

# THE LEARNING OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIATION BY ADVANCED FSL LEARNERS

## *The Case of Nous versus On in Immersion French*

Katherine Rehner and Raymond Mougeon

*York University*

Terry Nadasdi

*University of Alberta*

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This paper synthesizes research on the acquisition of linguistic variation by learners of French as a second language—an overview that, to our knowledge, is the first of its kind. It also presents a case study on French immersion students' acquisition of the pronouns *nous* and *on* “we,” an alternation in many varieties of spoken French. The study shows that the students use the mildly marked variant *on* slightly more often than the formal variant *nous* but much less often than native speakers (who use it almost categorically) and immersion teachers (who strongly favor it). Female and middle-class students favor *nous*, students with greater extracurricular French language exposure favor *on*, and students who speak a Romance language at home favor *nous*. Various explanations are proposed for these correlations. Finally, the students, like L1 Francophones, favor *on* in linguistic contexts in which the referent is both nonspecific and unrestricted.

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Address correspondence to: Katherine Rehner, Department of French Studies, Faculty of Arts, 7th floor North, Ross Building, York University, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3, Canada; e-mail: krehner@yorku.ca.

Our study presents a variationist analysis of the alternation between the subject pronouns *nous* and *on*, both of which designate two or more individuals including the speaker. This case of variation has been documented in many varieties of contemporary spoken French. The objective of our study is twofold. First, we seek to determine whether French immersion students use both pronouns *nous* and *on* to mean “we” (e.g., *Ma soeur et moi nous allons à la même école* and *Ma soeur et moi on va à la même école*, both of which mean “My sister and I, we go to the same school”). Second, we seek to determine whether the immersion students’ usage of these pronouns is conditioned by the same linguistic and extralinguistic constraints that have an impact on native speaker usage as well as by independent variables that are specific to second language (L2) learners—for example, the amount of exposure to native French outside school and the learners’ first language (L1). As such, this study belongs to a strand of SLA research that investigates the learning of sociolinguistic variation by L2 learners. Within this strand of research, numerous studies have focused on French as a second language (FSL), but no synthesis of these studies’ findings has yet been attempted. Thus, our paper will include such a synthesizing overview.

## RESEARCH ON VARIATION IN SLA

L1 sociolinguistic research has demonstrated that native speakers’ alternation between two or more linguistic elements (variants) expressing the same meaning (referred to hereafter as L1 variation) is an integral part of spoken language competence (Labov, 1966, 1972). It affects all components of language (syntax, morphology, lexicon, etc.). It is highly frequent in L1 discourse and constrained by both linguistic factors (e.g., factors pertaining to the linguistic context in which the variants are used) and extralinguistic factors (e.g., gender, social status or group identity, and register or style).

However, the bulk of research on SLA has focused on aspects of the target language in which native speakers display invariant linguistic usage (i.e., they use only one linguistic element to convey a given notion). In contrast, recent research taking a sociolinguistic perspective on SLA has begun to focus on aspects of the target language in which native speakers display linguistic variation. This type of research has investigated the learning of variation in French (e.g., Dewaele, 1999; Dewaele & Regan, 2000; Knaus & Nadasdi, 2001; Mougeon & Rehner, 2001; Nadasdi & McKinnie, in press; Regan, 1996; Sankoff et al., 1997) and a variety of other languages (e.g., Adamson & Regan, 1991; Bayley & Preston, 1996; Major, 1999; Yamagata & Preston, 1999). Thus, this new strand of research has started to fill a long-standing gap in the field of SLA studies.

Interestingly, although previous research on SLA was centered on the learning of invariant linguistic usages, it was confronted with the problems of describing and accounting for linguistic variation—namely, learners’ alternation between usage of a native form and one or more nonnative equivalents

prior to invariant use of the native form. In extending some of the constructs of L1 variationist research and of speech accommodation theory to the investigation of this pattern of interlanguage variation, SLA researchers discovered that some of the same independent variables that influence variant choice in L1 speech also had an impact on the alternation of native versus nonnative forms in learners' L2 (e.g., attention to form, communicative task, interspeaker accommodation, and medium). For an overview of such research, the reader is directed to, among others, Adamson (1988), Beebe (1988), Ellis (1999), and Tarone (1988, 1990). Obviously, factors that apply only to L2 learners were also found to be influential (e.g., input, time spent learning the target language, and transfer from the learners' L1 to their L2).

In recent SLA studies on the learning of specific cases of L1 variation, researchers have started from the dual premise that successful mastery of L1 variation involves not only the use of all the L1 variants but also nativelike sociolinguistic patterns of usage of the variants (i.e., the ability to observe the linguistic and extralinguistic constraints that have an impact on variant choice). This focus on the acquisition of a complete repertoire of variants and of their linguistic and extralinguistic constraints is the hallmark of the new strand of sociolinguistic research on SLA that distinguishes itself from mainstream SLA research. This special focus is also reflected in an expansion of the set of independent variables examined. It includes not only factors that have been examined in mainstream SLA research but also those shown to correlate with L1 variation in sociolinguistic research. For instance, in our own research on the learning of L1 French variation by Canadian immersion students, of which this present study is a part, we examine the effect of: (a) factors such as number of years spent learning French, opportunities to interact with native Francophones, classroom treatment of the variants, L1 transfer, and morphological or syntactic complexity of the variants (traditional predictors of learning in SLA research); (b) factors such as learners' gender and social background as well as topic (in)formality (common correlates of L1 variation); and (c) linguistic constraints (those that sociolinguistic research has found to be shared across speakers in L1 communities).

## **A SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH ON THE LEARNING OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC VARIANTS BY L2 LEARNERS OF FRENCH**

### **Frequency of Use of Vernacular, Mildly Marked, and Formal Variants**

Research on the learning of sociolinguistic variation by FSL learners in an educational setting has dealt with three types of variants that roughly correspond to three points on a sociostylistic continuum—namely, vernacular, mildly marked, and formal variants. Vernacular variants are nonconforming to the rules of standard French, typical of informal speech and inappropriate in for-

mal settings, associated with speakers from the lower social strata, and usually stigmatized (e.g., in Canadian French, the open-vowel variant in words like *moi* [mwe] “me” and *toi* [twe] “you”). Mildly marked variants, like vernacular variants that do not conform to standard French, are typical of the informal register, but they may also be used in formal situations. However, unlike vernacular variants, mildly marked variants demonstrate little or no social stratification and hence are not stigmatized. An example of such a variant is the deletion of the negative particle *ne* “not.” For example, speakers of Canadian French from all social classes almost categorically use *Je (ne) comprend pas* “I do not understand” in the semiformal setting of a taped interview. Formal variants that conform to the rules of standard French are typical of careful speech and written French, and they are strongly associated with members of the upper social strata. An example of a formal variant in Canadian French is *donc* “therefore,” an intersentential conjunction expressing the notion of consequence (e.g., *Il est malade donc il ne viendra pas ce soir* “He is sick therefore he will not be coming tonight”).

Research on these three types of variants has revealed three general trends regarding the frequency of their use by FSL learners in comparison to their use by L1 speakers of French. First, FSL learners make nil to marginal use of vernacular variants. Apparent exceptions have been identified when what seem like vernacular variants are found in FSL speech but are in fact forms resulting from processes of regularization or L1 transfer that reflect the imperfect knowledge of standard variants (see Table 1). Second, FSL learners use mildly marked variants at levels below native norms. Exceptions have also been found when certain mildly marked or informal variants are promoted by factors such as classroom input and L1 transfer (see Table 2).<sup>1</sup> Third, FSL learners overuse formal variants in comparison to L1 speakers (see Table 3). Harley and King’s (1989), Lyster’s (1994), and Swain and Lapkin’s (1990) research on the use of the conditional to attenuate requests documented one exception to this general trend: French immersion students make significantly less use of this formal variant than do native speakers. Harley and King suggested that the complexity of the conjugation of the conditional is likely at the root of this underuse.

