what they actually produce in social settings, I will make a firm distinction between these two terms throughout this article for the purpose of clarity.

2.2.2 Communicative anxiety

One factor that may explain discrepancies between competence and performance is communicative anxiety. Without spending significant time abroad, learners are ‘scared to express themselves’ with NSs (Dewaele and Regan, 2002: 124). Their self-assessed low competence levels discourage them from using the TL outside the classroom, resulting in a vicious circle. Dewaele and Regan (2002) found that time spent in a country where one's TL is spoken is conducive to lower communicative anxiety, thereby improving TL performance.

3. Review of previous SLA studies investigating the variables under study

3.1 Degree of *ne* omission/retention

Regan (1997) interviewed 6 Irish University students of French before and after a year abroad in France or francophone Belgium and found that they omitted *ne* more often upon their return. Concerning fixed expressions, she compared her results with those of Ashby (1981) and found that NNSs omitted *ne* more often than NSs with fixed expressions like *je sais pas*. However, their *ne* retention rates with non-fixed expressions were much closer to NS norms. Her subjects omitted *ne* more often with pronouns and clitics, a finding also found in Ashby (1981), suggesting that they were approximating NS norms. Regarding style, NNSs over-applied the rule and omitted *ne* more often in informal styles than would NSs.

Rehner (2010) interviewed 61 Canadian University-level learners of French and found a *ne* omission rate of 42%, a considerably higher rate than that observed of high school FFL learners (Rehner and Mougeon, 1999). This rate nonetheless remained well below that documented of NSs of Quebec and Ontario French (99.5% and 98% respectively). Concerning postverbal negators, *pas* was seen to promote *ne* retention over any other negator. More exposure to French correlated positively with *ne* omission, however Rehner still asserted that more intense contacts were needed, as

“a semester in a Francophone environment is not enough to provide learners with sufficient exposure to and opportunities to use the language in order to fully master the subtleties of sociolinguistic variation.”

(Rehner, 2010: 304)

3.2 Use of *on/nous* for 1st person plural referents

Dewaele (2002) reported on L2 acquisition of *nous* and *on* by 32 advanced Dutch learners and found that *on* was largely linked to authentic interaction with French rather than classroom instruction. Its use was also found to correlate with *ne* omission, suggesting that it is marked for style. However, this study also looked at learners' written French and found relatively similar frequencies of *on*, indicating that the learners had not yet completely mastered the rules behind the use of *on/nous*.

Rehner, Mougeon and Nadasdi (2003) found that on the whole, their 41 Canadian high-school immersion students used *on* only slightly more than *nous* (56% vs. 44%). Extracurricular exposure to French (through the media or extended stays in a Francophone environment) motivated higher rates of *on* usage, suggesting that immersion is indeed a factor in the mastery of this variable.

Sax (2003) investigated the *on/nous* distinction in her corpus of interviews with 30 American learners of French (at different levels of study) and found that *on* was used only 9% by those who had spent two weeks or less abroad. For those who had spent the most time abroad, this figure jumped to 93%, with the intermediate group figure at 47%. Common across all groups was the tendency

to use *on* more frequently in the informal situation, suggesting that variable rules can, to a certain extent, be picked up through imitation of NSs in the classroom.

3.3 Frequency of left dislocation

Nagy, Blondeau and Auger (2003) investigated left dislocation in the French interlanguage of 29 Anglophone natives from Montréal. Those with least exposure to French generally exhibited the lowest rates of LD. As found in Coveney (2005) the presence of *ne* disfavoured LD, attributed to the strongly-marked status of *ne* in Canadian French.

Sleeman (2004) tested 11 Dutch University FFL students' use of emphatic constructions, defined as constructions "where the speaker emphasizes that a referent is the topic of the predicate that follows" (Sleeman, 2004: 133). The reintroduction of a topic was not found to be a trigger for left dislocation. Where the students were to tell stories in which there was a trigger for the use of emphatic constructions, this did indeed lead to a sharp increase in their use, particularly in the form of LDs. Finally, NSs and NNSs used LDs for contrastive purposes in equal measure, indicating that the learners were on the way to approximating NS norms.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Recruitment of the Final Years began early in the 2011/12 academic year in order to isolate residence abroad, a third-year requirement of all UK Modern Languages degrees, as an independent variable. Five participants were selected based upon their answers to a questionnaire entitled 'French Language Learning', a process repeated with the 2nd Years but with the questionnaire slightly adapted. Those that were deemed to have most engaged with the language were chosen to take part in the study. Table 1 below details the sex of participants (P) and length of time spent in French-speaking countries.

