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*The Acquisition of sociolinguistic native speech norms: effects of a year abroad on L2 learners of French*

©Dr. Vera Regan; French Department; University College, Dublin  
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## **Introduction**

One of the perennial debates in language teaching is the one about the benefits, or otherwise, of time spent abroad -- learning the language while immersed in the target speech community. After all, as Gardner (1979) says, in acquiring a second language "the student is faced with the task of not simply learning new information (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc) .. but rather of acquiring symbolic elements of a different ethnolinguistic community". To what extent is this process facilitated by living in the target language community? This article reports a study which provides concrete empirical data on the effects of such experiences on the language learning process.

This sociolinguistic study of second language acquisition tries to investigate just what is the process of the acquisition of symbolic elements of another ethnolinguistic community. It is a study of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence and focuses on the acquisition of a particularly sensitive sociolinguistic variable which is invested with powerful symbolic significance by the native speech community.

The study takes a "language in context" perspective and sees second language acquisition as a process which happens in a social context. The approach of Giles and Coupland (1991) is used, which considers speakers as "actors in a dynamic social relationship rather than as static individuals". This view seems pertinent in the case of second language learners who spend time in the native speech community. These speakers are likely to want to integrate into this particular society. It is difficult to ignore the effect of that society on nonnative speaker usage

and it seems that one of the important facets of second language learning for many learners is the acquisition of those elements which promote this integration. It could be said that there is a constant two way interaction between speaker and the native speech community.

A variationist perspective is an approach which pays attention to areas of acquisition which are unavailable to most other research approaches in second language acquisition. Where other approaches can tell us about general directions, variation work has access to the detail of the learner's grammar. It can reveal the detail of the grammar of the speaker. In this instance, for this study, the learners grammar can be compared to the native speaker's grammar and the relationship between the two can be explored.

Young (1991) proposes that learners must first acquire developmental competence, that is the structural elements of a language, before they can acquire sociolinguistic competence. This is supported by Adamson (1988), who finds that style shifting (one indication of sociolinguistic competence) happens for the learner not in the early stages but later, when basic grammatical elements have already been acquired. The present study will focus, then, on advanced learners and their acquisition of sociolinguistic competence during a prolonged stay in a francophone country.

Many studies find that advanced learners abroad do not seem to make major advances on the structural level of their linguistic development, but they do nevertheless seem to improve in some indefinable way. This improvement may be due to many things: fluency, pragmatic knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge, or cultural knowledge. Much of the work so far on study abroad (Moehle and Raupach 1983, DeKeyser 1991, Huebner 1991, Guntermann 1992 and Freed 1994) draws similar conclusions. Many found that advanced students did not seem to make important changes on the structural level of language, but rather changed in relation to those aspects of communication which can be termed sociolinguistic competence. These skills seem to have an effect on the perception of the speaker by natives. It also seems that

there is, as well as this general change, much individual variation amongst learners. Freed (1994: 12-13) also points out: "the findings from the studies to date tell us little about actual language use and are therefore of preliminary, but limited value. No study has yet described, with any great precision, a range of linguistic variables (phonological, syntactic and/or semantic), sociolinguistic and discourse features, that may be influenced as a result of a study abroad experience."

The present study seeks to address some of the issues raised by the results of previous studies of the year abroad. Can one discover what exactly constitutes the difference which seems to be felt strongly, if intuitively? If there is not a perceptible difference in control of structural elements, but there is felt to be a difference anyhow, can we measure it in any way? (see Brecht, this volume)

The use of language by second language learners is addressed here. The acquisition process of 6 advanced Irish learners of French L2 who spend an academic year abroad is examined. [1] The study focuses on one sociolinguistic variable: deletion of *ne* the first particle of the negative in French, and how usage of this variable is affected by their stay abroad. This particular variable in French is an especially sensitive sociolinguistic marker of issues of power and solidarity, hierarchy, intimacy, and even political orientation. A quantitative study would best arrive at a precise and detailed description of the changes which take place as a result of the stay in France. A second topic of interest for this study is the question of how much individual variation there is among the speakers in relation to this variable, and how this is affected by the stay abroad.

