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INTRODUCTION:  
THE ACQUISITION OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE<sup>1</sup>

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Short title: Acquiring Sociolinguistic Competence

## INTRODUCTION: THE ACQUISITION OF SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

In recent years, researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) have paid increasing attention to the sociocultural context of language learning. Studies have drawn from a variety of sociolinguistic frameworks to examine the relationship between second language (L2) speakers' multifaceted social identities and their opportunities for access to the target language (e.g. Norton 2000), gender and choice of code in bilingual contexts (e.g. Woolard 1997), the effects of gender and style on L2 speakers' choice among phonological variants (e.g. Major in press), language use in multilingual adolescent urban peer groups (e.g. Rampton 1995), and home language practices and minority language maintenance (e.g. Schechter and Bayley 2002). In pursuing a wide range of questions concerning second language acquisition and use, researchers have drawn upon theoretical constructs and research methods developed in various sociolinguistic subfields and allied areas, including language socialization (e.g. Bayley and Schechter 2003; Kramsch 2002), cross-cultural communication (e.g. Cameron and Williams 1997), and conversation analysis (e.g. Markee 2000). Indeed, some scholars have called for a reconceptualization of SLA research to redress what they see as the 'imbalance between cognitive and mentalistic orientations, and social and contextual orientations to language' (Firth and Wagner 1997: 295).

In addition to studies that employ various qualitative approaches, such as many of those mentioned above, a considerable number of studies have adopted

the methods of data collection and analysis developed by William Labov and others in variationist sociolinguistics. These studies have attempted to account for the variable production of second language learners and to elucidate how investigations of variability in learner speech can expand our knowledge of the second language acquisition of forms and structures that are usually regarded as obligatory in the target language (e.g. Bayley and Preston 1996; Wolfram 1985; Tarone 1985; Young 1991), as well as target language patterns of variation (e.g. Adamson and Regan 1991). A full discussion of work that combines insights from sociolinguistics and SLA is beyond the scope of this introduction (but see Young 1999 for a recent review of sociolinguistic approaches to SLA). Here we focus on studies that have adopted the methods of mainstream sociolinguistics in the Labovian tradition and, more briefly, work in conversation analysis.

#### VARIATIONIST STUDIES

Variationist studies of second language speech have shown that variation in interlanguage, or learner speech, like variation in native speech, is highly systematic and subject to a range of linguistic and social constraints. For example, in an early study, Wolfram (1985) showed that past tense marking in the English of Vietnamese immigrants in the Washington, DC area was systematically constrained by saliency, defined as the difference between the base and past tense forms of the verb, and, in the case of regular past tense verbs, by the features of the surrounding phonological environment. A few years later, Young (1991) used variable rule analysis to study plural marking by adult Chinese learners of

English. His results showed that interlanguage plural marking is subject to a complex set of constraints including proficiency level, redundant plural marking, the syntactic function of the NP, and the features of the preceding and final segments. Bayley (1994) also used variable rule analysis to examine data from Chinese learners of English living in California. Multivariate analysis showed that past tense marking, like plural marking by the speakers in Young's study, was significantly affected by a range of linguistic and social factors. When describing past events, speakers were more likely to use past tense forms with perfective verbs and to use bare forms with imperfectives. In addition, as in Wolfram's (1985) study, past tense marking was affected by the saliency of the difference between the past tense form and the base form, with more salient forms more likely to be marked. Finally, the speakers' social networks played a significant role. Speakers with mixed native English-speaking and Chinese social networks were more likely to use past tense forms than those whose social networks were restricted to other speakers of Chinese.

Studies such as Wolfram (1985), Young (1991) and Bayley (1994), among others, have established that the variation we see in learner speech is systematic and can be analyzed in much the same way that sociolinguists have long examined native speaker variation. Other studies of L2 variation have addressed a number of key questions in SLA. For example, Berdan (1996) raised questions about the concept of fossilization in his reanalysis of Schumann's (1978) study of negation by Alberto, a 'fossilized' Spanish-speaking learner of English. To take

another example, in a recent study of the acquisition of Hungarian verbal morphology by Chinese learners living in Budapest, Langman and Bayley (2002) show that, contrary to claims by Bybee (2002) and others, frequency cannot fully account for the production of untutored language learners, while Bayley and Langman (in press) and Regan (2002) provide evidence that individual patterns of variation are consistent with group patterns.