These three trends underscore the limitations of learning FSL in an educational setting. It would appear that this setting is not conducive to the learning of a natively like repertoire of variants, perhaps because it does not provide learners with a varied and wide range of situations, especially those that would be associated with mildly marked or vernacular variants, and also because such variants may be avoided or underused by teachers and textbooks.

In contrast to these studies, the research by Blondeau et al. (1995) on young adult Montreal Anglophones (i.e., FSL learners who have learned French, from the outset, in both an educational context and in a Francophone community) has found that these FSL learners, unlike FSL learners in only an educational context, do not overuse formal variants, make frequent use of mildly marked variants (often at levels approaching native norms), and make

**Table 1.** Marginal use of vernacular variants

Research focus	Studies
Rarity of vernacular variants	
Restrictive adverb <i>rien que</i> (e.g., <i>Il y en a rien que trois</i> "There are only three")	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
Marker of consequence ( <i>ça</i> ) <i>fait que</i> (e.g., <i>Elle était malade [ça] fait qu'elle est pas venue</i> "She was sick so she didn't come")	Rehner (1998b)
<i>M'as</i> + infinitive to express futurity (e.g., <i>M'as lui parler ce soir</i> "I'm going to talk to him/her tonight")	Nadasdi, Mougeon, & Rehner (2001)
<i>Ouvrage</i> to express "job" (e.g., <i>Elle a trouvé un ouvrage de serveuse</i> "She found a job as a waitress")	Nadasdi & McKinnie (in press)
<i>Rester</i> to express "to reside" (e.g., <i>Il est resté à Montréal toute sa vie</i> "He has lived in Montreal all his life")	Nadasdi & McKinnie, (in press)
Use of familiar lexemes (e.g., <i>sympa, mec, moche</i> "swell, guy, ugly")	Dewaele & Regan (2000)
Apparent exceptions: Presence of vernacularlike variants	
Auxiliary <i>avoir</i> for <i>être</i> (e.g., <i>Elle a tombé sur la glace hier</i> "She fell on the ice yesterday"); analogical regularization	Kenemer (1982); Knaus & Nadasdi (2001); Mannesy & Wald (1984)
<i>Job</i> to express "job" (e.g., <i>J'ai trouvé une bonne job</i> "I found a good job") <sup>2</sup> ; L1 transfer	Nadasdi & McKinnie (in press)
Use of a singular verb form in third-person-plural contexts (e.g., <i>Eux-autres ils vient demain</i> "Them they come tomorrow"); analogical regularization	Nadasdi (2001)
A variety of other examples	Kenemer (1982); Mannesy & Wald (1984)

nonnegligible use of some vernacular variants. Obviously, the fact that such FSL learners are immersed in an L1 community accounts for these dramatically different results.

### Influence of Independent Variables

In addition to these three general trends, research on the learning of sociolinguistic variation by FSL learners has also identified a number of variables that influence such learning. First, contact with L1 speakers has a positive effect on the learning of mildly marked or vernacular variants by FSL learners (see Table 4). Second, female FSL learners use formal variants more often than do their male counterparts (see Table 5). Exceptions to this trend are of two types: (a) the opposite pattern obtains (Nagy, Moisset, & Sankoff, 1996, in relation to [t<sup>s</sup>] as an allophone of /t/ and [d<sup>z</sup>] as an allophone of /d/, as in *tu dis* [t<sup>s</sup>yd<sup>z</sup>i] "you say"); and (b) no gender effect is found (Dewaele & Regan, 2001, *ne* deletion; Nadasdi, 2001, third-person-plural subject-verb agreement).

**Table 2.** Infrequent use of mildly marked variants

Research focus	Studies
Use of variants at levels below native norms	
Deletion of negative particle <i>ne</i> (e.g., <i>Je [ø] sais pas</i> “I don’t know”)	Dewaele (1992); Dewaele & Regan (2001); Regan (1996); Rehner & Mougeon (1999); Sax (1999); Thomas (2000)
Schwa deletion (e.g., <i>J’ le veux</i> “I want it”)	Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, & Rehner (2001)
/l/ deletion (e.g., <i>l’ vient</i> “He is coming”)	Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al. (2001); Sax (2000)
<i>Je vas</i> + infinitive to express futurity (e.g., <i>Je vas gagner</i> “I am going to win”)	Nadasdi et al. (2001)
Exceptions: Overuse of variants	
Personal address pronoun <i>tu</i> in formal situations (e.g., <i>Est-ce que tu pars monsieur?</i> “Sir, are you leaving sir?”); classroom input, early immersion students	Swain & Lapkin (1990)
Restrictive adverb <i>juste</i> (e.g., <i>Elle a juste trois frères</i> “She has only three brothers”); L1 transfer	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)

**Table 3.** Overuse of formal variants

Research focus	Studies
Retention of negative particle <i>ne</i> (e.g., <i>Il ne comprend pas</i> “He does not understand”)	Regan (1996); Rehner & Mougeon (1999); Sax (1999); Thomas (2000)
Restrictive adverb <i>seulement</i> (e.g., <i>Il y en a seulement trois</i> “There are only three”)	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
Marker of consequence <i>alors</i> and <i>donc</i> (e.g., <i>Elle était malade alors/donc elle est pas venue</i> “She was sick so she didn’t come”)	Rehner (1998b); Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi (2001)
<i>Travail</i> to express “job” (e.g., <i>Elle a trouvé un bon travail</i> “She found a good job”)	Nadasdi & McKinnie (in press)
<i>Habiter</i> to express “to reside” (e.g., <i>Il a habité à Montréal toute sa vie</i> “He has lived in Montreal all his life”)	Nadasdi & McKinnie (in press)
Schwa retention (e.g., <i>maint[ə]nant</i> “now”)	Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al. (2001)
/l/ retention (e.g., <i>l[l] mange</i> “He is eating”)	Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al. (2001); Sax (2000)
Personal address pronoun <i>vous</i> in informal situations (e.g., <i>Venez-vous chez moi ce soir?</i> “Are you coming to my place tonight?”)—late immersion students	Swain & Lapkin (1990)

**Table 4.** Favorable effect of interactions with L1 speakers on informal or vernacular variants

Research focus	Studies
Deletion of negative particle <i>ne</i> (e.g., <i>Je (ne) sais pas</i> "I don't know")	Dewaele (1992); Dewaele & Regan (2001); Dewaele & Sachdev (2001); Regan (1995, 1996); Rehner & Mougeon (1999); Sax (1999); Thomas (2000); Trévisé & Noyau (1984)
Subject doubling (e.g., <i>Jean il dort</i> "John he is sleeping")	Blondeau & Nagy (1998)
Deletion of consonant /l/ (e.g., <i>Il vient</i> "He is coming")	Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al. (2001); Nagy et al. (1996); Sax (2000)
Colloquial lexical items (e.g., <i>sympa, mec, moche</i> "swell, guy, ugly")	Dewaele & Regan (2000)
Discourse markers (e.g., <i>bon, ben, t'sais</i> "good, well, you know")	Rehner (2002); Sankoff et al. (1997)
Restrictive adverb <i>juste</i> for <i>seulement</i> (e.g., <i>Il y en a juste trois</i> "There are only three")	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)

**Table 5.** Female students favor formal variants

Research focus	Studies
Nondoubled subjects (e.g., <i>Jean dort</i> "John is sleeping" vs. <i>Jean il dort</i> "John he is sleeping")	Blondeau & Nagy (1998)
Restrictive adverb <i>seulement</i> (e.g., <i>Elle a seulement trois frères</i> "She has only three brothers")	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
Inflected future (e.g., <i>Je lui parlerai demain</i> "I will speak to him tomorrow")	Nadasdi et al. (2001)

The role of social class in the learning of sociolinguistic variation has, to our knowledge, only been investigated in our research. Two of our studies have shown that middle-class learners use formal or standard variants more frequently than do upper-working-class learners (Knaus & Nadasdi, 2001, auxiliary *être* "to be" vs. *avoir* "to have"; Rehner & Mougeon, 1999, *ne* retention), whereas other studies found no social-class effect (Nadasdi, Mougeon, & Rehner, 2001, inflected vs. periphrastic future; Mougeon & Rehner, 2001, restrictive adverb *seulement* vs. *juste* "only").