Table 1. Characteristics of the student samples

	Final Years					2 nd Years				
	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5
Sex	F	F	F	F	M	F	F	F	F	F
Residence abroad (mths)	9	7	6	11	12	8	0	0	0	5

Four of the five Final Years were female, which is representative given that 76.6% of final year FFL students at the University that year were female. As all Final Years were taking combined degrees, some learning another language and some not, they spent varying periods of residence abroad in France during the 2010/11 Academic Year. The 2nd Year sample consisted entirely of females due to a lack of male consent to take part. Nonetheless, females made up 72% of the 2nd Year FFL cohort at Manchester University that year, so the sample can again be seen as fairly representative.

4.2 The informal interview

Based on Hymes' SPEAKING model, the *setting* for this interview was in or outside a university café familiar to participants, at a busy time of day, reducing the likelihood of people listening in and therefore lowering attention to speech (smaller audience). *Participants* were both NSs of English and both studying French, somewhat balancing out the power relationship inside the interview, as both speakers were in similar positions. The *ends* (purpose) of the interview, and *art characteristics* (form/content) were to talk conversationally for 15 minutes in French about topics of interest, such as sports, plans for/experiences of the year abroad, current lifestyle, etc. with the aim of recording data for a dissertation. Interviews followed a loose Q&A format, with the interviewer interjecting occasionally as in conversation and the interviewee free to continue at their leisure. The *key*, or tone, of the interview was light and friendly, with frequent laughter. The Dictaphone was placed aside to promote a relaxed atmosphere. As stated above, data was collected via interview, where the code was primarily French, with occasional switches to English while participants searched for vocabulary (*instrumentalities*). The *norms* applied were those of a spontaneous interview (*genre*), with a few initial pre-prepared questions to start off conversation. The interviewee mostly held the floor. Based on the amount of data obtained, this design was largely successful, although one 2nd Year informal interview was stopped after eight minutes in order to protect the quality of the data.

4.3 The formal interview

Many changes were made to the SPEAKING model to render this interview more formal. The interviews were led by a member of staff (French NS) and conducted in her office. She was instructed to ask a pre-written list of questions regarding more formal topics such as education, politics and punishment, and participants were also asked to judge their own language abilities in comparison with others, as well as identifying their strong and weak points, which was believed to increase their attention to speech. The Dictaphone was placed in a more obtrusive position.

4.4 Sociolinguistic competence questionnaire

Participants were asked to suggest suitable contexts for the three variables under study. This was done after the interviews, in order to hide the purpose of the study. While this was mainly successful, the third Final Year's results may be skewed as she returned her questionnaire *after* taking an exam for a module in which the variables had been studied in detail.

Overall, the 2nd Year group were aware of when *ne* would be employed and omitted, particularly with reference to formality. Interestingly, P5 linked *neuse* to *vous*, something that found in NS patterns of variation (Coveney, 2002: 73). Concerning *on* and *nous*, the 2nd Years still, on the whole, assume that *on* is used impersonally or for non-specific groups and that *nous* refers to a specific or present 'we'. P3 was unaware that *on* could mean 'we'. The main gaps in knowledge were with LD.

Concerning final year *ne* judgements, formality was cited by three of five respondents. P3 was very aware of the linguistic constraints on *ne*-use. With *on/nous*, this group focused more on formality and inclusive/exclusive uses. P3 correctly linked *nous*-use to *ne*-use (Coveney, 2002). The Final Years as a whole associated LD with emphasis and introducing new information. P3 again demonstrated awareness of the linguistic constraints on LD.

Taking these summaries into account, it is evident that the Final Years are more aware of the (extra)linguistic constraints on the variables under study, particularly LD.