## Negation in French

### *Variation in ne deletion in native French*

Negation in the verb phrase in French is a variable element in French morpho-syntax. The negative is formed by a particle on either side of the verb: a proclitic *ne* and a marker of general negation: *pas* or *plus, jamais, rien, personne* and some other lesser used ones..

Examples of negatives taken from the corpus of the nonnative speakers studied here were:

*Ce (ne) était pas lui.*

*Ils (ne) veulent pas me donner l'argent.*

*Ca (ne) fait rien maintenant.*

*Ecoute, on (ne) va pas en prison.*

Variability in relation to this particular morpho-syntactic item has existed since the earliest stage of the development of the language. Throughout the history of French there has been a continual shift in marking negation, from one particle to the other. Latin *non* became Old and Middle French *ne*, with *pas* optionally, which became *ne* with obligatory *pas* in Classical French and in contemporary French. French today uses, in formal contexts, *ne.. pas*. In spoken language however complex sociolinguistic variation is correlated with variable degrees of deletion of the preverbal (and unstressed) *ne*. [2] It is suggested (Harris 1978, Kayne 1975 and Ashby 1976, 1981) that French is undergoing a process of cliticisation, where the loss of *ne* between subject and verb is leading to a fusing of clitic pronoun and verb into one form consisting of prefix and stem. On the other hand, there is much evidence that while *ne* seems to be increasingly deleted in apparent time, (e.g. age grading in France and universal *ne* deletion in Canada) [3], it is nevertheless maintained universally as a symbolic sociolinguistic indicator. Ashby's study (1976) of Malécot's Paris corpus shows that deletion in Paris is conditioned by grammatical, stylistic and social factors, and his Tours study (1981)

shows similar conditioning. Sankoff and Vincent (1977) find that the few tokens which did exist in their corpus of Canadian French correlated with stylistic register and topic. When talking about education, religion and such formal topics, people retained *ne* overwhelmingly.

Whether the variable behaviour of *ne* is seen as undergoing a change in progress, or is instead a stable sociolinguistic variable, it seems to be a highly productive sociolinguistic item which is exploited by the native speech community in the indication of issues of formality and power and solidarity. The research question posed then, in relation to second language learners learning French in the community, is whether they understand the sociolinguistic significance of this particular variable for the native speech community, whether they learn to use it while in the community and how their usage compares with native speaker usage.

#### *ne deletion in non-native French.*

There are relatively few studies of *ne* deletion in French Interlanguage (O Connor Di Vito, 1991, Trévis and Noyau, 1984 and Dewaele, 1992). Trévis and Noyau (1984) studied the French of 8 adult Hispanophones living in Paris. They carried out two types of interview; one formal and one informal. They found that there was indeed stylistic variation, but that only 3 out of the 8 speakers deleted more in informal style. The other speakers used more *ne* in informal style. In general, they found that some followed the native speech norm and used *pas* and no *ne*. Some transferred from Spanish and used *ne* and no *pas*. And yet some others seemed to follow French prescriptive rules and used both *ne* and *pas*. The individual variation was correlated with factors such as degree of schooling, length of language learning in France, attitude to French speakers, age of arrival in France. It was obviously difficult to control for variables such as effects of transfer, formal instruction and variable exposure to *ne* deletion in the input. Dewaele (1992) studied the Interlanguage of 21 Dutch learners of

French in relation to *ne* deletion. He found that variation between formal and informal style was limited and that the degree of omission of *ne* was largely less than in native French. He found inter-individual variation in relation to the sex of speaker, degree of extraversion, the type of input and finally, the use the speaker made of their Interlanguage. However these speakers, unlike those in the present study, were learning in a formal classroom situation in Holland and input was largely from French taught in this formal context; spoken by professors, audiovisual documents as written texts analysed in class. All of these sources would have provided more of the prestige variant, where *ne* is retained, than would native speaker input with its high *ne* deletion content.

### **Description of the study**

The subjects of the study are 6 university students who participated in a programme (Erasmus), funded by the European Union, which helps university students to spend an academic year in another European country. Five of the six were in universities in France, and one was in Brussels. During this year the students attended the regular courses at the university and got credit for these. They generally lived in university residences. There was a system in place in which the students were assigned a host French family which invited them on occasion to spend time in their home. This was taken up by the students with varying regularity. In general, the amount of contact with native speakers in interactive situations varied with the individual.