**Table 6.** L1 variants promote similar French variants

Research focus	Studies
Learners' L1 = Italian or Spanish	
Retention of <i>ne</i> (influence of <i>non</i> )	Rehner & Mougeon (1999)
<i>Seulement</i> (influence of <i>solamente</i> )	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
<i>Travail</i> for <i>emploi</i> (e.g., <i>J'ai trouvé un travail</i> "I found a job"); influence of <i>trabajo</i> and <i>travaglio</i>	Nadasdi & McKinnie (in press)
Deletion of <i>pas</i> (e.g., <i>Je ne le parle bien</i> "I do not speak it well"); influence of L1 preverbal negator	Rehner (1998a); Trévisé & Noyau (1984)
<i>Alors</i> (influence of <i>allora</i> )	Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner (2001)
Learners' L1 = English	
<i>Juste</i> (influence of <i>just</i> )	Blondeau et al. (1995); Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
QVS (e.g., <i>Où est-il?</i> "Where is he?"); L1 influence	Dewaele (1999)
Pause filler <i>comme</i> (e.g., <i>J'étais comme fatigué</i> "I was like tired"); influence of <i>like</i>	Rehner (2002); Sankoff et al. (1997)

Another variable is that the presence of variants with counterparts in the learners' L1 promotes the use of such variants in the L2 (see Table 6). It should be noted that in a number of our studies the expected effect was not found (e.g., Knaus & Nadasdi, 2001, found greater use of the auxiliary *être* by learners who speak Italian at home; Nadasdi et al., 2001, found greater use of the inflected future by these same learners).

Teachers' use of variants in the FSL classroom has an influence on the variants learners favor (see Table 7). Note, however, that there are interesting exceptions to this trend that can be traced to a number of inter- or intrasystemic factors that affect the learning of the variants.

FSL learners observe, in general, the linguistic constraints on sociolinguistic variation found in L1 speech. However, as Table 8 illustrates, several exceptions have been documented. Learners have been found to observe some stylistic constraints on variation (e.g., Regan, 1995, 1996, and Sax, 1999, *ne* deletion; Sax, 2000, /l/ deletion) and not others (Dewaele & Sachdev, 2001, *ne* deletion; Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al., 2001, /l/ deletion; Rehner & Mougeon, 1999, *ne* deletion). However, the effect of stylistic constraints has not been the object of many studies. For this and other reasons (e.g., methodological differences in how the learning of style constraints is assessed), arriving at a general trend on the basis of these conflicting results is very difficult.



**Table 7.** Influence of educational input on learners' variant choice

Research focus	Studies
Learner use matches teacher use	
Overretention of negative particle <i>ne</i>	Rehner & Mougeon (1999)
Exclusive use of consequence markers <i>alors</i> and <i>donc</i>	Rehner (1998b); Rehner et al. (2001)
Nativelike frequencies of periphrastic future vs. inflected future vs. present	Nadasdi et al. (2001)
Near categorical use of <i>je vais</i> + infinitive (instead of <i>je vas</i> )	Nadasdi et al. (2001)
Overuse of <i>tu</i> as a pronoun of address	Lyster & Rebuffot (2002)
Learner use does not match teacher use	
Marked overuse of restrictive adverb <i>juste</i> ; likely influence of English <i>just</i>	Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
Significant use of singular verb forms in third-person-plural contexts; imperfect mastery of complex verb morphology	Nadasdi (2001)
Overuse of auxiliary <i>avoir</i> (instead of <i>être</i> ); imperfect mastery of marked auxiliary <i>être</i>	Knaus & Nadasdi (2001)

## BACKGROUND TO CASE STUDY OF *NOUS* VERSUS *ON*

### Research Objectives

Our research project is based on data collected in 1996 by Mougeon and Nadasdi. Data collection began with the administration of a survey questionnaire to all students (over 300) enrolled in an immersion program (Extended French) in three Greater Toronto area high schools. From these students, a subset of 41 students who did not communicate in French at home was selected for interviews.<sup>3</sup> These semidirected, Labovian interviews were all conducted by a middle-aged, university-educated, female native speaker of European French. The interviews followed a set of nonchallenging, noninvasive questions about the students' daily activities that was based on interview protocols used in previous sociolinguistic studies of Canadian French and that, notably, featured a range of topics of differing levels of (in)formality.

Our project seeks to answer the following questions:<sup>4</sup>

1. Do the immersion students use the same range of variants with the same discursive frequency as L1 speakers of Canadian French?
2. Do the immersion students use the same range of variants with the same discursive frequency as French immersion teachers and the authors of French language arts materials?
3. Is the immersion students' use of variants correlated with the same independent variables, both linguistic and extralinguistic, affecting L1 spoken French (e.g., so-

**Table 8.** Acquisition of linguistic constraints

Variable	Findings confirming this tendency	Findings not confirming this tendency
<i>Ne</i> deletion	All L1 constraints except that listed in the opposite column; Regan (1996) <sup>a</sup> ; Thomas (2000)	Influence of postverbal negator—Rehner & Mougeon (1999); Thomas (2000)
Subject doubling	All L1 constraints except that listed in the opposite column; Blondeau & Nagy (1998)	Influence of degree of concreteness of referent of subject; Blondeau & Nagy (1998)
Future verb marking	Only specificity of the time adverbial; Nadasdi et al. (2001)	Influence of negative constructions and polite <i>vous</i> ; Nadasdi et al. (2001)
Auxiliaries <i>avoir</i> vs. <i>être</i>	Influence of pronominals and verb frequency; Knaus & Nadasdi (2001)	Influence of transitivity of verb and adjectival use of verb; Knaus & Nadasdi (2001)
Restrictive adverbs <i>seulement</i> vs. <i>juste</i>	All L1 constraints; Mougeon & Rehner (2001)	Unlike L1 speakers, learners use <i>juste</i> to the left of the verb; Mougeon & Rehner (2001)
Deletion of consonant /l/	All L1 constraints; Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al. (2001); Nagy et al. (1996); Sax (2000)	None
[t <sup>s</sup> ] vs. [t], [d <sup>r</sup> ] vs. [d]	All L1 constraints; Nagy et al. (1996)	None
[r] vs. [R]	All L1 constraints; Nagy et al. (1996)	None
Schwa deletion	All L1 constraints; Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al. (2001)	None
Use of singular verb forms in third-person-plural contexts	L1 constraints not acquired	Influence of <i>qui</i> and <i>ils</i> . Unlike L1 speakers, learners use more singular verb forms if: an object occurs between the subject and the verb; the verb is infrequent; the subject is overtly marked for plurality; Nadasdi (2001)

<sup>a</sup>Regan (1996) did not investigate the influence of postverbal negators.

cial class and gender), and are there also variables applying only to the immersion students (e.g., opportunities to interact with Francophones, level of L2 proficiency, languages spoken at home)?

To answer the first question we take as a starting point cases of variation that have been attested by sociolinguistic research on the speech of French Quebecers. These studies were chosen because they are based on corpora that, like our French immersion corpus, were collected via semiformal, semi-directed, taped interviews. This allows us to compare the immersion students with L1 speakers of French in the same communicative situation and to assess to what degree the students have reached levels approaching native norms.

