

EFL as a contact language: Evidence from variation in an L1

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In some speech communities, the long presence, the volume of speakers, the prestige, and the socioeconomic dominance (Thomason 2001) of English as a foreign language (EFL) creates a language contact situation that affects the native language. The effects of a nonnative second language on the first has been demonstrated, e.g., in Cook (Ed.), 2003; Maurais & Morris (Eds.), 2003; and Sharp, 2001.

This paper observes possible effects of EFL on the first language (L1) of native Finnish speakers. Data were acquired from 68 speakers living in Helsinki, Finland – a city that features a prolonged and high-density use of EFL, and a place where facility in English is considered prestigious. Two arguments are advanced: 1) Speakers who regularly use EFL and who participate extensively in multicultural networks and travel (among other factors) exhibit L1 features that distinguish them from other Finnish speakers; 2) linguistic features distinguishing this type of speaker are evident in domains about which speakers exhibit a high level of metalinguistic awareness. In this study, the features investigated are all within the domain of pragmatics, a domain considered susceptible to influence from English (Östman & Raukko, 1993).

Data were gained from scripted oral interviews that elicited request utterances. The features designated for analysis included the semantic formula of the main request, the verb tense/mood, discernment of the second-person singular, and the use of politeness markers. These features, observed in approximately 500 request utterances, were analyzed using Varbrul and Chi-square tests. The results for the data as a whole showed that the dependent features did exhibit variable properties across grammatical and sociopragmatic contexts. For example, speakers over the age of 45 were found to not favor the use of politeness markers compared to younger speakers. An important trend to emerge was that speakers who fit a certain description tended to use more mitigated or “polite” forms than other speakers in the interview context.

A more focused analysis compared three groups of speakers, divided according to linguistic biographies (including input/output in EFL, time spent abroad, age of acquiring EFL). The same Finnish features were evaluated. Speakers who could be considered pure bilinguals in English and Finnish patterned more with speakers who were virtually monolingual in Finnish. A group of speakers consisting of speakers who had lived abroad, who spoke English on a daily basis but were *not* bilingual exhibited a higher use of mitigated features, differing with statistical significance from the other groups. Further analysis of this latter group revealed pragmatic features in Finnish that can be considered innovative and even nonnative to Finnish. Some of these same speakers remarked during their elicitation interviews – without remorse – that they felt their Finnish had “changed” as a result of influence from English, and this was a characteristic for which they exhibited pride.

While these findings are drawn from a group of speakers in just one speech community, the results offer insight into a largely unexplored type of language contact, that resulting from English as a global lingua franca. These findings, presented through a variationist model, support other researchers who have concluded that EFL exposure does lead to changes in an L1.

Key words: pragmatics, English as a foreign language (EFL), Finnish

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