Recent work on interlanguage variation, particularly research that focuses on the acquisition of target-like patterns of variation, expands the domain of sociolinguistics by focusing on populations that use more than one language in day to day interactions. Moreover, by focusing on the acquisition of variable patterns, recent work on variation in SLA necessarily moves beyond a focus on the acquisition of the standard language to a consideration of the vernaculars that constitute the input for most immigrants who are acquiring a second (or nth) language with little or no formal instruction. Finally, recent variationist work provides a measure of the extent to which immigrants are adopting the norms of the target language community, as Wolfram, Carter, and Moriello show in their article in this issue on the acquisition of U.S. southern dialect features by Latino immigrants in North Carolina.

#### CONVERSATION ANALYSIS

The application of conversation analysis (CA), originally developed as a subdiscipline of sociology, to problems in SLA is a relatively new and somewhat

controversial area of research (Markee 2000). Studies of L2 interactions using the methods of CA differ radically both from traditional SLA studies in the Chomskyan tradition by focusing on the turn as the unit of analysis and concentrating on the details of moment by moment interaction, and from SLA studies in the variationist tradition by eschewing a priori social categories such as those of gender, social class, and proficiency level and by a much more fine-grained analysis of the talk in progress as the context of interaction.

Proponents of the use of CA to study SLA argue that this approach offers a number of advantages. Markee (2000), for example, suggests that CA enables us to gain a fuller picture of learners in interaction than traditional studies of interaction and language learning because it not only deals with typical cases but also accounts for outliers. Markee also argues that CA can help ‘to refine insights into how the structure of interaction can be used by learners as a means of getting comprehended input and producing comprehended output’ (2000: 44) and that it is ‘capable of identifying both successful and unsuccessful learning behaviors, at least in the short term’ (2000: 161). Moreover, as Schegloff, Koshik, Jacoby and Olsher (2002) observe, the techniques of CA are especially valuable for the examination of interactions in oral assessments, as seen in the work of He (1998), among others, while work on how social interaction organizes grammar, such as that contained in Ochs, Schegloff and Thompson (1996), promises insights into the relationship between the details of conversational interaction and learners’ developing grammars. Finally, work in CA, as Young and Lee show in their

contribution to this issue, promises new insights into how learners acquire the ability to participate in conversations, not only as speakers, but also as active listeners who co-construct their interlocutors' turns at talk.

## SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE

### ACQUISITION AND USE

Taken together, the studies cited here advance our understanding of second language acquisition and sociolinguistics in several ways. First, many were conducted in the kinds of vernacular dialect communities where most second language learners reside. Second, while maintaining a focus on the linguistic aspects of second language acquisition, research in the variationist tradition has attempted to model the effects of the many social and individual factors that may facilitate or impede acquisition. Third, conversation analysis, as demonstrated in Young and Lee's contribution, offers a much more fine-grained analysis of context than is typical in variationist studies – or in studies of SLA generally – and promises insights into issues that have not often been addressed within mainstream SLA.

We turn now to a brief discussion of the articles in this theme issue, which constitute some of the most recent contributions to the growing interdisciplinary body of work on language in its social context and second language acquisition.

*Latinos in the American South*

The dramatic increase of the Latino population of the United States was one of the main stories coming out of the 2000 census. From 1990 to 2000, the number of people who claimed to speak at least some Spanish at home grew by 57 percent, an increase of 10,238,575 (United States Bureau of the Census 1993, 2003).

Moreover, Latinos are no longer confined primarily to the traditional areas of settlement in California, the southwest, and the northeast. Rather, Latino immigrants and their children now constitute a growing presence in areas that had previously experienced very little immigrant settlement. Walt Wolfram, Phillip Carter and Becky Moriello's study, 'New dialect formation in the American South: Emerging Hispanic English,' documents the linguistic consequences of this large-scale demographic shift. Focusing on Siler City, North Carolina, a community in which the Latino population has grown from three percent of the population in 1990 to more than 40 percent in 2000, and the much larger city of Raleigh, Wolfram et al. examine the extent to which Latino immigrants and their children are adopting features of Southern American English.