Our comparison of immersion students with speakers of Quebec French is also motivated by the fact that it is primarily with these speakers that our sample of immersion students have had extracurricular interactions in French (i.e., they stayed with Francophone families in Quebec or went on trips to Quebec). We assess the extent to which these contacts have enabled them to learn some features of the vernacular. An additional motivation for choosing Quebec French as a benchmark is the existence of economic, cultural, and academic ties between Ontario and Quebec. This means that when they reach adulthood, Ontario French immersion students will likely continue to have contact with Francophones from Quebec. In fact, the relevance of data on the sociolinguistic abilities of native speakers in the development of FSL pedagogical norms has also been underscored by Lyster (1996), O'Connor Di Vito (1991), and Valdman (1998).

To answer the second question we analyze both in-class French immersion teachers' speech and written materials for the teaching of French language arts in immersion programs. The corpus of teachers' speech that we use is Allen, Cummins, Harley, and Swain's (1987) corpus of spoken French produced by a sample of seven French immersion teachers from Ontario who were taped while teaching French immersion students.<sup>5</sup> The written materials are two series of textbooks and accompanying exercise books that are commonly used in French immersion programs in the Greater Toronto area.<sup>6</sup>

It is essential to stress the need to have recourse to these two educational corpora because the students in the present study learned French primarily in immersion settings. The importance lies first in the extent to which variants in these sources of educational input are used differently from the way they are used in native spoken French and, second, in the degree to which such differences are reflected in the students' own patterns of variant use.

To answer the third question we use a variety of data provided by the immersion students' responses to the questionnaire administered prior to the interview. This questionnaire provides us with data on the students' sociological characteristics and their patterns of L1 and L2 use in and out of the home and school settings. These data are used as independent variables in a factor analysis that correlates the students' use of variants with the independent variables.

Finally, it should also be pointed out that our research project provides data useful for immersion educators interested in determining whether the sociolinguistic competence of French immersion students meets the expectations set forth by the Ministry of Education. With regard to these expectations, the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2000) guidelines for the teaching of FSL in the final 2 years of immersion programs state, among other things, that students should have the following productive abilities: incorporate colloquialisms and idiomatic expressions into their speech; debate formally and informally issues arising from their reading of literary and other works; and express clearly and confidently their personal point of view in informal discussions.

### **Student Speaker Sample**

In the school district where the sample was collected, Extended French, the immersion program in which the 41 students were enrolled, is characterized by 50% French-medium instruction in grades 5–8, followed by 20% in high school. It should be made clear that the immersion programs in which the data were collected are housed in regular English-language high schools where the great majority of the administrative, teaching, and maintenance staff, and also students, are not French speaking. In other words, the classrooms where these students take their French-medium courses and the resource rooms attached to the French immersion programs are nearly the only settings in which they have the chance to use and be exposed to French. This situation is typical in Ontario, where most school districts offering French immersion education do so via French immersion programs rather than via designated French immersion schools.

All of the 41 immersion students come from a home where neither parent speaks French. Their parents, however, are by no means all monolingual Anglophones. In fact, as illustrated in Table 9, the students' responses to the questionnaire show that 51% of them come from homes where another language in addition to English is spoken to varying degrees (e.g., Chinese, Croatian, German, Korean, Polish, Tagalog, and Vietnamese), and 39% of them come from homes where other Romance languages are spoken (e.g., Italian and Spanish). In other words, more than half of the 41 students have two L1s. This finding is consistent with previous research pointing to the presence of significant numbers of students from non-French and non-English-speaking backgrounds in French immersion programs in metropolitan areas in Canada (e.g., Bienvenue, 1986; Dagenais & Day, 1998).

Table 9 also shows that we have almost equal numbers of grade 9 and 12 students,<sup>7</sup> more females than males, and more students from middle-class backgrounds than from the upper working class. This preponderance of females and middle-class students is typical of immersion programs in Ontario (e.g., Rebuffot, 1993). Also, the majority of the student sample never use the spoken French media; however, there are proportionally more grade 12 students than grade 9 students who do so on occasion. Although most of the

**Table 9.** Chief characteristics of the student sample

Characteristics	Students per grade		
	9 ( <i>n</i> = 21)	12 ( <i>n</i> = 20)	Total ( <i>n</i> = 41)
Gender			
Female	13	17	30
Male	8	3	11
Social class <sup>a</sup>			
Middle	10	14	24
Upper working	9	6	15
Percent of French medium schooling			
0–25	2	6	8
26–37	14	13	27
38–100	5	1	6
Exposure to TV and radio in French			
Never	16	9	25
Occasional	5	11	16
Time in Francophone environment			
<1 day	8	4	12
1–6 days	6	3	9
1–3 weeks	6	9	15
>3 weeks	1	4	5
Length of stay with Francophone family			
0 hours	15	12	27
1–13 days	5	1	6
>2 weeks	1	7	8
Languages spoken at home			
English	10	10	20
Romance	4	4	8
Other	7	6	13

<sup>a</sup>Two students did not provide sufficient information for their social class to be determined.

students have stayed in Francophone environments, only 14 of them have stayed with a Francophone family, for the most part in Quebec. The average length of stay for these 14 students is a relatively modest 16 days.

Finally, concerning the students' use of French in their everyday life in and out of school, the questionnaire revealed the following trends. The only situation in which the students report making significant use of French is in their in-class communications with their immersion teachers. When they communicate with their classmates within the confines of the classroom, they sometimes use French; however, outside the classroom their use of French is marginal. Concerning their use of French outside the school setting (e.g., with friends or neighbors), the students rarely or never use this language, a finding that reflects the scarcity of Francophones in the localities where they reside.

### Previous L1 Research

One previous study, Laberge (1977), investigated alternation between the subject pronouns *nous* and *on* in Quebec French. It is based on the Sankoff and Cedergren corpus of 120 speakers of Montreal French (Sankoff, Sankoff, Laberge, & Topham, 1976). Laberge found that *nous* (e.g., *Nous sommes allés à Vancouver* “We went to Vancouver”) was used only 1.6% of the time, and *on* (e.g., *Je dis qu'on est tous égal moi* “Me I say that we are all equal”) was used 98.4% of the time during the taped interviews. Furthermore, *on* was used either alone as a single pronoun or in conjunction with the pronouns *nous* or *nous-autres* (e.g., *Nous on est venu rester dans Côte-des-Neiges* “Us we came to stay in Côte-des-Neiges”; *Ils veulent pas que nous-autres on reste dans la même merde qu'eux-autres* “They do not want that us we stay in the same shit as them”). These latter forms are typical of spoken French, not standard written French. Because Laberge did not provide information on the frequency of these latter forms, we turned to the work of Blondeau (1999), who focused on such variants within the same corpus examined by Laberge. The combined frequency of *nous-autres on* and *nous on* was just under 3%.<sup>8</sup> It should be pointed out that in speech these compound forms can occur in two guises: (a) as emphatic constructions in which the first pronoun (*nous-autres* or *nous*) is stressed and separated from *on* by a pause; and (b) as cases of subject doubling in which the first pronoun is not stressed and not separated from *on* by a pause, a construction considered to be nonstandard (see Nadasdi, 1995, for a variationist study of subject doubling in Ontario French). It could be argued that instances of compound forms as emphatic constructions should not be counted as variants of *on* but that instances of their use as doubled subjects could be counted as such. This is because, like *on* and *nous* used on their own, the use of *on* and *nous* in doubled subjects does not carry any special emphatic value. In any case, given that Laberge did not distinguish these two constructions in her analysis, we did not distinguish them in our own analysis of the immersion data.<sup>9</sup> One should bear in mind that in Montreal French the subject pronoun *on* is also used to refer to subjects that do not include the speaker and, thus, are not relevant for the case of variation under study here (e.g., *mais si on prend un Italien qui sait pas un mot de français* “but if one takes an Italian who does not know a word of French”). Such noninclusive usage represented 22% of Laberge’s data for *on*.<sup>10</sup>

Concerning the effect of extralinguistic parameters on the *nous* versus *on* alternation, Laberge (1977) found that the 22 speakers who made use of *nous* were primarily from the oldest age group (50 years and older). She also found that there were almost twice as many women as men who used *nous* and that there were almost three times as many speakers from the middle class as from the working class who used *nous*. Additionally, Laberge noted that *nous* co-occurred with other variants typical of the formal register (e.g., negative constructions retaining the particle *ne*) and was used more frequently in the more formal part of the interview.

