The relationship between the group and the individual and the acquisition of native speaker variation patterns: A preliminary study

VERA REGAN

Abstract

The relationship between group and individual has been explored within the variationist paradigm. In L1, group patterns of variation are replicated by the individual. Second language acquisition research is concerned with the individual learner, but second language acquisition variationist researchers tend to group learners. Little empirical evidence exists that such grouping is valid, given the importance of individual variation. This article investigates whether it is meaningful to group learners. This is a longitudinal, quantitative study of the acquisition of variation by Irish speakers of French L2 over three years, of which one is a year abroad experience. Participants are five advanced learners, twenty years old, with five years of French classes at secondary school and two at university. A computer (Varbrul) analysis shows similar patterns in group and individual, in the deletion of ne. Theoretical implications are that it is legitimate to apply group standards to individual speakers and that native speaker variation acquisition is linked to a prolonged stay in the native speaker community.

1. Introduction

This article will examine a theoretical issue in second language acquisition (SLA) research from within a new research thread in the area of sociolinguistics and SLA. A specific line of inquiry which has recently emerged from the confluence of variationist sociolinguistics and SLA research focuses on the acquisition by second language (L2) speakers of native speech (NS) variation patterns. This research began in the early nineties when Adamson and Regan (1991) examined the acquisition of NS variation patterns of the variable *-ing* by Vietnamese and Cambodian speakers of English L2. It has been pursued and developed by an increasing number of researchers (Regan 1995; 1996; 1997; Dewaele and Regan 2002; Mougeon, Nadasdi, and Rehner 2002; Mougeon and Rehner 2001; Nadasdi, Mougeon, and Rehner 2003). A comprehensive account

is provided in Rehner, Mougeon, and Nadasdi (2003). Prior to this research and in tandem with it, the main body of work focused on variability in learner speech (e.g., Dickerson 1974, 1975). This research investigated the process whereby L2 speakers proceeded from the variable use of target and nontarget forms to the point where they used only the target-like form. It was concerned with the invariant. In the early nineties, the new research thread focused on the acquisition of what was variable in NS speech.

Variationist sociolinguistics has suggested convincingly that knowledge of variability is part of speaker competence (for example, Guy to appear; and Chambers 2002). Far from being a peripheral element, variationists consider this knowledge to be a central part of competence for the native speaker. It would seem then that this would be part of non-native speaker (NNS) competence also, insofar as L2 speakers, by and large, wish to become more native-like. Of course, the aims and motivations of L2 speakers can vary widely. Some speakers wish to master basic grammar rules and use the language for certain restricted purposes. Others wish to become a part of the chosen language community.[1] Knowledge of categorical rules of the L2 may suffice for some speakers. For those, however, who wish to integrate into the NS community, the speaker needs to know more, and this involves knowledge of what is variable in the native speech of this community.

Research questions which became part of this particular new programme included issues such as: Are L2 variation patterns similar to NS patterns?; Are the constraints (linguistic and extra-linguistic) which condition L2 speech similar to those of native speech?; What are the processes by which NS variation patterns are acquired by the L2 speaker?; What is the effect of context on this process?; What is the role of input?; What is the role of gender in the process? Research questions to be explored in the future might include such an issue as whether the behaviour of the L2 speaker is the same in the case of a stable sociolinguistic variable as in the case of one which is undergoing change in progress?[2]

Context of acquisition has important implications for the acquisition of what is variable in NS speech. There is much evidence to suggest that a formal context is generally successful in helping the L2 speaker with learning what is categorical in the target language. What does not appear to be available to the learner in this context is knowledge (conscious or unconscious) of what is variable in NS speech. Dewaele and Regan (2001) find, for example, that learners who experienced only classroom learning used far fewer colloquial words than those who had spent time in the native speech community. Dewaele (1992) finds that active interaction with native speakers has the most significant effect of various factors he studied. Regan (1996) similarly found contact with native speakers has an important effect on the acquisition of sociolinguistic norms. Research is emerging which reveals that those who have spent time in the NS

community seem to have a grasp of how native speakers behave linguistically in relation to variation. No more than native speakers are they consciously using knowledge of the probabilities of the appearance of one variant as opposed to another (Adamson 1988). But recent research seems to indicate that they replicate the patterns of native speakers more closely than those speakers who learn in a classroom. Lemée (2002) finds that English speaking learners who have spent a year in France use the informal variant *on* 'we' in continental French significantly more than those who have not.