#### *The Irish linguistic situation*

Bilingualism and, frequently, multilingualism, is a perennial state for Europeans and is likely to become even more important with the dissolving of trade barriers in the European Community, increased economic and cultural exchanges with and within the Eastern bloc. For Irish people, unlike their American and British English-speaking counterparts, the

concept of bilingualism is not a particularly surprising one, due to their contact with and use of the Irish language. There are only small remaining pockets of Irish speaking areas on the west coast and an increasing but still small number of speakers on the east coast in the Dublin area. (Regan 1992). Although they do not use Irish much, it seems that Irish is very important for Irish people, and acts as a catalyst for language awareness (Singleton 1992). It appears, from a recent survey (O Riagain and O Gliasain 1994), that Irish is a very salient symbol of identity. It is seen as a badge of ethnicity and it creates an awareness of a second language and culture in Irish people from an early age. This may well sensitise Irish learners of foreign languages to the symbolic significance of language use. So that Irish people, as well as having motivation to learn other European languages for practical reasons such as employment, also, in theory, have a certain familiarity with the notion of multilingualism and multiculturalism.

## **Method**

To examine the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence of the speakers, a quantitative study, from a variationist perspective, was carried out. Labov's variationist model of language is explicitly a probabilistic, as opposed to a deterministic, one. Its purpose is to account for the dynamic nature of language. It is a particularly useful model for the representation and explanation of Interlanguage, which is generally agreed to be inherently variable and also systematic (Ellis 1985, Adamson 1988, Young 1991). Labov's description of native speech as "orderly heterogeneity" can also be applied to Interlanguage. The method used in the analysis of linguistic variation is variable rule analysis. The analysis of the L2 data in the present study was carried out using the Varbrul 2 computer program. This program is designed to analyse variable data by using the "maximum likelihood" method of estimating probabilities. It controls for skewing resulting from unevenness in factor distribution and resulting empty cells. The analysis is a procedure for discovering the relative influence of various factors



simultaneously on the production of a particular variant in speech. Data on each particular combination of factors are input into the Varbrul program and by estimating a maximum likelihood, the programme calculates the conditional probabilities for each factor. Each factor has a coefficient (p) attached to it. A p value greater than .50 indicates that the factor favours the production of a variable (*ne* deletion in this case), whereas a p value less than .50 indicates that the factor disfavours it. For this longitudinal study of Interlanguage, the aim was to carry out several runs on data from different stages to see if and which reweightings of these probability figures took place. The resulting figures would reflect developmental trends in the language development of the speakers, and thus provide reliable evidence for changes due to the period of time spent abroad. (See Guy 1993, for an explanation of the advantages of multivariate analysis for the analysis of native speech.) [4]

#### *Data collection*

The data for the study consist of controlled sociolinguistic interviews of between 45 minutes and an hour on average. The first interviews were carried out just before the students left for France and the second set took place just after they returned. These interviews were based on modules developed by Labov and covering topics thought to elicit spontaneous speech. These modules were adapted to the lives and situations of these speakers who spent a year abroad. They covered areas such as relations between anglophone and francophone speakers, life in the *cité universitaire* (the university "dorms"), crime in the streets in France, comparative French and Irish male-female relations and the classic Labov "danger of death" module. The interviews were carried out by myself. My relationship with the speakers began with the study; the speakers knew me to be a faculty member but did not actually take courses I taught. In short, the speakers had a casual relationship with the interviewer which resulted in spontaneous if slightly careful speech during the interview. As far as possible the interviews

were arranged to be relaxed in atmosphere – frequently over coffee. Even if what the speakers said was unclear at times, the interview was never interrupted for clarification. Labov's "channel cues" such as laughter were frequent indications of the spontaneity of the situation. These interviews were then transcribed in full and each token of *ne* was coded. A total of 626 tokens were used in the Varbrul analysis; 307 in the "before" data and 319 in the "after" data. The transcription was carried out following the methods developed for the transcription of spoken French by Blanche-Benveniste in Aix-en-Provence (Blanche-Benveniste C. and Jeanjean, C. 1986).