5. Hypotheses

Previous research has found that immersion has positive effects on sociolinguistic competence (Regan, 1997; Rehner et al, 2003). Coupled with the results of the competency questionnaires and communicative anxiety theory, the following hypotheses can therefore be drawn:

- Those who have spent the most time in France will omit *ne* more often, use *on* over *nous* and produce more LDs.
- Experimental manipulation will be most successful with those who have not spent a period of residence abroad, i.e. they will drastically alter their style according to the interview situation. This is because they are likely to be more communicatively anxious when faced with a NS of French.
- There will be a positive correlation between use of each variable, i.e. those that prefer to maintain *ne* will also prefer *nous* and disfavour LD.
- The Final Years will adhere more closely to the linguistic constraints on the variables (based on their competency questionnaire results).
- Those who are familiar to the interviewer will produce fewer instances of *ne*, more instances of *on* and more dislocations, based on reduced levels of formality/speech monitoring.

6. Results

With these hypotheses in mind, let us now turn to the results of the study, which are presented as follows. Firstly, I will deal with a select number of extralinguistic factors that may have impacted on use of the variables. I will look at the following factors in turn: formality and immersion, interviewer familiarity, and locus of the variables in the interviews (first or second half). Under each heading, I will deal with the variables individually, beginning with *ne*-use, followed by *on/nous* and finally LD. I will then examine linguistic factors, which vary according to each variable. Following this, there will be a discussion of the results².

6.1 Extralinguistic factors

6.1.1 Formality

The 2nd Years omitted *ne* in 73.3% of cases in the informal interview and in 44.9% of cases in the formal interview. Considering the 30% difference between the

two settings, it is safe to say that experimental manipulation was successful and that participants altered their style accordingly. For the Final Years, a lot less variation in *ne* omission was observed between the informal and formal settings, with accumulated totals of 91.9% for the former and 90.5% for the latter. The two 2nd Years with previous immersion experience omitted *ne* in over 80% of cases in the formal interview. While the Final Years' competency regarding *ne*-use was high, they did not carry this over into their interviews; their *ne*-omission rates were very high in both settings. The 2nd Years' competency, however, fully matched their performance in the interviews, with each participant trending towards higher *ne*-retention when switching to formal French.

The 2nd Years used *on* for 'we' in 81.4% of cases during the informal interview and in 51.9% of cases in the formal interview. This overall tendency is respective of NS patterns. More interesting, however, are the findings concerning time spent abroad. As the two 2nd Years who had previously spent time in France omitted *ne* very frequently in the formal interview, one would expect them to also prefer *on* in this setting, something only found of P5, who had spent the longest time abroad and used *on* categorically across both settings. Regarding competency, the 2nd Years were seemingly unaware that *on* was used for 'we' (see Sec 3.4), yet all participants used it for this purpose, albeit to differing extents. Final year patterns observed re *on*-use mirror those found for *ne*-dropping, with an extremely high 95.7% overall *on*-use in the informal interview and an even higher 98.1% for the formal interview. Looking at the Final Years' competency regarding this variable, all participants linked *nous*-use to formality (see Sec 3.4), yet very few of them employed it to a considerable degree when faced with a seemingly formal interview. This over-application of *on* is stronger the lengthier the previous exposure to French, with P4 and P5 categorically using *on* compared to the others, who had spent less time abroad.

Let us now turn to left dislocation. Due to a combined total of 10 LDs across all interviews, the 2nd Year results were not examined for extralinguistic factors. Focusing on the final year interviews, 58 LDs appeared in the informal interview and 56 in the formal, indicating that the group do not deem LD to be stylistically marked. Going against NS norms, some participants used more LDs in their formal interviews, despite the fact that LD is usually avoided in formal speech. That said, one particular construction (*moi, je...*) is said to be common in both varieties, being 'used frequently by all social groups and in all speech styles and registers' (Coveney, 2005: 101). Removing *moi, je* tokens from the corpus, we are left with a total of 39 LDs in the informal interview and 37 in the formal. We can therefore conclude that their global lack of competence regarding LD is reflected by their performance here. That said, P5 produced 13 LDs across two interviews despite no previous knowledge of its contexts of usage. Immersion seems to have had a negative impact on students' performance regarding LD, with P5 (who had spent the longest time in France) increasing his usage of LD in the formal interview, going against native patterns, compared to P3 (who had spent the least) who reduced her usage.

6.1.2 Interviewer familiarity

The 2nd Years were expected to speak fairly formally with the NNS interviewer as none of them had previously come into contact with her. However, with individual rates of *ne*-retention ranging from 0-64.7%, it is clear to see that familiarity, or non-familiarity in this case, did not provoke any formality trends. For the 2nd Year formal interviews, 'known' interviewees retained *ne* 20% and 100% of the time, while 'unknown' participants retained *ne* between 16.67% and 76.47% of the time. The Final Years' results for the informal interview were equally varied, despite some participants being on familiar terms with the NNS interviewer; there was no straightforward positive correlation between familiarity and a tendency towards informal speech. However, an increase in *ne* retention was found for the participants who were unknown to the NS interviewer. 'Known' participants used *ne* in up to 4% of cases compared to rates of 16.7%-25% for those who did not.