Through a detailed phonetic analysis of the /ai/ diphthong, Wolfram et al. found that the majority of Latino participants were reluctant to accommodate to the general Southern vowel system. Possible reasons for this lack of accommodation to the local norm included the insularity of newly formed ethnic communities, whose members have very limited interactions with the long time residents of the area, as well as the constant influx of Spanish-speaking

newcomers, whose presence contributes to maintaining Spanish as the main means of communication within the Latino community. The authors also note that most of the ESL teachers who serve as models for Latino immigrants not do themselves follow the local Southern norm. In this respect, the results reported by Wolfram et al. align themselves with the results reported in the contributions by Mougeon et al. and Dewaele in their articles in this issue. That is, for many of the participants in Wolfram et al.'s study, the classroom may well be the primary source of English input. Since vernacular variants are relatively rare in this environment, the lack of convergence with local vernacular norms is to be expected.

*The Acquisition of a Native-Speaker Strategy by English-Speaking Learners of Japanese*

In the second article in this collection, Dennis Preston and Ayako Yamagata investigate how L2 speakers behave in relation to a native speaker strategy. In 'Katakana representation of English loan words,' they examine how native English-speaking learners of Japanese handle the consonant gemination that occurs after obligatory vowel epenthesis in English CVC loan-words in Japanese ('put' becomes 'putto'). The questions asked involve how closely L2 speakers of Japanese approximate the behavior of native speakers. Unlike the articles on French included in this volume, which deal with the acquisition of variable processes and forms, Preston and Yamagata examine the acquisition of what is categorical in the target language. The authors present evidence that a variable

account deals more fully with the complexity of the data than Broselow and Park's (1995) account of mora conservation. The variationist study takes account of the multiple factors which affect this phenomenon such as the native language, the target language and universal tendencies (as well as settings) that modify both perception and output. Preston and Yamagata propose that current phonological representations, while successful on many levels, still neglect the ineluctable fact of inherent variability which seems to variationists working on SLA as much part of L2 speech as of native speech. This study is an example of a variationist approach that provides a more satisfactory account of some aspects of second language acquisition than are provided by other approaches, and thus it contributes to the general debate about competing models of second language acquisition.

Preston and Yamagata's study indirectly adds to the growing investigation of the acquisition of variable as opposed to categorical processes and forms. With classroom study, learners' performance with loan words gets closer to the nearly categorical performance of native speakers. Other research, including the articles by Mougeon et al. and Dewaele in this issue, however, suggests that classroom study is not sufficient for learners to acquire target-like patterns of variability. It may be that what is categorical in NS speech is more easily acquired in the classroom than what is variable. The acquisition of NS patterns of variability appears to require prolonged contact with native speakers.

*Becoming an Active Listener in an L2*

Richard Young and Jina Lee's contribution, 'Identifying units in interaction: Reactive tokens in Korean and English conversations,' employs the analytical techniques developed in conversation analysis to examine an aspect of sociolinguistic competence that has seldom been treated in the SLA literature – the skills necessary to participate as an active listener in conversations with native speakers (but see LoCastro 1987 and Ohta 2001: 179-231 for studies of learners of Japanese as an L2). They note that active listening, or participation in a turn in progress, requires that listeners choose appropriate words and vocalizations and use these items at appropriate points in the turn. The authors first analyze monocultural conversations between pairs of American women and pairs of Korean women to document the different interactional resources available to speakers of English and Korean. This comparison provides a baseline for the study of potential differences in speakers' participation in turns in progress in cross-cultural conversations. Then, to understand the degree to which Korean speakers of English as an L2 approximate native speaker conversational norms, Young and Lee compare the use of 'reactive tokens' (Clancy, Thompson, Suzuki and Tao 1996), vocalizations such as 'mm' or 'uhhuh' and words such as 'yeah,' 'okay' and 'wow,' in a series of conversations between pairs of American and Korean women.