To use the program, one first specifies the factors which are hypothesised to constrain the variation. Following Ashby (1976, 1981) and Sankoff and Vincent (1980) in relation to native speech, and my own observations of nonnative language, the following factors were specified as independent factors hypothesised to affect *ne* variation: Style, Lexicalisation, Presence of Object Clitic, Subject, Verb Tense, Following Phonological environment, Preceding Phonological Environment, Syntactic Structure of the Verb, Clause Type. Table 1 displays the factor groups with their constituent factors and examples of each factor in the form of tokens taken from the corpus.

Table 1  
Factor Groups Hypothesised to constrain the probability of *ne* deletion.

Style	Monitored Casual	(formal) [5] (informal)
Following Phonological Segment	vowel consonant	<i>je n'ai aucune idée</i> <i>elle ne travaille plus</i>
Preceding Phonological Segment	vowel consonant	<i>je n'allais pas</i> <i>elle ne va pas en France</i>
Syntactic Structure of the verb	modal auxiliary copula main	<i>elle ne pouvait pas trouver</i> <i>j'ai entendu rien d'elle</i> <i>c'est pas moi</i> <i>j'aimais pas</i>
Clause Type	main subordinate	<i>je dis rien contre elle</i> <i>tout est bien s'il n'y a rien</i>
Subject	Pronoun full noun phrase	<i>je pourrais pas"</i> <i>les gens n'étaient pas contents</i>
Presence of Object clitic	Absence Presence	<i>je ne travaillais pas</i> <i>je ne l'aimais pas</i>
Lexicalisation	not a formula il n'y a pas je ne sais pas	<i>je ne voudrais pas sourire</i> <i>il n'y a pas</i> <i>je sais pas</i>
Individual	1. Cathy (C) 2. Donna (D) 3. Joy (J) 4. Judy (U) 5. Miles (M) 6. Sally (S)	

## Results

An analysis of the combined data set was carried out to ascertain whether the stay in France made a difference to *ne* deletion rates. One of the factor groups contained two factors: "Before" and "After". This shows the probability figures for deletion rates from before the period spent abroad and afterwards. It shows a dramatic rise in the rate of deletion. The input probability (p) for the rate of deletion in Time 1 (before the stay abroad) is .19, and for Time 2 (after the stay abroad) .80. In addition, the results show a widening and strengthening of the native speaker rule, which was already in place in Time 1.

In the following sections, the effects of individual factor groups which were found to be significant will be discussed. Wherever possible, that is, where comparable figures are available for native speaker speech in Ashby's study, these will be given for comparison sake.

### *Lexicalisation*

Whether the speaker uses a lexicalised phrase like *Je ne sais pas* or *Ce n'est pas* or *Il ne faut pas*, or, on the other hand, a non-lexicalised phrase, has a strong constraining effect on the deletion of *ne* (Table 2). This is similar to the behaviour of native speakers (Ashby 1981). Ashby gives probability figures for the retention of *ne*; he finds that for a non-lexicalised phrase the retention figure is .74, and for the lexicalised phrase they were: *ce n'est pas*: .27, *il ne faut pas*: .36, *je ne sais pas*: .44 and *il n'y a pas*: .59 (In my analysis of nonnative speech, all four of these phrases are collapsed into category "c"). The nonnatives deleted more in the lexicalised phrases. However, the nonnative speakers are overgeneralising. They have a slightly more pronounced rule than the natives. In addition, the constraint ordering remains the same after the stay in France: a lexicalised phrase still favours deletion more than a non lexicalised one in Time 2. In fact, after the period in France, the rule strengthens.

