

Preface

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This special issue of *The International Review of Applied Linguistics* focuses on variation in the interlanguage of advanced second language (L2) learners. Variation in interlanguage started to draw the attention of researchers in the late seventies (see Tarone 1988 for an overview). Most researchers focused on diachronic variation, i.e., they investigated developmental patterns in the interlanguage. Since the early nineties, a growing proportion of studies have combined a diachronic perspective with a synchronic one. That is, they have considered variation not simply as increased knowledge on the part of learners over time, but also as differential knowledge among learners at a given point in time as a function of characteristics of the situation or the task in which the interlanguage was produced, as well as enduring characteristics of the learners, such as gender, social class, personality, biographical variables linked to the language learning experience and the use of the target language (Dewaele 1993).

A particularly thorny issue for researchers interested in variation in interlanguage is the choice of an appropriate theoretical model and the interpretation of the patterns of variation observed. Beebe (1988) pointed out in her overview of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA that sociolinguistic methods designed to measure subtle variation in the speech of native speakers cannot be directly imported to study interlanguage variation because interlanguage “involves using a repertoire that is both limited and in a state of flux” (Beebe 1988: 44).

The state of flux might be linked, as Rehner (2002) points out, to the larger number of independent variables that affect variation in the L2, and not simply the social characteristics of the speaker traditionally considered in sociolinguistic research. Additional independent factors include the students' first language(s), the degree of curricular and extra-curricular exposure to the L2, and the type of input received through teachers and pedagogical materials.

Rehner (2002) insists that interlanguage researchers should therefore not blindly adopt the sociolinguistic variationist approach in equating “correct” L2 forms with “standard” or “prestige” L1 forms. She also suggests a differen-

tiation between two kinds of variable production observable in interlanguage data, namely “Type 1” variation, and “Type 2” variation:

“Type 1” variation manifests itself via an alternation between, on the one hand, forms that conform to target language native norms and, on the other hand, forms that are not observable in native speech, commonly referred to as ‘errors’ (e.g., *il parle au professeur* versus **il parle à le professeur*, both meaning ‘he spoke to the teacher’); “Type 2” variation manifests itself via an alternation between forms that are each used by native speakers of the target language (e.g., *il ne comprend rien* versus *il comprend rien*, both meaning ‘he understands nothing’). (Rehner 2002: 15)

Rehner (2002) argues that the measure of learner success in relation to Type 1 variation is differential knowledge of the native versus non-native forms. It is more difficult however to measure success in relation to Type 2 variation. It can be achieved in terms of:

a) learners’ use of the same expressions as native speakers; b) their use of such expressions at levels of discursive frequency similar to those found in the speech of native speakers in the same situation; and c) the correlation of such uses with similar independent factors, both social (e.g., social class, sex, and style) and linguistic (e.g., the surrounding lexical and syntactic context), affecting the uses by native speakers. (Rehner 2002: 15–16).

While studies that investigate Type 1 variation are primarily focused on grammatical competence, Type 2 variation studies are centred on both grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, the latter consisting of “the capacity to recognize and produce socially appropriate speech in context” (Lyster 1994: 263). One goal that unites both kinds of studies is their examination of the effect of linguistic and extralinguistic factors on progress towards the acquisition of native grammatical or sociolinguistic norms. Further, since many of the linguistic factors (e.g., linguistic properties and surrounding context of the usages to be learned) and extralinguistic factors (e.g., attention paid to speech, length of exposure to the target language) examined by both types of studies are the same, the distinction between Type 1 and Type 2 variation studies should not be overemphasized.

The need to investigate the acquisition of Type 2 variation is fuelled not only by purely theoretical considerations, but also by practical concerns. Language learners seem to experience great difficulty in acquiring the full range of speech styles in the target language and in developing a capacity to alternate between them appropriately (Mougeon, Nadasdi, and Rehner 2002; Rehner, Mougeon and Nadasdi 2003). Having spent years learning “the orthoepic standard norm” (Valdman 2003), instructed L2 learners might find themselves at a loss when they suddenly become L2 users unable to produce vernacular speech.

They might be equally distressed when having to use highly formal speech in authentic situations. Learners appear to be monostylistic at first, stuck somewhere in the middle of the speech style continuum (Tarone and Swain 1995). Their oral interlanguage is close to the written norm and their written interlanguage is close to the oral norm (Dewaele 2001). The learners' realization that their sociolinguistic and pragmatic competence lags behind their grammatical competence often coincides with a stay in the target language community. This phenomenon is nicely illustrated in Evans (1988). The author collected testimonies from British language students after a stay abroad. One student related the following: "The Italians are so different, and if they want something they will go out and get it. I've been taught that you ask for it politely. You realize that unless you do what they do, shout, nothing will come out of it" (Evans 1988: 45). In other words, when in Rome, do as the Romans.

Students who come back from their stay abroad may also be in for a reverse shock when their new vernacular forms are 'picked upon' by teachers. One such testimony from a learner was discussed in Dewaele (2004) in relation to the variable omission of *ne*. It also offers a glimpse into the learner's attitude and understanding of speech styles. The learner is Henry, a 21 year-old student (English L1) who spent six months in France during the previous academic year as part of his study abroad experience. In a conversation with Jean-Marc (the researcher), shown in example (1), Henry expresses his frustration at the negative attitude displayed by his teachers and professors of French towards the vernacular speech styles he acquired in France, and of which he is extremely proud.