In sum, in spoken Montreal French, the subject pronoun *nous* is a highly marked variant in terms of both the social and stylistic factors examined. It is

also highly infrequent even though the speakers were recorded in the context of a semiformal interview.

Although Laberge's (1977) study underscored the influence of social class and style on the *nous* versus *on* alternation, it did not assess the influence of linguistic factors on this alternation. To obtain information on this influence, we drew on two studies of this alternation based on corpora of European French: Boutet (1986) and Coveney (2000). In these corpora, the pronoun *on* is also extremely frequent in comparison to *nous* (e.g., Coveney found that *on* was used 96% of the time).<sup>11</sup> Coveney considered the possibility that a number of linguistic factors would influence the choice of pronoun. These factors were: inclusion versus exclusion of the hearer, reference to a group that is "seen from outside" versus "seen from within," reference to a group of specific individuals versus an institution comprising a large number of unnamed people, and the indication of a thematic shift. Noting that both *nous* and *on* occurred in each of these contexts, Coveney concluded that the influence of these factors on *nous* was essentially no different from their influence on *on*.<sup>12</sup> The factor of specificity of the group of individuals referred to by the pronoun *on* was also examined by Boutet, who used a ternary distinction of specificity and restriction to characterize the various uses of *on*. More specifically, she distinguished among references to: (a) a group that is both specific and restricted (i.e., a limited group of people who the speaker can count and name, such as the members of the speaker's family); (b) a group that is specific but not restricted (i.e., a cohesive group of people whose individuals cannot all be identified, such as the people who work in a big firm for which the speaker works); and (c) a group that is not specific and not restricted (e.g., all of humanity, people in general). It should be noted that specificity and restriction each form a continuum and that the inclusion of specific tokens of the subject pronouns in each of the three categories previously listed involves, to some degree, a judgment call.

In a recent study based on a corpus of Ontario French, Mougeon (2000) tested the hypothesis that the more specific and restricted the reference, the more likely speakers would be to use *nous*, and, conversely, the less specific and restricted the reference, the more likely speakers would be to use *on*. Mougeon found some evidence supporting the hypothesis. However, because of the rarity of *nous* in that corpus, the correlation of *nous* with degree of specificity and restriction was not very robust. To further his study, Mougeon examined a collection of seventeenth-century French language plays in which *nous* was much more abundant. He found that the correlation was very strong and gave full support to his hypothesis. On the basis of the strength of Mougeon's findings, we chose to examine the effect of specificity and restriction using Boutet's (1986) scale in our own study.

## ANALYSIS OF THE VARIATION DATA

### Methodology

As previously mentioned in the "Research Objectives" section, we seek to determine the range and frequency of the variants used by our 41 French immer-

sion students as well as the influence exerted on variant usage by certain independent (linguistic and extralinguistic) variables. The computerized concordance program MonoConc Pro (Barlow, 1998) was employed to identify within the corpus tokens of the pronouns under study.<sup>13</sup> In the speech of the students we found only two tokens of *nous on* and only one token of *nous-autres on*. Consequently, our analysis of variation focused only on *nous* and *on* as single pronouns. GoldVarbII (Rand & Sankoff, 1990), a logistic regression factor-analysis program, was used to obtain frequency counts and factor weightings that enabled us to identify which of the extralinguistic and linguistic factors are significantly correlated with variant choice. This program performed a step-wise regression analysis yielding an ordered selection of the factors. The effects varied between 0 and 1, with values greater than .5 favoring rule application (i.e., the realization of the linguistic variable as one variant in preference to another) and values less than .5 disfavoring it. GoldVarbII also gave two more general measures, one of the overall goodness of fit (log likelihood) and the other of the probability of the application of the rule irrespective of the contribution of the factors (input probability).

The following extralinguistic factors were examined: gender; social-class background (middle class, upper working class);<sup>14</sup> use of French language television and radio (never, occasional); time spent in a Francophone environment (0 hours, 1–6 days, 7–20 days, 3 weeks or more); time spent with a Francophone family (0 hours, 1–13 days, 2 weeks or more); and languages the students speak at home (English, Romance, or other language).<sup>15</sup>

As for the linguistic factors of specificity and restriction, we distinguished three categories: (a) reference to a group that is both specific and restricted, (b) reference to a group that is specific but not restricted, and (c) reference to a group that is not specific and not restricted. When the reference of a token of either pronoun was ambiguous in relation to either of these two factors, the token was excluded from the analyses.

## Hypotheses

The following is a summary of what we expected to find in the immersion students' speech. These hypotheses are presented under three sections: hypotheses related to the frequency of the variants, hypotheses regarding the effect of extralinguistic factors, and hypotheses reflecting the effect of linguistic factors.

**Frequency of the Variants.** Our past research has shown that these same students use formal variants during their semidirected interviews considerably more frequently than do L1 speakers of Canadian French in the same situation and that this so-called overuse of formal variants is also found in the in-class speech of immersion teachers and the French language arts materials used in immersion programs. This trend was particularly evident in our study on *ne* deletion (Rehner & Mougeon, 1999). In this study, the French immersion



students and teachers maintained the negative particle *ne* 73% and 71% of the time, respectively. The materials used to teach French language arts in immersion programs employed this variant 100% of the time in text passages representing written French and 98.7% of the time in text passages representing oral French (e.g., dialogues). These rates of *ne* maintenance contrast sharply with the rate displayed by native speakers of Quebec French (0.5%). The difference is even more striking in a study of /l/ deletion in subject pronouns (Mougeon, Nadasdi, Uritescu, et al., 2001), given that the immersion students use the standard (nondeleted) variant in 98% of occurrences, whereas native speakers do so only 2% of the time. Thus, in the present study, we expected that *nous*, which like *ne* and /l/ maintenance is extremely rare in spoken Canadian French, would be used quite frequently by the students as well as by the immersion teachers and the French language arts materials.

As for the infrequent forms *nous-autres on* and *nous on*, because they are typical of spoken French, we expected that they would be used very rarely in the French language arts teaching materials and avoided by the immersion teachers in their classrooms. In previous research we found that the students never or very rarely used variants that were infrequent or absent in these forms of input, thus we expected that they would make nil or marginal use of these variants.

**Extralinguistic Factors.** On the basis of the trends revealed by several of our previous studies (e.g., *ne* deletion), we expected that those students who received extracurricular exposure to French would exhibit a higher frequency of use of the mildly marked variant *on* in their speech than would the remaining students. This would reflect the fact that the students with greater levels of extracurricular exposure have, for the most part, been exposed to the speech of Quebec Francophones, a variety of French that almost categorically uses the pronoun *on*.

Concerning the factors of gender and social class, we expected that as *nous* is clearly a formal variant it would be favored by the female students, middle-class students, or both because we found in previous research that these same students tend to favor variants that are typical of standard usage (e.g., *ne* maintenance, *seulement* “only,” and the inflected future). The explanation we proposed for this finding was that, in the classroom speech of immersion teachers and in the course materials used in the immersion context, the formal variants are used quite frequently if not categorically. Such preferential usage leads the students to infer that the favored variants are standard and prestigious or associated with the formal register. On the basis of such an inference, the female students, middle-class students, or both favor them more than do their respective counterparts, just as female speakers, middle-class speakers, or both have been found to favor standard variants in L1 research. An additional motivation for this hypothesis is that because the use of *nous* is highly marked, socially and stylistically, in spoken Canadian French, those students who had increased extracurricular exposure to this variety of French

would receive confirmation of the sociostylistic value they had inferred from the educational treatment of the variants.