Table 2  
The contribution of Lexicalisation to *ne* deletion

Time of development	c (formula)	a (non-formula)
Time 1	.74	.37
Time 2	.77	.30

The overuse of these lexicalised phrases is probably due to the fact that they are frequent in the input and they tend to be learnt as unanalysed chunks. There is evidence that this happens both in first and second language acquisition. Wong-Fillmore (1979) tells us that the second language learner more easily learns a small number of frozen forms than a productive rule. So it may be that the learner finds it easier to produce these lexicalised formulaic forms. In addition, phrases such as [ epa] and [sepa] are popularly recognised stereotypes for *ne* deletion, and they are seen as such by the nonnative speaker. The learners see these as a useful pragmatic device and as highly productive, and, for this reason, produce them in great numbers in their speech. The striking quantity of nonnative use of these routinised formulas seems to confirm the claims of Nattinger and De Carrico (1992), that this behaviour demonstrates the pervasive role that ritualisation plays in language behaviour, as indeed, anthropologists argue it does in all human behaviours. Adamson (1990) introduces the notion of the prototype in relation to this phenomenon in language. For both Adamson and Nattinger and De Carrico, routinised formulas and other sorts of prefabricated language chunks seem to play a large part in both acquiring and performing language. These advanced second language learners are aware of the ritual value of such lexical phrases in native speaker speech, and for the reasons outlined above (ease and general symbolic power), tend to over use them. Their overgeneralisation of these phrases will be discussed later on.

### *Subject*

The type of subject used – whether it is a full noun phrase or a pronoun – is a very powerful constraint on the deletion of *ne*. Already a very strong effect before the stay abroad, the rule strengthens during this time. The speakers are using the native speaker rule here.

Table 3  
The contribution of Subject to *ne* deletion

	Pronoun	Full NP
Time 1	.53	.15
Time 2	.57	.02

The pattern for the role of subject in *ne* deletion is very similar in native speaker speech. (Ashby 1981). In Ashby's study, he subdivided grammatical subject into second negative, noun, none, non-clitic pronouns and clitic pronouns. The probability figures for retention of *ne* were: noun: .72, non-clitic pronouns: .43, clitic pronouns: .28, none: .68, and second negative: zero. For both natives and nonnatives then, when the subject is a full NP (e.g., *les hommes ne vont jamais au bal*), *ne* is much less likely to be deleted than when the subject is a pronoun (*je ne vais jamais au bal*), or a clitic (*ce n'est jamais comme ça*). This tendency may be related to the process of cliticisation which may be going on in contemporary French, wherein the clitic may be becoming bound to the verb stem. The effect of the preceding pronoun seems to favour the deletion of *ne*. Where the subject contracts to the verb, the presence of *ne* would prevent this and so it is preferentially deleted.

### *Following segment*

A following vowel disfavours deletion slightly. This is the expected direction and is in line with the universal tendency to reduce consonant clusters. This has been found, for example, by Greg Guy (1980), in relation to t/d deletion, and by Shana Poplack (1982), in

relation to s deletion. What is particularly interesting is the fact that the rule strengthens considerably from Time 1 to Time 2.. The difference increases strikingly and this is certainly due to contact with natives.

Table 4  
The contribution of Following Segment to *ne* deletion

(a) Following Segment: Manner

	Vowel	Consonant
Time 1	.40	.59
Time 2	.30	.68

(b) Following segment: Place

	Alveolar	Non alveolar
Time 1	.75	.41
Time 2	.52	.44

The alveolar favouring effect becomes weaker, after the stay in France.

*Effect of the verb on the deletion of ne*

This factor group was not significant for the Time 1 data (although this was probably due to too few tokens). In Time 2, deletion is favoured by auxiliaries and disfavoured by the main verb; for example, *j'ai pas vu ça*, but *je ne déjeune pas*. If the percentages for Time 1 were statistically significant, it would have suggested that the rule strengthens.

Table 5  
The contribution of Verb to *ne* deletion

	Aux	Main
Time 1	.54	.47
Time 2	.62	.37

The native speakers in Ashby's study retain *ne* more in auxiliaries (.63 and .54) and modals (.52) than in main verbs (.40). In this factor group, unlike the others, the constraint ordering for the nonnative speakers is different to the one for natives.