Very similar trends were found for the 2nd Year interviews concerning *nous*-retention, with rates varying between 0% and 73.3% for the informal interviews (all participants 'unknown') and 0% and 83.3% for the formal interview (some 'known'). The highest *nous*-retention rate was produced by a 'known' participant. The final year informal interviews also produced interesting findings. The participant best known to the NNS interviewer produced the highest *ne* retention rate (10.4%), while the others (all known by face) produced rates of 0.3%. Again, the results of the formal interviews showed no sign of being influenced by interviewer familiarity.

6.1.3 Locus of the variables

The 2nd Year informal interviews saw an even spread of *ne* across the first and second halves and as expected, *ne* appeared more in the first halves of the formal interviews than the second. Contrary to this, the Final Years used *ne* evenly throughout the formal interview and *ne*-use was at its highest in the latter half of the informal interview.

While there was a minimal increase in *nous*-use towards the end of the 2nd Year informal interviews (15.8% > 20.8%), results again went in the opposite direction for the formal interview, where *nous*-use dropped from 67.6% (first half) to 15% (second half). The Final Years used *nous* so rarely that it is impossible to make any concrete statements.

Finally, let us examine LD, again leaving aside the 2nd Year results due to low token counts. Separate analyses were conducted concerning the locus of LDs in the informal and formal interviews but as the figures were very similar, I will provide global counts. A total of 58 LDs were found in the first halves of each interview, compared to 56 for the second halves.

6.2 Linguistic factors

Having discussed the extralinguistic factors that may have impacted on usage of the variables, I now present the results for each variable and participant group based on linguistic factors.

6.2.1 Ne-use

A thorough linguistic analysis of *ne*-use was conducted with regards to syntactic factors (as in Ashby, 1981). It was decided to leave out phonological contexts as students' pronunciation in many cases was less than optimal, meaning that the results would have been flawed. I will first discuss the findings for the 2nd Years.

The 2nd year corpus produced very mixed results, but each finding can be grouped into one of three categories: (1) approximated NS norms and to the same level of frequency; (2) approximated NS norms but to different frequency; (3) did not approximate NS norms. Falling into the first category are the findings concerning basic clause types and some specific clause types. The 2nd Years produce similar frequencies of *ne* in dependent and independent clauses to those found in Ashby (1981), omitting *ne* more often in independent clauses. With declaratives in particular, they omitted *ne* to a very similar level. Category two, however, is where most findings fit in. *Personne* produced a 100% *ne*-retention rate, far from the 33% found by Coveney's (2002:76). That said, *personne* does belong to the second negatives linked to higher *ne*-retention. While percentage results concerning declaratives mirrored Ashby's findings, the 2nd Years generally failed to achieve similar percentages with the other specific clause types, even if they did follow the same order. This second category also applies to the findings for the factor groups 'verb type' and 'role of the verb', with impersonal verbs and the auxiliary *avoir* most favouring *ne* retention. Finally, while they retained *ne* more often with nouns (85.7%) as opposed to clitic subjects such as *je* and *ce* (33%), mapping NS patterns found in Coveney (2002), the 2nd Years employed *ne* significantly more often with clitics than did the participants in his study (2002: 73). Areas in which the 2nd Years did not approximate NS norms were: with *il y a* (normally linked to high *ne* omission as opposed to retention - Coveney, 2002: 81); with *que* (linked to high rather than low *ne* retention); and with *pas* (linked to high rather than low *ne* omission).