Again in keeping with the findings of our previous research (e.g., *ne* maintenance and *seulement* “only”), concerning the effect of the languages spoken at home by the students, we expected to find a preference for *nous* by those students from homes where Romance languages are spoken (in this case, Italian and Spanish). This is because these languages, unlike French, do not use a pronoun similar to *on* but rather have stressed subject pronouns morphophonetically and semantically similar to *nous*—namely *noi* (Italian) and *nosotros* (Spanish).<sup>16</sup>

**Linguistic Factors.** As we pointed out in the literature review, FSL learners tend to observe the linguistic constraints that are found in L1 spoken French. However, in the context of our own research, we have found several exceptions in which the students did not observe the constraints observed by L1 speakers. Given this, we cannot definitively predict whether the students will respect the constraints observed by L1 speakers—namely, the increased likelihood of *nous* usage as the specificity and restriction of the referent increase.

## Results

**Frequency of the Variants.** The analysis of the speech of our 41 immersion students reveals that, as expected, *nous* and *on* make up the great majority of the occurrences of the variable. The forms *nous-autres on* and *nous on* are practically never used (1 token and 2 tokens occurred, respectively). The sentences in (1)–(9) illustrate the variants used by the immersion students in the three linguistic contexts.

Nonspecific and unrestricted:

- (1) *Nous sommes vraiment en danger notre monde.*  
“In this world of ours we are really in danger.”
- (2) *Comme en “Bosnia” les choses comme ça je ne sais qu’est-ce que je peux faire alors . . . quelque fois je pense que on va faire quelque chose et tout le monde va être mieux.*  
“Like in Bosnia stuff like that I don’t know what I can do so . . . sometimes I think that we are going to do something and everybody will be better.”

Specific and unrestricted:

- (3) *Je sais que nous sommes canadiens mais . . .*  
“I know that we are Canadian but . . .”
- (4) *À la neuvième année on fait l’histoire.*  
“In grade 9 we study history.”

Specific and restricted:

- (5) *La veille de Noël um nous allons à la maison de mon autre grand-mère.*  
“On Christmas Eve um we go to the house of my other grandmother.”

**Table 10.** Effects of internal and external factors on *nous* versus *on*

Factor groups	<i>On</i> ( <i>n</i> )	<i>Nous</i> ( <i>n</i> )	<i>On</i> (%)	<i>Nous</i> (%)	Total ( <i>n</i> )	Factor effect ( <i>On</i> )
French media						
Never	434	436	50	50	870	.43
Occasional	376	206	65	35	582	.60
Francophone family						
0 hours	333	508	40	60	841	.41
1–13 days	223	31	88	12	254	.73
>2 weeks	254	103	71	29	357	.52
Francophone environment						
0 hours	148	195	43	57	343	.41
1–6 days	78	175	31	69	253	.46
7–20 days	361	252	59	41	613	.45
>3 weeks	223	20	92	8	243	.74
Social class						
Middle	385	429	47	53	814	.39
Upper working	401	185	68	32	586	.68
Gender						
Female	608	558	52	48	1166	.46
Male	202	84	71	29	286	.63
Home language						
Romance	56	152	27	73	208	.14
English	526	286	65	35	812	.66
Other	228	204	53	47	432	.39
Specificity and degree of restriction						
1	674	595	53	47	1269	.47
2	100	43	70	30	143	.57
3	36	4	90	10	40	.85
Total	810	642	56	44	1452	

Note. Log likelihood = -622.332. Significance = .006. Input probability = .68.

- (6) *Avec mes amis on est allé à au Canada's Wonderland.*  
"With my friends we went to to Canada's Wonderland."
- (7) *Nous-autres on va porter ce qu'on veut.*  
"We will wear what we want."
- (8) *Nous comme famille on on fait.*  
"We as a family we we do."
- (9) *J'ai trois soeurs . . . nous on est non trois soeurs seulement trois soeurs.*  
"I have three sisters . . . we are no three sisters only three sisters."

The tokens of *nous-autres on* and *nous on* were not included in the GoldVarb factor analysis for which the results are displayed in Table 10. As for the immersion teachers' in-class speech and the French language arts materials, Table 11 reveals a complete absence of these forms.

Given that these forms are infrequent in L1 spoken Canadian French, cate-

**Table 11.** Use of variants by French immersion teachers and in French language arts textbooks

Variants	French immersion teacher corpus		French language arts textbook (dialogues)		French language arts textbook (written text)	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
<i>Nous</i>	80	17	42	52	39	83
<i>On</i>	398	83	33	48	33	17
<i>Nous-autres on</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>Nous on</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	478	100	75	100	72	100

gorically avoided in the immersion teachers' in-class speech and in the French language arts written materials, and marginal in English "us we" (Blondeau & Nagy, 1998), it is not surprising that these forms are practically never used by our sample of immersion students.

Concerning the single pronouns, Table 10 shows that, contrary to our hypothesis, the students do not use the formal variant *nous* more than the mildly marked variant *on*. In fact, their use of *on* slightly outweighs their use of *nous* (56% vs. 44%). Even more surprising, and contrary to our hypothesis, is the fact that, as Table 11 shows, the immersion teachers make very frequent use of *on*, not *nous*. Analysis of the French language arts materials further confirms the fact that *nous* is not as overwhelmingly favored as we had initially expected because it is used only 52% of the time in the dialogues contained in the French language arts materials and 83% of the time in the written texts. However, the high frequency of *nous* in the written texts underscores the fact that this variant is strongly associated with written French. Although *nous* is not the preferred variant in the students' speech, we should point out that in comparison to L1 speakers who use this variant in only 1% of occurrences they do make exceptionally great use of this form.

The unexpected finding that the students use *on* 56% of the time can be attributed to frequent exposure to this variant via the speech of their immersion teachers. However, the relatively low frequency of this variant in comparison to that of immersion teachers may reflect the fact that the written materials used in their French classes favor *nous* and thus somewhat counteract the influence of their teachers' speech.

Also counter to our hypothesis is the finding that this case of variation is quite different from that of *ne* deletion and /l/ deletion despite the fact that in L1 spoken Quebec French these three variants are used almost categorically. More specifically, the immersion students, the teachers, the written dialogues, and the written texts each, to differing extents, favor the maintenance of *ne* to a much higher degree than they do the use of *nous*. This is particularly evident in the case of the teachers who highly favor the maintenance of *ne* while also highly disfavoring *nous*. One explanation for this might be that the stu-

dents favor *on* because it offers a simpler alternative to *nous* in terms of verb conjugation. Although verb conjugation for *nous* requires a special ending that can be entirely avoided by not using this pronoun, verb conjugation for other pronouns, *je* “I,” *tu* “you” singular, *il* “he,” *elle* “she,” and *on* “one” or “we,” is homophonous for regular verbs, thus increasing the students’ frequency of exposure to this one form.<sup>17</sup> Another explanation is that there is a differential perception of the so-called incorrectness of these nonstandard variants on the part of L1 speakers—namely, that deleting an item such as *ne* or /l/ is a much graver “error” than is the expansion of the meaning of an existing form (i.e., *on* to mean *nous*). As a result, immersion teachers and the authors of French language arts materials do not avoid the use *on*, whereas they frequently or categorically avoid *ne* deletion.<sup>18</sup> In fact, it is interesting to point out that the few instances of *ne* deletion present in the written materials were in extracts from novels that featured the speech of a youngster with lower-than-average intelligence and that of young drug dealers, whereas no such associations were found for the instances of *on*.