*Effect of Style on the deletion of ne*

The factor group Style was not statistically significant but this is most probably due to the number of tokens involved (since, when pre- and post-abroad data were combined, the factor group was significant). Table 7 shows that style has an effect on *ne* deletion, with monitored style favouring the retention of *ne*, and casual style deleting more. Not much change takes place from Time 1 to Time 2. The native speaker pragmatic norms in relation to negation are: "when you are being formal in French, you retain *ne*, and alternatively in casual speech, you delete." Ashby uses two measures of formality for his native speaker speech. For the first of these, "discourse setting", formal style retained *ne* .60 and informal retained .39. The second measure results from his proposition that the first half of an interview would produce more formal speech, whereas, when the speaker relaxed and felt more at ease as the interview proceeded, the second half would produce more informal speech. In this second measure, "locus in the conversation", he found that informal retained .47 and formal .52 (for a further discussion of native speaker usage, see Ashby 1981, 1976 and Sankoff and Vincent 1980). The nonnatives seem to understand the native speaker rule as the results of the Varbrul analysis show.



Table 6  
The contribution of Style to *ne* deletion

	Monitored	Casual
Time 1	.37	.61
Time 2	.43	.60

The learners delete more, in general, after the stay in France. Interestingly, they delete more in monitored style, after France, than they did before, in monitored style, and more than natives do in monitored style. It must be noted however that the figures for deletion found in Ashby's study may be reflective of a slightly careful speech style. French Canadian deletion rates are far higher at .89 (Sankoff and Vincent 1977), and Poplack (personal communication) finds .99 in the Ottawa-Hull corpus.[6] Contemporary casual speech in France may have much higher rates of deletion, particularly in relation to young speakers. So that the nonnatives may be closer to the contemporary native norm than it might appear.

In any case the learners seem to have decided that *ne* deletion is a badge of nativeness, and so, as for the lexicalised phrases, they overgeneralise its use. We can say that they are closer to the native speaker rule in relation to *ne* deletion than the speakers in Dewaele's study. This makes sense, as the Dutch learners, in general, were not exposed to native speaker usage to the same extent. In addition, the learners in the present study, after one academic year in France, have not quite learnt the native speaker norms, as they are over generalising. It could well be that after a further period in France, they would eventually nuance their frequency of *ne* deletion to approximate more precisely the native speaker norm.

### **Individual speakers**

To explore the experience abroad and the difference it made to the speech production of individual speakers in this study, it was necessary to group together 4 of the speakers. The Varbrul program requires at least some variation in order for analysis to proceed, and two

speakers did not delete at all before their stay in France. Therefore, in order to compare the significance of individual variation, it was necessary to exclude those two speakers from this particular analysis. However, when the data for Time 2 for all 6 speakers was analysed, it showed that these 2 speakers underwent a great change in relation to *ne* deletion. From zero deletion, Donna went to .22 and Joy to .39. So, for these 2 speakers (as for most of the other speakers), there was a striking increase in *ne* deletion.

Table 7  
Results for subset of 4 speakers

Individual	Time 1	Time 2
Cathy	.08	.31
Judy	.79	.93
Miles	.15	.39
Sally	.46	.30

It is apparent that there is great individual variation between the speakers. This may be due in part simply to the fact that there will always be variation in all sociolinguistic sampling. But there were also differences between the speakers' experience which would account for some of the variation. This information was elicited both by the interviews which contained much detail about the experience abroad and also by a questionnaire filled in by the students, after their return. Issues addressed in the questionnaire and the interviews included: number of years of study, previous trips to French speaking countries, place of residence abroad, (university residence, with a native family, separate apartment) amount of contact with natives, attitude to native speakers. Obviously, as the information relating to attitudes is self-reported, it is not reliable and in fact was not taken into account in any formal way in the study. However, the portrait of these individual speakers that was built up was informative.

Miles, who hardly deletes before he goes to France, had only been to France for a 3 week trip previously. His speech style was bookish and careful. He himself said that he was

particularly keen to make contact with native speakers. His rate of deletion increases during the stay abroad from .11 to .36. An interesting fact about this speaker is that most of his tokens of *ne* deletion are [ epa]. Virtually whenever he deletes, it is in this particular stereotypical phrase. He has adopted this native stereotype with great enthusiasm despite the fact that he is not generally a high deleter. He almost seems to use it also as a native sounding "filler" in his speech. He seems to be an example of the way second language learners use lexicalised phrases. In his case, as he is a low deleter in general, it seems to be used as a sociolinguistic marker to suggest nativeness.