Young and Lee show that Korean and English differ in their preferred positions for reactive tokens. For example, they observe that, as a result of the

agglutinative structure of Korean, reactive tokens may occur in the middle of words, in contrast to English, where such tokens most often coincide with syntactic, prosodic, or pragmatic boundaries. Moreover, as a consequence of the open syllable structure of Korean, reactive tokens in Korean are often longer than they are in English. As Young and Lee note, when native speakers of Korean do participate in English conversations, their second language does not provide the possibility of lengthy reactive tokens. However, data from cross-cultural conversations suggest that Korean speakers use more reactive tokens than native speakers of English. Of particular interest for the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence is the fact that in conversations with native English speakers, Korean speakers utter response tokens at positions that are not typical intra-turn boundaries in NS English, although, like native English speakers, they also utter reactive tokens at typical English boundaries,

Young and Lee's article is exploratory and suggests a number of possible directions for further research. For example, the study is limited to a small number of women's conversations about a single topic, popular films. Although Coates (1998) has argued that differences in the use of reactive tokens, or minimal responses, result from differences in context rather than from gender differences, it would nevertheless be useful to study Korean men's use of reactive tokens in English conversations, as well as to study both men's and women's response patterns in a different contexts and in conversations about a variety of topics. In addition, research might also address the use of response patterns by speakers of a

wider variety of languages to distinguish which patterns are characteristic of second language speakers in general and which are characteristic of speakers of different languages. Third, investigations of the reactions of native speakers to the different patterns that characterize non-native speakers' co-construction of turns would also be highly useful. In summary, the new strand of research to which Young and Lee's article contributes offers numerous opportunities for interdisciplinary research on second language and bilingual speech in its immediate social and linguistic context.

*The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence in Canadian and Continental French*

The final two articles are representative of the rich tradition of sociolinguistic studies of L2 French that has emerged in recent years. In 'The learning of variation by French immersion students from Toronto, Ontario,' Raymond Mougeon, Katherine Rehner and Terry Nadasdi offer a synthesis of their large-scale study of variation in the French of Canadian immersion students. Mougeon et al. focus on determining to what extent students in immersion programs have acquired patterns of variability that characterize spoken Canadian French. That is, to what extent have students in these programs acquired the sociolinguistic competence necessary to engage in a variety of interactions, both formal and informal, with native speakers? Moreover, in contrast to many studies of L2 variation, the authors examine a range of variables at different linguistic levels. Mougeon and his colleagues also distinguish between variables that are more

socially marked and those that are less socially marked in native speech. This distinction, combined with an analysis of the types of input learners receive from teachers and textbooks, explains why learners approach native patterns with some variables but not with others. Many SLA studies equate the target language and the standard language. Mougeon et al.'s work, however, is a welcome exception. They compare their work with Mougeon and Beniak's (1991) study of spoken vernacular Canadian French and discuss the interaction between the vernacular variety and the language of the immersion students.

The final article, by Jean-Marc Dewaele, deals with the acquisition of continental French and contributes to the already substantial literature on *ne* deletion by L2 speakers. Unlike the existing work on this variable, here the focus is on the extralinguistic factors. The study examines omission rates of *ne* in conversations between 73 native and non-native speakers of French and provides a comprehensive review of studies of *ne* deletion to date. Of the extralinguistic factors considered, age and gender had little effect, but the speakers' degree of extraversion, their frequency of use of French, and the native/non-native status of their interlocutors affected the omission of *ne*. Non-native speakers interacting with native speakers omitted *ne* more frequently than when they interacted with other non-native speakers. The results for the effect of the interlocutor in Dewaele's study provide additional evidence for the importance of this factor, which Young (1991) and Bayley (1994) also discussed in studies of Chinese speakers of L2 English. The issue of extraversion, already treated by Dewaele and

Furnham (1999), is confirmed here as an important factor in *ne* deletion. Dewaele explains this by the fact that extraverts are ‘risk takers’ and ‘they dare to use informal variants’. Evidence that convergence takes place with the native speakers during conversation further refines the situation of *ne* deletion in general within Accommodation Theory, an issue previously raised by Regan (1996).