**Extralinguistic Factors.** As for the influence of extracurricular French language exposure, Table 10 reveals that as such exposure increases, either as the result of greater French media consumption or of extended stays with Francophone families or in Francophone environments, the students’ use of *on* also increases. Concerning stays with a Francophone family, it should be noted that the effect is not linear because the intermediary level of this type of exposure is associated with the highest factor effect (.73). However, those students with no exposure display, as expected, the lowest factor effect for *on* use (.41). These findings confirm our hypothesis and reflect the positive impact of contact with L1 speakers outside the classroom on the learning of a mildly marked variant like *on*, which, as we have seen, is extremely frequent in spoken Quebec French.

As for social correlations, Table 10 reveals that both gender and social class exert the expected effect on this case of variation. It is indeed the female and middle-class students who are most likely to use *nous* and who thus have the lowest factor effects for *on* (.46 and .39, respectively). These findings reflect the fact that the students have inferred that *nous* is more standard than *on* on the basis of the treatment of these variants in the immersion context. As we have seen, *on* accounts for nearly half of the usages in the dialogues included in the French language arts materials and is used more than 80% of the time in immersion teachers’ classroom speech, whereas *nous* is highly favored in the written texts contained in the French language arts materials. Also, given that the use of *nous* is strongly associated with upper-middle-class and formal speech in Quebec French, it is likely that students who have had extracurricular exposure to French have had this inference reinforced. Consequently, depending on their social-class background and gender, the students will display variable preference for the prestige variant *nous*.

Table 10 also suggests that the languages the students speak at home affect

their selection of *nous* versus *on*. As we had hypothesized, students speaking Italian or Spanish at home display a very marked preference for *nous* usage. In fact, their factor effect for *on* use is startlingly low (.14). As we have suggested, this likely reflects the presence of *noi* and *nosotros* in these languages and the absence of variants similar to *on*. It is also interesting to point out that, in contrast, those students who speak only English at home have the highest factor effect for *on* (.66). It is not clear to us if these students do so because English occasionally uses the formal subject pronoun, *one*, which is morphophonetically similar and semantically related to *on*, or simply because they do not speak another language that makes them favor *nous*. On the basis of these findings, one might assume that, were it not for the presence in our sample of students who speak a Romance language at home, the overall rate of *on* usage would have been even higher.

For students who speak non-Romance languages other than English, their factor effect falls between the other two groups (.39), which may simply reflect the fact that some of these languages have pronoun systems that favor the use of *on*, whereas others do not. This intermediary category includes many languages, and we have not yet attempted to determine how each one would influence the students' variant selection.

Finally, Table 10 displays the influence exerted by the linguistic factor of specificity and degree of restriction. As can be seen, a linear correlation was found. The referents that are both nonspecific and unrestricted (category 3) were overwhelmingly favorable to the use of *on* (.85), whereas the referents that are both specific and restricted (category 1) were the most favorable to *nous* (.47). Thus, in this case of variation the students observe a linguistic constraint that is also observed by L1 speakers of Canadian French.

Two explanations can be proposed for this finding. First, it is possible that the students have learned this linguistic constraint via the in-class speech of immersion teachers because we found that the teachers in the Allen et al. (1987) corpus use *nous* almost exclusively to refer to groups of individuals that are both specific and restricted, marginally to refer to groups of individuals that are specific but not restricted, and not at all to refer to groups that are neither specific nor restricted. Second, in the exercise books that we analyzed, there is no mention of the possibility of using *on* for *nous*, and when *on* is introduced it is only in its use as an indefinite pronoun.

## DISCUSSION

We will now relate the findings of our study to those of past research on the learning of linguistic variation by learners of FSL and, more generally, by learners of other L2s. First, we found that the students practically never used the forms *nous-autres on* and *nous on*. These findings may reflect the fact that these forms are typical of spoken French, are very rarely or never used in class by the teachers, and are absent from the French language arts materials. Second, we found that contrary to our expectations the immersion students

do not prefer the formal variant *nous* but instead use the mildly marked variant *on* somewhat more frequently. These results are not in keeping with our previous research in which we found that the students used the mildly marked variants infrequently or very infrequently (e.g., deletion of *ne* 27%, use of *je vas* 8%, deletion of schwa 15%, and deletion of /l/ in *il(s)* 3%; see Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2001). The explanation for this unexpected finding lies in the fact that, contrary to the other mildly marked variants that we have examined, *on* is not avoided by the teachers and the dialogues contained in the teaching materials. This finding is reminiscent of Swain and Lapkin's (1990) explanation for their finding that immersion students overuse the informal pronoun *tu* "you" in informal contexts. These authors hypothesized that their finding reflects the fact that these students are exposed to high levels of teacher input of the informal personal pronoun *tu* in the immersion classroom context.

Regarding the influence of teacher input on the acquisition of sociostylistic variation by immersion students (and more generally by advanced FSL learners), our research has, in a sense, put Swain and Lapkin's (1990) hypothesis to the test in that we have systematically taken this factor into account in the different sociostylistic variables we examined. In the present study, we have broadened our examination of the influence of educational input by including French language arts materials. Our results suggest that this dimension of educational input may also play a role in the learning of sociostylistic variation.

Third, we found that the students' extracurricular contact with L1 speakers and their use of the spoken French media are correlated with more frequent use of mildly marked *on*. Many studies have documented a similar effect for other learners of FSL (see Table 4)<sup>19</sup> and for learners of other L2s (e.g., Bayley, 1996, Chinese learners of English residing in the United States). Still, our research has shown that the positive effect of interactions with L1 speakers was too weak to allow the students to use mildly marked variants as often as L1 speakers. Several studies allow us to suppose that if the students had had longer stays in a Francophone environment, then the results would have been different. For instance, Regan (1996) found that after a stay of 1 year in France her students deleted the particle *ne* in the formal register at a level even higher than that of native speakers. Nagy et al. (1996) have shown that Anglophone L2 learners residing in Montreal, a predominantly Francophone city, delete /l/ in the impersonal pronoun *il* at a rate that is not much different from that of native speakers of the local variety (80% vs. 98%). Blondeau et al. (1995) have shown that these same speakers make widespread use of the mildly marked variant *on* almost as frequently as native speakers (97% vs. 98%). In contrast, our sample of immersion students makes much less frequent use of these mildly marked variants: They delete *ne* 29% of the time; they delete /l/ 2% of the time in impersonal pronouns; and, as we have seen, they use *on* in 56% of occurrences.

Fourth, we found that our female and middle-class students make greater use of the formal variant *nous* than their respective counterparts. With regard

to gender, our finding is consistent with two of our previous studies and with that of Blondeau and Nagy (1998) for Anglophone learners of FSL in Montreal, Adamson and Regan (1991) for Vietnamese and Cambodian learners of ESL in the United States, and Major (1999) for Japanese and Spanish learners of ESL in the United States. Note, however, that in these latter studies it is reasonable to assume that the female speakers had internalized the effect of gender observable in the L1 communities in which they were immersed, whereas in the case of the students in the present study the effect of gender reflects a differential treatment of the variants within the educational context. As for social class, we are, to our knowledge, the only ones to have examined the effect of social class on the learning of specific cases of variation by learners of FSL or of any other language in an educational context. It remains to be seen if future research will confirm our findings.

Fifth, we found that students speaking Italian or Spanish at home display a very marked preference for *nous* usage, whereas those students speaking only English at home show a marked preference for *on*. This finding is in keeping with four of our previous studies and also with those of other researchers of FSL (see Table 6) and other L2s (e.g., Adamson & Regan, 1991). Such findings underscore the role of L1 transfer in the learning of variation, just as it has been shown to influence the learning of invariant usages.