Mougeon and his colleagues (Rehner et al. 2003: 130), in an important and substantial research project with a large data base, investigate the acquisition of variation patterns by Canadian immersion learners (summarized in Rehner, Mougeon, and Nadasdi 2003). The variants studied were categorized into three types according to the degree of formality they have in Canadian French. They were placed on a sociostylistic continuum: vernacular, mildly marked and formal variants. Mougeon and his colleagues found that these immersion speakers make "nil to marginal use of vernacular variants". Dewaele and Regan (2002) found that intensity and amount of formal instruction made no difference to rates of omission of *ne*, that is, the informal variant. Learning of formal and mildly-marked variants does take place in the classroom context, but the frequency and patterns of use are shown repeatedly not to be native-like. There seems to be strong indication then, that while the classroom is adequate for the learning of the categorical, it is necessary to live in the speech community to acquire native variation patterns. These conclusions obviously have implications, amongst other issues, for policy makers in language education. For instance, the debate about the usefulness of study abroad (SA) must be affected by the findings of this new research thread (Regan, Howard and Lemée to appear).

The researchers who have developed the issue of the acquisition of NS norms since the beginning of the nineties carried out empirical, quantitative, fine-grained studies, many involving Varbrul analyses which are particularly effective in modelling the multivariate nature of the phenomena studied. Major (to appear) studied the acquisition of English by Japanese and Spanish speakers. The acquisition of French, both Canadian and continental, has especially been the focus of this research thread. Many of these involved Varbrul analyses. Regan (1996) studied the acquisition of NS variation patterns by Hiberno-English speakers by investigating the variable deletion of *ne* 'not', the first particle of negation in French. Mougeon and his colleagues (Rehner, Mougeon, and Nadasdi 2003), as previously described, carried out a major study of Anglophone learners of French (immersion students in Ontario) investigating no less than thirteen variables. Sax (1999; 2000) investigated several variables in the French of American learners. Dewaele (1992; 1995; 2002) looked at the acquisition of variation in French by Dutch L1 classroom learners. Lemée (2002)

investigated the *nous/on* 'we' variable in the acquisition of continental French by Hiberno-English learners.

The study by Adamson and Regan (1991) of the acquisition of community speech norms by Vietnamese and Cambodian speakers of English L2 specifically set up its research design to clarify the question of the distinction between variability in interlanguage as far as it concerns the invariant on the one hand (target and nontarget), and the acquisition by L2 learners of NS speaker variation patterns on the other. In order to avoid confusion between the two, the research was designed with the learners' L1 containing the prestige variant of the variable *-ing*. The appearance of the non-prestige form [in] would signal only the adoption of community norms. Results showed that some of the grammatical constraints affecting NNS were different from those in NS speech. It was also found that males use [in] more frequently than females, especially in monitored speech. This was interpreted as a desire to accommodate to a male NS norm. The L2 speakers worked hard, it seemed, to approximate the appropriate gender native variation pattern of the speech community. Amongst other things, this study showed more about the role of transfer in the acquisition of NS phonological variation patterns. The present article proposes to discuss another theoretical issue within this research thread treating the acquisition of NS variation pattern; the relationship between the individual and the group.