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Clearly no single theme issue could do justice to the full range of studies that combine insights from the many branches of sociolinguistics and second language acquisition. The articles in this collection, however, cover a broad range of topics in a variety of sociolinguistic contexts, from the study of an emerging dialect of English in an immigrant community in the American South to the examination of the acquisition of a French sociolinguistic variable by university students in Britain. The articles deal with central issues in second language acquisition, and they do so by maintaining a focus on language, while at the same time providing richly contextualized views of language acquisition and use.

The articles in this issue, as well as the work reviewed earlier, provide ample evidence that sociolinguistically-oriented studies of SLA may expand our understanding both of sociolinguistics and of second language acquisition. However, much remains to be done. We suggest that three areas of research offer particular promise: 1) the development and operationalization of a psycholinguistically adequate model of second language variation and its

relationship to language acquisition; 2) studies that combine ethnographic and variationist analysis; 3) linguistically-focused accounts of the role of gender in SLA. We will briefly discuss each of these areas.

First, as Preston (2000, 2002) has argued, we need a psycholinguistically adequate account of how L2 speakers acquire target-like patterns of variation, as well as a psycholinguistically plausible account of how speakers move from variable to categorical use of L2 structures. Using data from the study of katakana representation of English loan words reported on in this issue, Preston (2000) has demonstrated how a model that takes account of the multiple factors, both linguistic and sociocultural, that influence a speaker's selection of a linguistic form provides a more plausible account of SLA than accounts that fail to allow any place for performance data or for sociocultural factors. The task now is to operationalize, test and, if necessary, modify the constructs that Preston has proposed based on additional types of data representing a range of linguistic levels, as well as a range of different languages.

Second, recent studies that combine ethnographic and variationist analysis (e.g. Eckert 2000; Zhang 2001) suggest another promising line of research in SLA. Although a number of important studies of second language learners (e.g. Norton 2000) have used ethnographic methods to gain rich insights into speakers' experiences in acquiring a second language, few studies have combined the intensive ethnographic study and linguistic analysis that characterizes some of the

best current research in quantitative sociolinguistics (but see e.g. Tarone and Liu 1995). In SLA, studies that combine variationist and ethnographic analysis, which are necessarily longitudinal, not only promise a better understanding of the development of learner competence over time; they also offer the potential for overcoming some of the difficulties associated with assigning speakers to predetermined social categories, e.g. native or non-native speaker (cf. Atkinson 2002; Firth and Wagner 1997). Most importantly for SLA, such studies have the potential to focus on the second language speaker as a multi-dimensional language user while at the same providing solid linguistic evidence of acquisition.

The role of gender in SLA is a third research area that offers particular promise and, given the range of topics covered in recent research on language and gender, one where we can outline only a few of the many possibilities for future work. Recent studies have examined the role of gender in a range of second language and bilingual contexts, including, for example, conversations between bilingual couples (Piller 2002), language use in intermarried families (Okita 2002), and the relationship between gender and acquisition in classrooms and communities (Pavlenko, Blackledge, Piller and Teutsch-Dwyer 2001). Nevertheless, there is a great deal of research to be done. For example, we have learned a considerable amount in recent years about how speakers use linguistic variants to express gendered identities in different contexts (e.g. Kiesling 1997) and, as we have noted, several SLA studies have also dealt with this topic (Adamson and Regan 1991; Major in press). However, there is still more to learn.

Mougeon et al. in this issue, for example, describe how French immersion students use certain mildly marked variants, but either avoid or fail to acquire more strongly marked vernacular variants. Does gender have a role in the process? In addition, how do second language learners, whether in French immersion classrooms or elsewhere, deploy the sometimes limited L2 resources at their command to enact gendered identities and how does this affect learning? How do the gendered identities that target-language societies present to L2 learners, and learners' acceptance or rejection of those roles, impact on acquisition? Finally, how do gendered patterns of participation in the target-language society affect learners access to different registers and hence their patterns of acquisition? Studies of the types of questions posed here not only have the potential to enhance our understanding of SLA, but also to advance sociolinguistic inquiry by examining how people come to acquire sociolinguistic competence in more than one language and how they deploy their linguistic resources in day to day interactions in the multiple speech communities to which they belong and to which they aspire.

NOTES

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