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Retention or omission of the *ne* in advanced French interlanguage: The variable effect of extralinguistic factors¹

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This article considers inter-individual variation in omission rates of the pre-verbal particle *ne* in 991 negations produced in conversations between 73 native and non-native speakers of French. It appears that both endogenous and exogenous extralinguistic factors are linked to omission rates of *ne*. Whereas age and gender were found to have little effect, the degree of extraversion of the speaker, the frequency of use of French and the native/non-native status of the speakers were correlated with omission rates. Among the exogenous factors it appeared that the composition of the dyad was linked to omission rates: non-native speakers interacting with native speakers omitted the *ne* more frequently than the non-native speakers in conversation with other non-native speakers. The theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Interlanguage variation, stylistic variation, *ne* deletion, French interlanguage, convergence

INTRODUCTION

The present study is part of the rapidly growing research strand in the field of second language acquisition studies that focuses on the acquisition of socio-pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence by advanced second language learners and users (cf. Bayley and Preston 1996; Dewaele and Mougeon 2002, 2004; Preston 1989, 2000; Rehner, Mougeon and Nadasdi 2003; Tarone 1997). Interlanguage (IL) studies have traditionally focused on the acquisition of invariant forms and adopted a diachronic perspective to examine systems evolving towards a target language (TL) norm. In the study of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence (defined by Lyster 1994: 263 as 'the capacity to recognize and produce socially appropriate speech in context'), synchronic or stylistic variation is the objective of the acquisition process (the ability to style-shift consistently and appropriately is one aspect of sociolinguistic competence). Researchers examine how learners acquire variable aspects of the TL (for an in-depth discussion see Preston 1996, 2000).

Patterns of interlanguage variation have been found to approximate the variation observed in native speech but only rarely to match it. Instructed second language users, in particular, seem reticent about using informal variants, using higher proportions of formal variants instead. It is not entirely clear to what extent L2 users (cf. Cook 2002) are able to distinguish between highly stigmatized informal variants and mildly marked ones, such as the omission of *ne* in French, which will be the focus of the present study. It is equally unclear when non-native speakers (NNSs) start copying linguistic usage of groups within the TL community they want to identify with. Preston (2001) refers to a 'funnel' of influences that characterizes variation. In the present study we will focus on the extralinguistic variables (both endogenous, i.e. internal to the speaker, such as psychological and biographical variables, and exogenous, i.e. external to the speaker, such as the situation) and determine their effect on omission rates of *ne* in a large corpus of non-native and native French.

The originality of the present research design lies in the fact that all participants, native speakers (NSs) and NNSs, interviewed each other, rather than being interviewed by a single researcher. This means that, in addition to the analysis of inter-individual variation linked to the speaker's characteristics, the effect of the interlocutor's characteristics on the speaker's speech can also be explored, that is, accommodation effects (cf. Bell 1984; Giles and Powesland 1975). Coupland and Giles (1988) noted that in order to promote social approval, interlocutors can use a strategy of speech convergence 'whereby dissimilarities between interlocutors' speech styles or codes come to be reduced' (1988: 176). Coupland later added that 'from the perspective of the social actor, what is being reduced is the cultural and social divide between identities, the social personas they can project through their stylistic selections' (2001: 197). It will be particularly interesting to see whether such an accommodation effect occurs in exolingual dyads, with NNSs converging with NSs (cf. Py 1986). Accommodation effects in omission rates may be linked to two other characteristics of the dyad, namely the age and the sex of the interlocutor in relation to the speaker's age and sex (cf. Bilous and Krauss 1988).

We begin with an overview of research on the negation in native French and on the omission of *ne* in French IL. After that we present the rationale for the present study and introduce six research hypotheses. The methodology of the study is presented in the following section. We then start the analysis with two extracts from the corpus to highlight the variability in the data and to offer an 'emic', or participant-relevant view: 'as a result of which the L2 learners' and users' voices and opinions (...) are heard on a par with those of the researchers' (Pavlenko 2002: 297). This is then followed by the quantitative analysis of the data. The findings are discussed and linked to the literature in the final section of the study.

OMISSION OF *NE* IN NATIVE FRENCH

Negation in French is expressed through a pre-verbal *ne*, a verb form, and one of many possible post-verbal items (*pas, jamais, plus, rien, personne, point . . .*). These post-verbal items used to have a much stronger semantic content and reinforced preverbal *ne* (Pohl 1975). They referred to the smallest possible unit linked to specific verbs. For the verb *manger* ('to eat') this would be *mie* ('crumb'), for *voir* it was *point* ('point'), for *faire* it was *rien* ('thing', later also 'nothing'). In modern French the post-verbal item *pas* ('step'), originally linked to the smallest unit of the high frequency verb *aller*, became dominant and its use was extended to most verbs. The weakening of the particle *ne* and the phrase-final stress on the post-verbal item made the *ne* more or less redundant (Englebert 1984; Ludicke 1982). Although still required in written speech and formal oral speech, *ne* became 'omissible' in informal speech (Coveney 1996: 30), hence becoming 'the best known sociolinguistic variable in contemporary French' (1996: 55). The particle *ne* has been described as a low-level morpho-syntactic variable, comparable to a phonological variable (Armstrong 2002: 154). The linguistic constraints linked to the deletion of *ne* are as complex as the ones weighing upon phonological variables, and they are connected with syntax and phonology. Armstrong (2002) observes that in everyday spoken French the particle *ne* is 'overwhelmingly deleted after clitic pronouns, with some variation due to phonological factors, but tends to be retained after full noun phrases and other complex syntactic constructions' (2002: 155). Among the other linguistic factors that constrain the retention/omission of *ne*, researchers cite the nature of the verb, type of utterance, nominal or pronominal subject, and lexicalized phrases (Ashby 1981; Coveney 1998). These factors fall outside the scope of the present study.