Judy was a high deleter before her stay in France, (she had spent 3 months as an *au pair* in a French family, where she had learnt a lot of French). She was a highly motivated learner who wanted to become as proficient and native-like as possible. She felt that she had not had enough contact with natives during the academic year at a French university, and, for this reason, got a job in Paris after the university year had finished, and spent 3 months further there. Her rates of deletion went from .78 to .90.

Sally, who had been on some short exchange holidays previously and spoke with relative ease, felt she had not had a lot of contact with natives, and was the only speaker of the group who deleted less after the year at the French university. She went from .44 to .32 deletion.

Of the other 3 speakers, one, Donna, had never been to a French speaking country, then went to Brussels and had contact mostly with natives. She attended courses where she met only Belgian students and had lodgings with native French speakers. She went from zero deletion to .22. Cathy reported that she had spent a short period as an *au pair*, before the year in France, and that native speakers had commented that she did not speak enough in French. Before the year abroad, 2 speakers (Donna and Joy) did not delete at all and the third (Cathy) almost never did. To run the programme then, it was necessary to collapse the 3 speakers into one. The composite figure for the 3 low, or non deleters before the stay abroad was .01, and

the composite figure for the same three, after their year abroad, was .32. Since, after the year abroad, all the speakers did delete, they could be included in the Varbrul analysis as individuals (rather than collapsed, as in the pre-visit data).

An interesting fact, in relation to individual variation, is that while undoubtedly, it exists in relation to learners, in this instance we see that after the stay in France there is now less variation between individuals. They are much more similar in relation to this particular variable at least, after a year abroad. Now they are all deleting to a noticeable extent (though, of course, variation between them still exists).

A second point to be made about these learners that several of them actively sought contact with native speakers. Gardner (1979), in explaining accommodation for integrative purposes by minority groups to majority languages, says that these speakers will actively seek out contact with natives. The speakers in this study are very much in the position of the minority group here. Unlike some speakers who fossilize, such as Schumann's (1986) Alberto, these speakers wish for further integration into the French speaking community. Many professed a strong desire to live and work in France ultimately, at least for an extended period of several years. In addition, French as a second language does have prestige for the learner. It is perceived as at least as prestigious as their L1, a factor which is necessary for such accommodation to take place.

From these results, it may be that contact with native speakers and interaction with them is a crucial factor in the usage of these L2 learners, in relation to *ne* deletion. Those who had never been to France previously deleted not at all, and contact with natives during the year in France, increases their deletion rate substantially. On the other hand, the speaker who had had contact with natives previous to the year abroad, and who did not have much contact with natives during the academic year, actually decreased.

## **Discussion**

### *The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence*

From the empirical evidence produced from this analysis, we can draw several tentative conclusions about the effects of a year abroad on advanced second language learners. It seems that, in relation to negation, the stay in the native speech community makes virtually no difference to structural features in the learner language. The factors which conditioned the variable use of language by the learner remained more or less the same, as shown by the unchanging constraint ordering of factors within the factor groups. This empirical evidence seems to concur with other studies of advanced speakers, which find that periods spent abroad do not seem to greatly affect structural elements. Krashen and Seliger (1976) hold that environment alone does not seem to be sufficient for advanced speakers in the acquisition of grammar. They conclude that formal instruction is the most important determinant of performance for advanced students because it provides a structured environment for feedback. Freed's study (1990) also seems to point to the fact that for advanced learners, contact with natives does not seem to help with the acquisition of structural elements.

However, while contact with natives may not make a difference in the acquisition of structural elements, the present study shows that the effect of the year abroad is very striking in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. The rates of *ne* deletion more than doubles after the year abroad, which suggests that something important is happening in relation to the adoption of native speaker community speech norms. It seems as if at this stage the learner is sensitive to dialect issues in the second language and that his main work is on the horizontal axis in Corder's model outlined earlier. However, it also seems as though this might well be an intermediate stage in the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in relation to *ne* deletion is not complete. The learners have learnt

that it is a native-like thing to delete but they have not learnt the deletion rule as it is applied by the natives in relation to style. There is a slight tendency to delete more in informal style on the part of the nonnatives, but style is not nearly the constraint on *ne* deletion that it is for the native speakers. It would be interesting to see if further time spent in the community would result in a refining of the rule which would take it closer to the native speaker norm. In any case it looks as though contact with natives for advanced learners is necessary for the acquisition of a community dialect and sociolinguistic competence and ultimately integration into the native speech community.