The final year results suggest that they over-applied their newfound knowledge of *ne* omission in the interviews, with most findings falling into category two. Non-formulaic expressions were linked to a *ne* retention rate of 13%, well below Ashby's 46%. Overall *ne* retention rates for second negatives again lie well below those found by Ashby and fairly below those found by Coveney, even if they do follow the right order, with *pas* most favouring *ne* omission. This group had a good grasp of which basic clause type favours *ne* omission most, but again they over-omit *ne*, with rates of 19.4% and 5.5% for dependent and independent clauses compared to Ashby's 60% and 30%. The same pattern is true for specific clause types, albeit the group did recognise that declaratives typically favour *ne* omission, whereas relative clauses do not. Findings regarding verb type follow the same order as in Ashby (1981), with impersonal verbs most accompanied by *ne*. The role and subject of the verb are additional factors this group seem aware of, omitting *ne* more often with main verbs than auxiliaries and with clitic subjects rather than nouns. With specific subjects, the group correctly retained *ne* more often with *ça* than with *je* or *ce*. Despite the above, there were some category one findings in the corpus: retention rates for intransitive and transitive verbs were as similar as in Ashby's study and the Final Years omitted *ne* as often as in Ashby (1981) with *je* and *ce*.

6.2.2 *On/nous*

While Boutet (1986) has developed a tertiary distinction of specificity and restriction³ to describe the various uses of *on*, it is only the first two levels that are of relevance here, namely the specific and restricted use (e.g. family members) and the specific, non-restricted use (e.g. a cohort of students), as *on* is categorically used for the third category (people in general, corresponding to ‘one’ in English). It must be noted, however, that this three-way distinction has undergone much scrutiny for the level of interpretation involved in allocating individual instances of *on* to each of the categories. In the following example taken from my corpus, the student is describing how she heard about a job offer to work on a vineyard. Without asking the speaker of the utterance, how are we to know whether the *on* was meant to designate a specific, restricted group such as the owner and his partner (category 1) or a much larger group of workers (category 2)?

c’était sur Blackboard en fait... ils ont dit euh on veut bien recevoir um encore des étudiants de Manchester...

it was on Blackboard actually... they said we’d love to have more students from Manchester work here

(my translation into English)

The results below must therefore be read with the previous discussion in mind. Instances of *on* and *nous* discussed here are, as previously noted, solely those that were designated as Category 1 or 2.

Of 98 overall tokens of *on* in the 2nd Year interviews, 19 referred to specific and restricted groups, and 24 to specific but non-restricted groups. There was a noticeable incline in *nous*-use as the group became smaller and more specific. While *on* was also used in such instances, it tended to be preceded by *nous*, possibly to make it clear to the interviewer that they were excluded from the group referred to.

With the Final Years having only produced 7 tokens of *nous* during their interviews, we can conclude that there is no robust correlation between this more formal variant and specificity/restriction. *On* was used for specific and restricted groups as well as specific but non-restricted groups. These results suggest that the Final Years are either over-applying their knowledge of the uses of *on* or that *nous*-use is steadily declining in French, supported by the literature.

6.2.3 Left dislocation

Of 10 tokens of LD in the 2nd year corpus, the left-dislocated element filled one of two statuses: lexical or pronominal NP, with *moi*, *je*... appearing most often.

The Final Years certainly seemed to adhere to NS norms with regard to the most frequently dislocated elements. Their competence questionnaires showed that they considered LD to be highly linked to emphasis and, as found in Barnes

(1985), *moi, je* was therefore most common, as well as the *ça, c'est/c'était* structure. 65.8% of all LDs were pronominal subjects, which can be attributed to the 'high frequency in conversation of first and second person pronouns' and 'the relative topic continuity of everyday talk' (Coveney, 2005: 98). Of 114 LDs, 113 were subjects and all tokens were followed by a coreferential pronoun (one that refers back to the same referent, e.g. *Mon ami, il a 22 ans*). Surprisingly, the *nous, on* sequence was only seen twice in the corpus, but the *nous, nous* structure was absent altogether, suggesting that the group did prefer the *nous, on* structure when they felt there was the option to use it.

7. Discussion

With the overall aim of complementing previous research on sociolinguistic variation and SLA, this study has attempted to provide a more comprehensive picture of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by English FFL learners. Let us now turn to a discussion and explanation of the findings, ordered by variable.

7.1 *Ne*-use

A number of factors were seen to affect *ne*-omission. The 2nd year analysis of extralinguistic constraints showed that *ne* was omitted most by those who had previously been abroad; a strong positive correlation was found between stays in France and increasing *ne* omission in both interview settings. The idea that immersion encourages high *ne*-omission is further supported by the final year findings, who as a group never reached levels beyond 10% *ne*-retention. Having conducted a follow-up to his 1981 study, Ashby (2001) concluded that *ne* was progressively being lost from Standard Metropolitan French, which means that if these students had all spent a long period of time in France, the tendency they would have picked up on is *ne*-deletion.