2.   Group and individual variation

The issue of the relationship between the group and the individual, a matter of general interest in linguistics, has been raised and explored from within the variationist paradigm (Guy 1980). In general, variationists have found, in relation to first language use, that the overall community patterns of variation are replicated by the individual (although the issue was the subject of much discussion by Bailey 1973 and others). So far, the issue of the relationship between the individual L2 speaker and the group has received little attention within the literature of SLA research (with the notable exception of Bayley 1994). On the one hand, SLA research in general tends to be concerned with the individual learner, but, on the other hand, researchers with a variationist approach have tended to group learners together. The notion of a "community" of L2 learners has been problematic in second language studies in general. For instance, it was discussed by Levenston and Blum (1977) and tested by Perdue (1980) amongst others. Variationists who work within an SLA framework have always supposed a "community" of L2 speakers, confident in the assumption that individual variation does not negate or take a different direction from the overall pattern (Young 1991; Bayley 1991; Regan 1996). However there has been some reticence on the part of certain SLA researchers to accept that it is possible to talk about a community of L2 speakers given both individual variation and the

differing factors which affect L2 speakers. There is, of course, a general acceptance by SLA researchers that individual variation is an important feature, but quantitative work on SLA has so far investigated very little how exactly it plays a role. Our models of acquisition will undoubtedly be affected by the extent to which we understand if, and how, individual patterns do, in fact, mimic general group patterns. We need to further question the role of variation in the group and the individual. The relationship between the two is important in SLA in order that we may be confident of the validity of reporting group results (see Bayley 2002).

Variation studies have contributed in a significant way, in the past fifteen years or so, to the understanding of aspects of SLA, which other approaches either neglected or failed to reach. The models and constructs which have been successful in sociolinguistics in relation to the analysis of variation in native speech have been shown to be appropriate for the analysis of L2 speech which is, of course, highly variable. A probabilistic model can represent the choices speakers make in relation to particular variables, taking the context into account – both linguistic and extralinguistic. The choice of a particular variant of a variable may be affected by different features of its context. We therefore need a model which will deal with several simultaneous and sometimes conflicting contextual factors. A quantitative, multivariate, probabilistic model is ideally suited to representing speech which is at once highly variable but also systematic. The advantages of this approach in relation to SLA studies have been seen to be considerable (Bayley and Preston 1996; Young 1991; Preston 1989). It permits us, in the case of a longitudinal study, to see if these constraints change over time and thus for example, to chart the acquisition process.

3. The study

The issue of group and individual variation will be examined from within the context of a wider ongoing study. This study is an analysis of the linguistic production of a group of speakers who learn French in a classroom environment for six or seven years, then spend a year in a Francophone country, and finally return for a year to a classroom environment.[3] This particular article is centred on a very common and only mildly stigmatized variant of NS spoken French, namely the deletion of *ne* 'not', the first particle of negation in French (see the examples in Table 1 in Section 3.2, where this particle is either deleted or retained). In this study we will compare variable rates of *ne* deletion over three years from the group of speakers studied with the variable rates of individual speakers. The overall study is an empirical, quantitative one of the acquisition of NS speech norms in French by Hiberno-English speakers (see Regan 1995 and 1996 for a discussion of the wider study). This particular analysis examines rates of *ne* deletion over the three years or three distinct stages (Year 1, 2 and 3)

in different contexts of the period studied (classroom, native speech community and then return to classroom). An advantage of this study is that (as is rarely the case for L2 studies) it is longitudinal, and it follows the same group of speakers over three years. The aim was to chart deletion rates during this prolonged period and compare individual and group rates. Amongst the wider issues, which are ultimately addressed by the study are context of acquisition, the role of input, and the issue of accommodation to interlocutor. An analysis of three different stages of development including a stay abroad will provide the context for looking at individual and group variation rates. The larger study is a longitudinal analysis of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by advanced learners. It investigates the acquisition of variables in contemporary spoken French which are sociolinguistically sensitive, and, in some cases, undergoing sound change in the language: for instance, the variable use of *nous* versus *on* 'we', the variable deletion of /l/ in subject clitic pronouns and, in this instance, the variable deletion of the negative particle '*ne*'.

