

## **When will immersion students sound like native speakers of French: An assessment of the socio-stylistic competence in FSL of former immersion students in university.**

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This paper presents a synthesis of the first results of a two-phased synchronic and diachronic study of sociolinguistic variation in the spoken French as a second language of Ontario university learners. It focuses on six variables previously examined in the speech of Ontario high school immersion students: *ne* deletion in negative sentences (Rehner & Mougeon, 1999), first person plural pronouns (Rehner, Mougeon, & Nadasdi, 2003), the expression of the future in verbs (Mougeon, Nadasdi, & Rehner, 2003), consequence markers (Rehner, Mougeon & Nadasdi, 2001), expressions of restriction (Mougeon & Rehner, 2001), and discourse markers *like* and *comme* (Rehner, 2004).

The data were collected in 2005 via language background questionnaires and semi-formal, semi-directed, Labovian interviews among 61 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year undergraduate students enrolled in a French/English bilingual university. Some of the students attended French immersion programs in grade school, while others went through the “regular” FSL curriculum. Tokens for each variant were identified using the concordance program MonoConc Pro (Barlow, 1999) and the data were analyzed using GoldVarb (Robinson, Lawrence, & Tagliamonte, 2001).

By comparing the results of our 1<sup>st</sup> year students with those of our 4<sup>th</sup> year students, and the results of all 61 students with those of previous research on high school FSL learners, we shed light on the role of university learning in the process of L2 acquisition of sociolinguistic variation. We also highlight which aspects of their academic and non-academic experience play a significant role in their linguistic and sociolinguistic behaviour after secondary school, particularly regarding the acquisition of spoken French variation. The extra-linguistic factors we examine include the students’ perception of their bilingualism and their commitment to their acquisition of French as a L2 (as revealed during the interview and translating into increased continuous and intense exposure to the L2). The linguistic factors we examine include the nature of the post-verbal negator for *ne* deletion; the degree of specificity and restriction in the reference of the personal pronouns; temporal distance of the action and presence of a temporal adverb for the expression of the future tense; and the discursive function fulfilled by *like* and *comme*.

Our results reveal that those factors that entail increased exposure to French positively correlate with the students’ acquisition of a wider range of variants along the socio-stylistic continuum, particularly with the acquisition of non-standard mildly-marked variants. This suggests that the acquisition of socio-stylistic variation is highly dependent on the extent to which learners can target specific contexts for exposure and engage in conscious efforts to seek out a wider range of stylistic variants.

In the next phase of this research (2008) we plan to compare data obtained from further interviews with the 2005 1<sup>st</sup> year cohort reaching their 4<sup>th</sup> year with the 2005 results from data collected from the 4<sup>th</sup> year cohort. If the same trends are observed, we believe that our research will contribute to the on-going methodological debate (Labov, 1990) over the value of and relationship between synchronic and diachronic approaches.

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