Ashby's 1981 study did, however, find a difference between informal and formal settings. This is where the results for each group become very interesting. Experimental manipulation worked most with the 2nd Years who had not been abroad; they expectedly employed *ne* more in the formal interview. If this, as one would expect, is due to the format of the formal interview (increased attention to speech), then why is it that the Final Years and the second years that had spent time in France did not behave in the same way, using *ne* to an equally high extent in both settings?

I believe that this can be explained by how both groups approached the situation. For the 2nd Years (non-immersion), who previously had limited exposure to spoken French, it was probably viewed as an exam-style situation, with a NS assessing their accuracy and ability to discuss formal topics. This is supported by the fact that very few 2nd Years who had filled out the 'French Language Learning' questionnaire agreed to be interviewed. Of those that did, the ones with no immersion experience tended to drop *ne* towards the end of the formal interview, indicating a need for them to 'settle in' and relax. Considering that this group has mainly experienced FFL learning in the

classroom, the often mono-stylistic nature of this setting could lead to a feeling of apprehension when faced with a NS. For the others, however, who by now would be used to speaking French as a result of their residence abroad, it may have been seen as a chance to test their 'nativeness' and show a NS how much they were progressing. This explains why they abandoned what they knew from the classroom (competency answers) in favour of something that was deemed less 'bookish'. This is something that should hopefully be confirmed when considering the other variables.

Another anomaly with regards to formality is that the Final Years increased their *ne*-use towards the end of the 'informal' interview. This can be explained by looking at the format of the interview. As the NNS interviewer had no list of questions, it is likely that the conversation became more 'interview-like' towards the end, particularly as the Final Years spoke fairly quickly, giving the interviewer less time to formulate questions that naturally linked to the topic of conversation. This could have led to an increase in attention to speech. Finally, interviewer familiarity had little impact on results regarding *ne*-omission. Regarding linguistic constraints on *ne* use/non-use, while the 2nd Years' results often followed the same order as in Ashby's 1981 study, their *ne*-retention rates remained well above those of a NS. This is contrary to the Final Years, who tended to over-apply *ne* omission.

7.2 *On/nous*

2nd Year results regarding *on* and *nous* mirror those regarding *ne* with respect to variation between the informal and formal settings. For the former, students exhibited an 81.4% *on* preference as opposed to only 51.9% in the latter. This goes against the fact that they were not aware that 'on' could mean 'we', suggesting that those who used it did so because they had simply imitated it from a French-speaking member of staff, who may have used it for general classroom directions such as "*aujourd'hui on va parler de...*" *Nous* was, in line with results concerning *ne*-use, dropped towards the latter end of the formal interviews, providing further support for the idea of communicate anxiety. Final year *on*-use was seemingly unaffected by the setting, suggesting: (a) that they are equally at ease speaking French with a NS as with a NNS and/or (b) they wanted to demonstrate their awareness of native norms. Despite the fact that their competency questionnaires indicated good awareness of when *on* would be employed, the performative nature of the situation may have provoked a desire to prove that they were not still exhibiting 'classroom' French. The effects of immersion were not as clear-cut with this variable, as only one of the two 2nd Year immersion students performed as expected (strong *on* preference in both settings). Otherwise, the 2nd Years produced varying *on* preferences. The Final Years who had spent the longest time abroad, though, produced more instances of *on* than the others.

Concerning familiarity with the interviewer, this did not have a great impact on either group when it came to preference for *on* or *nous*. As for linguistic factors, the 2nd Years as a whole produced data in line with Boutet's theory of specificity, with *nous* being used more for smaller, more specific groups and *on*

being employed more for larger groups. The Final Years employed *nous* so rarely that no comparisons can be drawn. We can assume that the 2nd Years produced these results based on classroom norms, but further studies would need to be conducted to strengthen this theory.