3.1.   *Participants*

The participants in this study were five advanced learners (a subgroup from within the larger study), university students who were studying French as one of two subjects for their BA degree. They had all studied French for five years at secondary school. Several had had short stays in France (two weeks to two months on average) but none had lived there for a long period. All of them were studying a second European language and all had studied Irish from the age of four or five. Their first language was English. They were all about the same age (from nineteen to twenty-one years) and were mainly middle class. They participated in a programme (Erasmus) funded by the European Union, which helped university students to spend an academic year in another European country. During the year abroad the students attended regular courses at the university and got credit for these. They generally lived in university residences. There was a system in place whereby the students were assigned a host French family which invited them on occasion to spend time in their home. This was taken up by the students with varying regularity. In general, the amount of contact with native speakers in interactive situations varied with the individual. Only one of the speakers was male. This gender imbalance was an indication of the general proportion of males and females taking French as a subject at that time, but obviously prevents any reliable conclusions being drawn regarding gender and second language learning. Another factor common to these speakers was that they had been selected as motivated students, on the basis of grades and evaluations, to take part in the year abroad programme. Most of them reported an interest in working in and living in a French-speaking country eventually.

3.2. *Methodology*

The overall study (Regan 1995; 1996; 1997; 2000; Dewaele and Regan 2001) was designed to highlight developmental stages in an acquisition process, which included a stay in the native speech community by the speakers. The three stages of the study were charted by taped interviews of the speakers: the first after their first year at university and before spending a year in a French-speaking country, the second set of interviews after their return to Ireland and the third after a further year at university in Ireland. Thus, three sociolinguistic interviews of forty-five minutes to an hour were carried out with each speaker by the researcher. The interviews were transcribed orthographically, again by the researcher for consistency's sake, using the methods developed by Blanche-Benveniste and Jeanjean (1987). Each token of negation in the transcripts was coded according to the envelope of variation and the proposed factors. They were then subjected to a multivariate analysis. For this a statistical computer programme was used: Varbrul. The version used here is Goldvarb 2.0, a variable rule application for Macintosh. This programme analyzes variable data by using the "maximum likelihood" method of estimating probabilities. For a description of the Varbrul programme, see Rand and Sankoff (1990). This analysis showed, amongst other things, the probability figures (p. figures) for *ne* deletion from Time 1, Time 2 and Time 3, after a year back in the classroom. The relative importance of each of these stages of development was estimated.

For the initial Varbrul analysis (Regan 1996), the factors believed to constrain this variable were specified. I hypothesized, following Ashby (1976, 1981) and Sankoff and Vincent (1977) in relation to native speech, and following my own observations of the interlanguage of Irish speakers, that the linguistic and extralinguistic factors presented in Table 1 would affect *ne* deletion: style, lexicalization, following phonological environment, preceding phonological environment, clause type, subject of verb, verb tense, presence of object clitic between *ne* and *pas*, syntactic structure of the verb, following adverb. The factor groups were divided into constituent factors.

To obtain the most parsimonious model of variation possible, each factor group in each data set was tested for significance. Individual factors within groups containing more than two factors were also tested for significance by comparing log likelihoods of runs with and without the factor.

4. Results

The results of the first two phases of the study are reported in Regan (1996). Comparing Time 1 (before the stay in France) to Time 2 (just after the stay in France) it was found that the overall rate of *ne* deletion increases dramatically between the time before and after a year abroad. The speakers were approximating roughly – though not exactly – the NS norm. The present study, which

Table 1. *Factor groups and factors hypothesized to influence* ne *deletion*

Factor group and factors	
Style	
Monitored	
Casual	
Following phonological segment	
Vowel	*je n'ai aucune idée* 'I have no idea'
Consonant	*elle ne travaille plus* 'She doesn't work any more'
Preceding phonological segment	
Vowel	*je n'allais pas* 'I didn't go'
Consonant	*elle ne va pas en France* 'She doesn't go to France'
Syntactic structure of the verb	
Modal	*elle ne pouvait pas trouver* 'She couldn't find'
Auxiliary	*j'ai entendu rien d'elle* 'I haven't heard anything from her'
Copula	*c'est pas moi* 'It's not me'
Main	*j'aimais pas* 'I didn't like'
Time of interview	
Year 1	prior to French visit
Year 2	after return from France
Clause type	
Main	*je dis rien contre elle* 'I'm not saying anything against her'
Subordinate	*tout est bien s'il n'y a rien* 'Everything is ok if there's no damage'
Subject	
Pronoun	*je pouvais pas* 'I wasn't able'
Full noun phrase	*les gens n'étaient pas contents* 'People weren't happy about it'
Presence of object clitic	
Absence	*je ne travaillais pas* 'I wasn't working'
Presence	*je ne l'aimais pas* 'I didn't like him'
Lexicalization	
Nonformula	*je ne voudrais pas sourire* 'I didn't want to smile'
Lexicalized phrase	*il n'y a pas*; *je sais pas*; *il ne faut pas* 'There isn't, I don't know, One must not'
Individual	
1. Catherine	
2. Donna	
3. Judy	
4. Miles	
5. Sally	