Sixth, we found that nonspecific and unrestricted referents were overwhelmingly favorable to *on*, whereas those that were specific and restricted were the most favorable to *nous*. Thus, this case of variation is one in which the immersion students have mastered the linguistic constraint under study. However, previous research has found that L2 learners do not always acquire the linguistic constraints observed by native speakers. This is true for learners of FSL (see Table 8) and learners of other L2s (e.g., Adamson & Regan, 1991; Bayley, 1996; Yamagata & Preston, 1999, for English learners of Japanese in the United States). It should be noted, though, that these studies examined learners of a variety of L2s at different levels of proficiency who had been exposed to differing levels of L1 speech, and for the most part they investigated linguistic constraints that are different from those we examined. What is now needed is research that investigates the learning of specific linguistic constraints by FSL learners of similar levels of proficiency and with similar levels of L1 exposure.

To conclude, we will make several observations concerning the pedagogical implications of our research. As we have pointed out, the students show signs of having learned the mildly marked variant in the present study. However, despite their favoring of *on* over *nous*, the students still use *on* less frequently than L1 speakers of Canadian French. This is reflective of the association of *nous* with formal situations in Canadian French and the limited presence of *on* in the teachers' in-class speech and the French language arts materials. Further, it reflects the fact that in these same teaching materials there is no explicit mention that *on*, according to native norms, is indeed the preferable option in spoken French nor are there any activities that provide



the students with the opportunity to alternate between *on* and *nous* as a function of register. In fact, the only explicit discussion of either of these subject pronouns was a caution not to confuse the verb *ont* (“have” in third-person plural) with its homonym *on* (“one” or “we”). As our research has shown, when mildly marked variants are absent or very infrequent in the French immersion teachers’ classroom speech, in the French language arts teaching materials, or both, the frequency of use of these variants by the students is much lower than that of L1 speakers of Canadian French. Indeed this is the pattern that emerged in all but two of the many cases of variation we examined.

Given these findings, it appears that the Ontario Ministry of Education’s curriculum objectives for the learning of different registers of French by immersion students have not been fully met. To reach that goal, special French language arts materials would need to be developed. What is also needed is a set of priorities for which specific variants should be the focus of explicit instruction targeting reception, production, or both (e.g., vernacular variants may be best targeted primarily for receptive abilities, whereas mildly marked variants would clearly qualify for both types of abilities). Such materials have already been piloted for French immersion by Lyster (1994)<sup>20</sup> and have been shown to be highly effective to develop not only receptive but productive socio-stylistic skills. Useful recommendations for the development of materials for the teaching of linguistic variation for FSL in general have also been formulated by Biggs and Dalwood (1976), Critchley (1994), Cuq (1994), O’Connor Di Vito (1991), Offord (1994), and Valdman (1998). Thanks to our own research and that of Harley and King (1989) and Swain and Lapkin (1990), French immersion educators now have at their disposal a substantial body of data on various aspects of variation in L1 Canadian French and in the French of immersion students that will allow them to develop such materials and establish curricular priorities.

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#### NOTES

1. We have presented a trichotomy of variants (i.e., vernacular, mildly marked, and formal) to describe the focus of most studies on the learning of spoken French variation. However, there is room for yet another category of variants—namely, “informal” ones that fall in between the vernacular and mildly marked categories.

2. In vernacular Quebec French the word *job* “job” is feminine.

3. To focus exclusively on the use of French as a second or third language, no native Francophones were included in the sample.

4. The project is entitled *Research on variation in the spoken French of immersion students* and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

5. In future research we hope to be able to use a more recent immersion teacher classroom corpus collected from within the school system where we gathered our student corpus.

6. We have examined two series of materials: (a) *Portes ouvertes sur notre pays* “Open doors on our country,” which included series 1A and 1B (Roy Nicolet & Jean-Côté, 1994) and 3A and 3B (Le Dorze & Morin, 1994), and (b) *Capsules* (Deslauriers & Gagnon, 1995, 1997).

7. The sample includes 20 students in grade 9, 1 in grade 10, 1 in grade 11, 16 in grade 12, and 2 in grade 13. For the purposes of the present research focusing on students in grades 9 and 12, those

from grade 10 are considered with those in grade 9, and those from grades 11 and 13 are considered with the grade 12 students.

8. Blondeau (1999) also found that *nous on* is much less frequent than is *nous-autres on* (3% vs. 97%) and that it is associated with the speech of females, with speakers from the higher social strata, and with formal topics.

9. As will be seen, the immersion students included in our corpus hardly ever used these compound forms, and hence these forms were not included in our statistical analysis of variation.

10. In contrast, in our sample of immersion students we found that the frequency of noninclusive *on* was only 8% and that the students massively preferred the pronoun *tu* instead, presumably on the model of English impersonal *you* (e.g., *Tu as plus temps penser alors tu peux faire les choses plus intéressantes* "You have more time to think so you can do more interesting things").

11. Although Boutet (1986) did not provide any information on the frequency of *on* versus *nous* in her database, it is interesting that the numerous examples she provides in her paper are all of *on* (either alone or in conjunction with disjunctive *nous*).

12. Coveney's (2000) conclusion was not based on a statistical analysis examining the influence of these factors on the probability of occurrence of either variant.

13. The concordance program generated all instances of *on*, including those where the speaker was excluded from the referential meaning of *on*. Obviously, these latter instances, accounting for 9% of all *on* usage, did not figure in our study. In looking for these instances, we noted, as did Coveney (2000) and Boutet (1986), that it was not always possible to determine with certainty whether the speaker was included. These ambiguous instances were also excluded from our study.

14. To determine the social class background of the students, the parents' occupations, as listed by the students on their questionnaires, were categorized as follows:

<u>Middle class</u>	<u>Upper working class</u>
accountants	cooks
computer programmers	skilled factory workers
systems analysts	fork-lift operators
engineers	receptionists
managers, assistant managers	truck drivers
nurses, doctors	laborers
owners, presidents, vice-presidents	
relations officers	
teachers, principals	

Our reason for including "receptionist" in the category upper working class is that it is closer to the occupations included in this category than to those listed under middle class. In the case of three students, there was a mismatch between the parents' occupations. All three were a combination of one occupation categorized as upper working class and one as middle class. These students were categorized as upper working class. When one parent's occupation was listed as "homemaker" or was too vaguely worded for proper identification, the occupation listed for the second parent was taken as the measure of social-class background. Finally, the label "upper working class" reflects the fact that the occupations included in this category are, for the most part, on the upper part of the working-class scale.

15. The reader will notice that the variable of style has not been targeted in this study. We intend to examine it in a separate study focused on several sociolinguistic variants, not just *on* versus *nous*. However, we performed a preliminary correlation of the frequency of variant choice with topic formality and found that frequency of use of the formal variant *nous* did not fluctuate with changes in topic (in)formality.

16. Although the use of these pronouns in Italian and Spanish is optional and marked, it is plausible that such usage is sufficient to promote *nous* in the speech of those students who speak these languages.

17. However, it should be noted that the students do not have an insurmountable problem with the more complex morphology entailed by *nous*, given that they use this pronoun with a variety of verbs not just the most frequent ones such as *être* "to be" and *avoir* "to have." In fact, the variety of verbs used with *nous* is not that much less than that observed after *on*.

18. According to Désirat and Hordé (1976), middle-class speakers of European French look upon *ne* deletion as a feature of incorrect speech even though *ne* is frequently deleted in informal spoken French in France. As concerns /l/ deletion, we are unable to comment on the teachers' use of this

form because we only have access to the written transcripts that do not contain such phonetic details.

19. In fact, Dewaele (personal communication, 22 June 2001), after reading an earlier version of this paper, performed a preliminary statistical analysis of the extralinguistic correlates of *on* usage in the speech of 32 Flemish learners of FSL. He found that authentic contact with native speakers was the strongest predictor of *on* usage in his corpus, followed by use of Francophone media.

20. The materials developed by Lyster (1994) were centered on the alternation between *tu* and *vous* "you" as address pronouns.

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