7.3 Left dislocation

Of the three variables investigated, the findings concerning LD reveal the most about the impact of immersion on acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. While the Final Years all employed LD to some extent, the 2nd Years produced a total of only 10 tokens across 9 interviews, suggesting that contact with NSs outside of the classroom is necessary for the acquisition of this normally informal variant. Of the LDs produced by the Final Years, there was a fairly even split between the two interview settings, suggesting that LD was not deemed to be particularly informal or formal. This is further supported by the fact that no change was observed between the first and second halves of each interview. The *moi, je* construction, was, as has been shown of NSs, equally represented in both settings. Student competence with this variable does seem to have played a large role here, with better knowledge linked to increased usage of LD. As found in previous studies, LD was mainly used for emphasis, something I expected to find based on answers to the competence questionnaire. Interestingly, P5 produced several LDs despite no prior knowledge as to when it is used, indicating that simple imitation almost certainly occurs when there are gaps in knowledge. Linguistically, the Final Years also approximated NS norms with regards to which subjects are most often dislocated (pronominal subjects) and how much co-referentiality normally occurs between the dislocated element and anaphoric pronoun.

7.4 Summary

Collectively, these findings produced the following points of interest. It is safe to say that the Final Years approximated NS norms more than the 2nd Years and this is linked to many factors. While immersion certainly impacted on the frequency of *ne*-omission, gaps in knowledge regarding *on* and LD were 'solved' through imitation, often leading to inappropriate language use. Familiarity on the whole did not seem to affect language use, suggesting that speakers style-shift according to the status of the interviewer and how the speech situation is defined rather than according to how well acquainted they are with their interlocutor. Finally, there was certainly more variation in the 2nd Year interviews, indicating that experimental manipulation works up until a certain point, beyond which the interviewees take more control in terms of what image they wish to portray of themselves.

8. Conclusion

This study has investigated sociolinguistic variation in the speech of ten FFL learners from the University of Manchester by examining their competence and performance regarding three sociolinguistic variables. Specifically, it has explored the varying retention of the preverbal particle of negation *ne*, use

of *on* and *nous* to mean ‘we’ and the frequency of LD across two interview settings, defined by their format, location and interviewer. The results have been compared with previous findings on these variables from studies conducted both on NSs and NNSs and a summary of findings can be found below:

- The 2nd Years showed signs of communicative anxiety when faced with a NS, something not observed of the Final Years, who often over-applied the use of informal variants.
- Students better approximated NS norms concerning *ne* use compared with *on/nous* or LD.
- Immersion was often linked to preference for informal variants but this was not always categorical.
- The experimental manipulation seemed to have more of an effect on the 2nd Years than the Final Years.
- Sociolinguistic competence was not categorically in line with performance.

Linked to communicative anxiety, these findings suggest that immersion is the key to improving students’ speech repertoires, with the Final Years seemingly so keen to make use of a newly acquired style of speech to the extent that they over-apply NS rules. It also seems that certain sociolinguistic variants are introduced into the classroom much earlier than others and can often be acquired through mere imitation. This is supported by the frequent discrepancies observed when comparing competence with performance. The danger of this could be that by teaching and assessing solely Standard French, students become mono-stylistic and can, like the some of the 2nd Years in this study, become very anxious when faced with NSs. Furthermore, students may still pick up on the occasional *ne*-drop and use of *on* and produce this in their own speech in an attempt to sound native without knowing why/when these variants are used.

8.1 Applications of the study

Given the above statements, I argue for the teaching of sociolinguistic variants in the classroom for two reasons. Firstly, in order to help less advanced students break out of an anxious cycle, whereby they avoid NSs due to fears about their own (in)competence, it is important that they master various styles of French (not solely Standard French). If teachers were therefore to offer a richer sociolinguistic model for students, this could potentially remove their anxiety and encourage them to increase their extracurricular contact with the TL. Secondly, and linked in with style, the Final Years often over-used the informal variants, perhaps judging their pre-immersion repertoire of French to be too ‘bookish’. Therefore, if they are actively taught that both variants are equally ‘native’ in appropriate settings, they may come closer to NS norms.

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Notes

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² NB: where the corpus is discussed in connection with previous sociolinguistic studies (particularly those of Coveney and Ashby), the relations identified between the French spoken by NNSs and NSs are meant as a means of demonstrating how closely the study participants approximate NS norms. While these studies only represent NS norms for particular areas (and not necessarily those where the participants of this study spent their residence abroad), they were deemed the most comprehensive in terms of the data they collected with regards to the variables under study.

³ According to this theory, *nous* will be used the more specific and restricted a group of people becomes (including the speaker). The three levels of distinction are: *specific and restricted*, e.g. family members; *specific but non-restricted*, e.g. a cohort of students; and *non-specific and non-restricted*, e.g. people in general.