includes a third phase, is set up with these prior results as a basis. After a year in a French-speaking country, the constraint ordering is generally the same as for native speakers (see Appendix, Table 6). It has become apparent from

Table 2. Ne *deletion rates (p. values) according to time of interview*

Time of interview	p. value
Year 1	.27
Year 2	.63
Year 3	.58

many variation studies of SLA that, in fact, L2 speakers "tend to observe the linguistic constraints that are found in L1 spoken French" (Rehner, Mougeon, and Nadasdi 2003: 134). It is also the case that L1 studies of variation show that even very young children seem to learn very early adult native patterns of variation (Roberts 1997; Roberts and Labov 1995).

A calculation of rates of deletion over the three years was made, to gauge general patterns of use over the three different contexts of acquisition (formal and informal) at three different phases: Year 1, before the stay abroad, when the students were largely formal learners, Year 2, after the stay abroad in the native speech community and Year 3, after a further year back in the classroom.

Detailed results have been reported elsewhere. Regan (1996) presents the first two phases and Regan (to appear), the three phases together. Rates for *ne* deletion are reported here in terms of factor group probabilities (p. values calculated by Varbrul) and not overall rates. In general, there was a dramatic increase in *ne* deletion after the year abroad (Year 2), and, after a year back in the classroom and without further contact with the native speech community (Year 3),[4] the speakers seem to remain generally stable or have a very slight reduction in *ne* deletion (see Table 2). When factor groups for the five speakers under study are compared with factor groups for native speakers, overall, by year two, these speakers are approaching native speaker variation patterns (see Appendix, Table 6). The grammatical structure of these advanced speakers at the same level of proficiency remains stable in relation to negation throughout the three years of the study. The rule for *ne* deletion in native speech, which had strengthened after the stay in France for the L2 learners, appears to be maintained, on the whole, after the year at home for all (except one of the factor groups and this one remained broadly the same as before).

The Varbrul analysis used *year* as one of the factor groups. As is shown by Table 3 the factor groups used in the present study were significant across all three years: clause type, lexicalization, following phonological segment, year and individual.

Separate Varbrul runs were done for each individual. Even though the number of tokens for each speaker was small, it was still useful to obtain some indication of the significance of year, in the context of other factors, for individuals (see Table 4).

Table 3. *Results of Varbrul run for five factor groups*

Factor group	Factors	p. value
Time of interview	Year 1	.27
	Year 2	.63
	Year 3	.58
Following phonological segment	Vowel	.36
	Consonant	.60
Clause type	Main	.53
	Subordinate	.31
Lexicalization	Lexicalized phrase	.78
	Nonlexicalized phrase	.35
Individual	Donna	.10
	Catherine	.37
	Judy	.82
	Miles	.44
	Sally	.51

Table 4. *Rates of* ne *deletion according to individual speaker and interview time*

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Sally	.47	.51	.52
Donna[a]	0 %	37 %	15 %
Miles	.12	.73	.66
Judy	.25	.67	.64
Catherine	.04	.47	.59

a Because Donna did not delete *ne* at all in phase one, it was not possible to run the Varbrul program in her case. Rather than insert a dummy deletion for phase one, percentages alone are reported here for Donna.

The constraint ordering for the group remains similar (see also Regan 1996). Although the data for individuals in relation to constraint ordering are too few to report as significant, it seems that the constraint ordering from speaker to speaker is also similar. In the case of the factor group lexicalization, for instance, the p. values for individual speakers are as shown in Table 5.