### *Overgeneralisation*

In general, the nonnative speakers, while using the same variable rule as natives in relation to the deletion of *ne*, tend to overgeneralise. They do this in relation to style and their use of lexicalised phrases. As we have seen, in relation to monitoring, the learners delete more in formal style than casual (like the natives), but they delete more overall after the stay abroad, and they delete more in formal also afterwards than before.

The speakers' overuse of lexicalised phrases is interesting and may have something to tell us both about how learners learn, and indeed perhaps, how teaching could make use of this strategy on the part of the learner. It would seem to confirm the theories of Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) concerning language acquisition. It is now accepted that all learners go through a stage of using a lot of unanalysed chunks of language in certain predictable social contexts. It looks as though this use of chunks may well be useful for the learner not only developmentally, for the acquisition of syntax, but also as a device for the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence.

The speakers in the present study confirm the use of this prefabricated language as a device on the part of second language learners in general. In addition, this study shows the

development over a period of time of the use of these frozen forms and shows that advanced speakers also use this device. They continue to use it even as their overall development proceeds and, during the period abroad, they actually increase their rates of production of these lexicalised phrases.

## **Conclusion**

In general, this variationist study of second language acquisition has given us a picture of the grammar of the learner, including details of its variability. These details, which other approaches do not have access to, gives us the texture of this grammar. The value of this particular approach to second language data is that it gives us empirical evidence for describing the grammar and its evolution. The configuration of the grammar is seen in the constraint ordering which we find in the Varbrul analysis. Since the constraint ordering is the same as for the natives, we can safely assume that this is not simply due to universal tendencies. This particular constraint ordering derives from the underlying grammar of the speakers. In addition, this constraint ordering strengthens after the year in France: the native grammar is taking hold. These speakers are becoming more non-standard, due to contact with natives. They are acquiring the grammar of the native speech community. So, just as the normal French person has a variable system, we have empirical evidence of the second language learner also acquiring the details of variability, precisely in the drive towards integration into the native speech community.

### *Future directions*

The study has focused on one particular variable in second language speech and has followed its development through the year spent in the native speech community. While it limits itself to a close examination of one particular variable, it provides evidence for the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence and how it relates to the year abroad. The

quantitative analysis of the data shows that a period spent in the native speech community affects the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in an important way. It also seems that this is affected by the amount of contact with native speakers while abroad and that individual variation plays a role. The analysis provides results for the constraint ordering of factors for different stages in the acquisition of this native speaker variable rule. This permits us to put together a more complete picture of how second language learners acquire sociolinguistic native speaker community norms. In addition, these different stages in the route followed by the learner may provide indications of possible approaches to teaching for advanced learners. The scope of this preliminary study is limited, due to the small number of subjects. Clearly, larger scale studies are needed to confirm its findings. However, the results of this study can guide the design of such studies



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## Footnotes

1. The study actually contained 7 speakers. However one of these subjects spent the year abroad in a non French speaking country, so, for purposes of the present analysis, this speaker was excluded.

2. For a full description of *ne* variation over time, see Ashby (1981), Gaatone (1971).

3. Ashby (1981) shows that young people delete more than older ones, and Sankoff and Vincent (1977) find that in Canadian French the rate of deletion of *ne* is nearly 100%.

4. "When there are several different environmental factors affecting one linguistic variable, a series of tables showing these effects separately (e.g. the realizations of /r/ by sex, by social class, by speech style, etc.) can easily give distorted or even wildly misleading results if the data are not evenly distributed, a multivariate analysis will give more accurate results, because while computing the effect of one independent variable, it explicitly controls for the effect of all other known independent variables." (Guy 1993)

5. Monitored is used throughout to mean careful speech in formal style in the sense used by Labov rather than in Krashen's sense of conscious attention to form on the part of the L2 learner).

6. For a description of the Ottawa-Hull corpus, see Poplack (1989).