- (1) Henry *J'aime pas j'aime pas trop les cours de français parce que je trouve ça ennuyant.*
 'I don't like, I don't like the French courses very much because I find them boring.'
- Jean-Marc *Pourquoi ?*
 'Why?'
- Henry *Parce que je sais déjà parler français assez bien mais euh c'est pas seulement ça c'est euh il faut qu'on parle différemment parce que moi quand je suis allé euh en France j'avais vraiment envie de parler exactement comme un Français.*
 'Because I speak French quite well already and but it is not only that it's that we have to speak differently because me, when I went err to France, I wanted to speak exactly like a Frenchman.'
- Jean-Marc *Ah oui.*
 'Ah yes.'

- Henry *Mais je sais plus le faire et quand on est en cours en Angleterre tout le monde parle en français évidemment avec le le prof est Français.*
 ‘But I can’t do it anymore and when one is in England everybody speaks French of course with, the the teacher is French.’
- Jean-Marc *Mmm.*
 ‘Mmm.’
- Henry *Et quand même il faut parler dans le registre soutenu et j’aime pas ça c’est tellement euh artificiel.*
 ‘And still one has to speak in a formal register and I don’t like that, it’s so artificial.’

Henry illustrates a phenomenon discussed by researchers who studied the effects of study abroad on the linguistic development of the interlanguage, namely the temporary overuse of informal variants (cf. Regan 1995). Dewaele (2002) suggested that after a phase of overgeneralization of informal variants, including in the written interlanguage, learners start adopting more native speaker-like variation patterns.

Using Rehner’s distinction between Type 1 and Type 2 variation, the present special issue can be divided in two parts: The first two articles deal with Type 1 variation, the remaining ones with Type 2 variation. The first one, by Robert Bayley and Juliet Langman, *Variation in the group and the individual: Evidence from second language acquisition*, looks at the acquisition of the past tense in English and Hungarian by Chinese learners. Bayley and Langman found that individual patterns of variation closely match the group pattern, e.g., the individual learners and the two groups marked perfective and frequent verbs for past tense more often than imperfective and infrequent verbs. This finding lends support to the practice of reporting group scores in lieu of individual results in studies investigating the development of interlanguage.

The second contribution in this issue to focus on Type 1 variation is Martin Howard’s *On the interactional effect of linguistic constraints on interlanguage variation. The case of past time marking*. Howard examines the acquisition of *passé composé* ‘compound past’ and *imparfait* ‘imperfect’ by Irish learners of French. Two interactive factors are found to have an effect on the acquisition of this aspectuo-temporal distinction: (i) the inherent aspectual value of the verb (e.g., stative versus active) and (ii) discourse grounding (foreground versus background).

The first contribution in this issue to deal with Type 2 variation is Vera Regan’s article *The relationship between the group and the individual and the acquisition of native speaker variation patterns: A preliminary study*. It echoes the research question addressed in the Bayley and Langman paper but focuses

on the variable omission of *ne* in the French interlanguage of Irish learners. Interestingly, it comes to similar conclusions about the similarity between individual patterns and group patterns. For instance the effects on variable *ne* deletion of linguistic factors such as clause type and subject type or extralinguistic factors such as style or length of exposure to French found for the group of learners is replicated in the interlanguage of each of the learners under study.

The next contribution is Dorin Uritescu, Raymond Mougeon, Katherine Rehner and Terry Nadasdi's article *Acquisition of the internal and external constraints of variable schwa deletion by French immersion students*. These authors found that Anglo-Canadian high school French immersion students delete schwa considerably less frequently than do same-age native speakers of Canadian French and that they do not observe the style constraint on schwa deletion that is found in the speech of these same native speakers of Canadian French. However, French immersion students observe the same hierarchy of phonetic constraints on schwa deletion that is found in L1 Canadian French.

The following contribution, by Alain Thomas, *Phonetic norm versus usage in advanced French as a second language* also looks at a group of Anglo-Canadian learners of French, half of whom spent a year in France while the other half continued studying French in an Ontario university. The focus is on morpho-phonemic variables, namely 'liaison', deletion of schwa and deletion of the negative particle *ne*. Like Uritescu et al., Thomas found that his learners of French display rates of schwa and *ne* deletion and variable liaison that are below native norms (even after a one year stay in France). He attributes his findings to the fact that his learners of French have lacked opportunities to be exposed to the informal registers of French while learning French in a university setting. His interpretation echoes a similar explanation proposed by Uritescu et al. for their own findings.

The final contribution, by Jean-Marc Dewaele, *Vous or tu? Native and non-native speakers of French on a sociolinguistic tightrope*, focuses on the independent variables linked to the choice of address pronoun (*vous* versus *tu*) among European learners of French and French native speakers through self-reports and spontaneous speech data. Dewaele found that, unlike the French native controls, his learners evidence some instability in the choice of *tu* and *vous*. For instance, while the native speakers almost never use *tu* with an unknown interlocutor, the learners use this pronoun some of the time in the same situation. According to Dewaele, such instability underscores the fact that the learners have not yet fully developed their implicit knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules governing choice of address pronoun and are unable to make automatic decisions about appropriate use.

Heraclitus famously declared that "panta rei" ('everything flows'), and scientists have confirmed this from microscopic to macroscopic scales. However, while physicists accelerate particles and astronomers can accurately predict ce-

lestial orbits of planets and comets, we applied linguists, seem to experience much greater difficulty in understanding, describing and manipulating movement in interlanguage systems. The questions are basically the same ones that all scientists address: why and how does it vary? How can it best be measured? Can it be guided? Of course, human behaviour is not directly governed by the laws that determine the motion of particles or planets and our unpredictability makes us, as humans, unique. That said, this special issue illustrates the fact that patterns of variation in interlanguage are not entirely unpredictable and can be described reasonably well in terms of probabilities. More research is needed, of course, to increase the amount of variance explained by the independent variables that have been considered so far. We hope that our work will stimulate further research on variation in the interlanguage of advanced L2 learners.

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