In every case, *ne* is deleted significantly more in lexicalized phrases than in nonlexicalized ones. This pattern, repeated from individual to individual, repeats also the pattern for the group as a whole: .35 and .78 (see Table 3).

Table 5. *Individual speaker constraint ordering for lexicalization*

	Nonlexicalized phrase	Lexicalized phrase
Catherine	0.313	0.944
Donna	0.399	0.702
Miles	0.207	0.842
Sally	0.382	0.754
Judy	0.368	0.768

In all of the analyses, the same pattern emerges, whether it is a case of Varbrul runs for the group or Varbrul runs for the individual speakers. The figures go from initial low rates to rates which are significantly greater and then are basically maintained at that level.

5.   Conclusion

An interesting picture emerges of a synchronous pattern on the part of the group of speakers in this study and of the individuals within that group. There is a general coincidence of pattern between deletion rates for the majority of the speakers and the norms for the group. The group as a whole shows a significant increase in *ne* deletion after a stay in a Francophone country, and then a maintenance on the whole of these rates after returning to the classroom. This is exactly the case for each speaker but one. This would seem to indicate that, despite the individual variation inherent in the learning of second languages, the relationship between the group and the individual, in relation to variation patterns, is nevertheless maintained, rather in the same way as it is for L1 speakers.

It must be noted, of course, that these conclusions must necessarily remain tentative, given the small number of L2 participants and the relatively small database involved in this study. The findings cannot be seen to be as reliable as the robust findings in the L1 studies reported in Guy (1980) and others. It is noteworthy, however, that while the data in this study of Irish learners of French are relatively small, and would benefit from a larger database in the future, there is in fact further evidence that the results may be important. It is interesting to note that Bayley (2002) reports on the same issue of group and individual variation in relation to three different L1 groups learning English: Chinese, Hungarian and Spanish speakers. In each case, Bayley finds that individual patterns of variation closely match the group pattern on several dimensions. It appears that we now have crosslinguistic evidence from both cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, so that it is reasonable to report group results in second language research. In conclusion, the relation between

the group and the individual has been examined here within the context of the environment in which acquisition was taking place, taking input into account as well as accommodation to native speakers. In spite of the different factors which are at work in second language acquisition and use, the relationship between group and individual seems to be very similar to that found in L1 speech.

University College Dublin
<vera.regan@ucd.ie>

Appendix

Table 6. *The contribution of factor groups for* ne *deletion in Year 1, 2, 3 and native speakers*

Factor group	Factors	p. values			Natives[a]
		Non-native speakers			
		Time of development			
		Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	
Style	Monitored	.35	.44	.44	.47
	Casual	.63	.57	.65	.52
Lexicalization	Nonformula	.38	.28	.39	.26
	Formula	.74	.80	.80	.63
Subject	Pronoun	.53	.55	.54[b]	.64
	Full noun phrase	.12	.02	.16	.28
Clause type	Main clause	.52.	.64	.55[b]	.70
	Subordinate	.36	.32	.23	.40

a Native speaker figures derived from Ashby (1976). More recent studies of *ne* deletion by native speakers show a much higher rate of deletion. For instance, Armstrong (2002) finds in young people rates of 98.9 % in informal style and 97.1 % in formal style. These rates are similar to the very high deletion rates in Canadian French.

b These factor groups were almost but not quite significant at .05, but this is likely due to the smaller number of tokens available in Year three, as compared with phases one and two.

Notes

1. It must be noted here that any essentialist notion of community is seen as increasingly problematic in the 21st century, with multilingual speakers frequently belonging to several communities (see, for example, Bayley and Schecter 2003).
2. For a longer discussion of these issues, see Regan, Howard, and Lemée (to appear).
3. Some of the data reported here were presented at the 14th Sociolinguistic Symposium, Ghent, Belgium, 2002 and SLRF, Arizona, October 2003.
4. The evidence here is from questionnaires filled out by the participants.

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