Omission rates of *ne* seem to be rising gradually across the francophone world, although there is considerable geographical variation (cf. Armstrong and Smith 2002; Ludicke 1982). Ashby (1981) found omission rates in speech of native French speakers from France that varied between 40 percent in a formal situation and 61 percent in an informal situation. Younger speakers omitted *ne* much more frequently, suggesting that the particle *ne* is on the verge of extinction. The trend was confirmed in a follow-up study by the same researcher on oral French, recorded in 1995, where omission rates for *ne* reached 80 percent (Ashby 2001). Coveney (1996), who recorded oral interviews with monitors working in a children's summer camp in Picardy in the 1980s, found average omission rates of 81.2 percent. Younger informants and informants from lower social classes omitted the *ne* more frequently.

Armstrong (2002) looked at the sociostylistic distribution of *ne* in the speech of young people from Dieuze, and found very high omission rates (98.9%) in informal speech styles and equally high rates (97.1%) in more formal speech styles. He found several examples of *ne* retention in the informal style that

seem to show that 'the tone of a stretch of discourse can vary independently of the informality of the speech style' (Armstrong 2002: 153). This micro-stylistic variation serves to signal formal episodes in informal style.

Omission rates are close to 100 percent in Quebec and Ontario (Sankoff and Vincent 1977, 1980).

OMISSION OF *NE* IN FRENCH INTERLANGUAGE

The development of negation in French ILs, and the variable omission of *ne* have been the focus of several studies (Benazzo and Giuliano 1998; Meisel 1997; Myles, Rule and Marsden 2002; Royer 2002; Véronique to appear). In the following overview, we will focus on the effect of extralinguistic factors in the omission of *ne*.

Trévisé and Noyau (1984) is one of the first studies of the omission of *ne* in French IL, building upon an earlier study by Dubois, Noyau, Perdue and Porquier (1981). The authors did not use a variationist approach and their data were not analyzed statistically. They interviewed eight adult L2 users (with Spanish as an L1) in two situations. First, they elicited spontaneous speech from their participants on a variety of topics. Second, they played the original recording back to the participants and invited them to comment on various aspects of their performance. The authors expected that the focus on metalinguistic topics would elicit a more formal style, that is with fewer omissions of *ne*. What they found, however, was non-systematic interstylistic variation and a large amount of inter-individual variation linked to the L2 user's linguistic history in French. Length of stay, age of arrival, attitudes towards the French, and frequency of use of French were all linked to omission rates.

One researcher in particular, Vera Regan, has dominated research on omission rates of *ne* in French IL. She studied Hiberno-English speakers who spent a year in France and francophone Belgium (Regan 1995, 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002, to appear). Her studies, based on a corpus gathered through classical sociolinguistic interviews, showed that speakers omitted the *ne* considerably more after their stay abroad (65 versus 38%). In other words, they were approximating the NS norm without quite reaching it. Regan (1997) observed a great deal of inter-individual variation in her data, especially in the corpus collected before the departure to France and Belgium. Some participants had overgeneralized the omission of *ne* after their stay abroad, which Regan interprets as a sign that they were eager to adopt TL sociolinguistic norms and 'sound native' in order to integrate into the TL community (1997: 206). The same participants were interviewed again one year after their homecoming and their omission rates had decreased to an average of 55 percent.

Rehner and Mougeon (1999) analyzed omission rates of *ne* in the oral IL of 40 Anglophone students from Grade 9 and Grade 12 in immersion programs

in Ontario. Mean omission rate of *ne* was 28 percent. Omission rates were found to be linked: to the language spoken at home (English L1 speakers omitted more than L1 speakers of other languages); to time spent in a francophone environment (positive correlation); to contact with French media; and to the amount of formal instruction in French (positive correlation). Social class and gender had weaker effects. The formality of the conversational topic did not significantly affect omission rates. The authors conclude that for students to start omitting *ne* they need either explicit instruction or opportunities for authentic interactions with native Francophones.

Thomas (to appear) carried out a longitudinal study of the acquisition of various sociolinguistic markers in French IL, including the omission of *ne*, in a similar population, namely Anglophone Canadian students. He compared the performance of a group of 48 students who spent their third year of university in France to that of a control group, 39 classmates who chose to stay and study at home, in southern Ontario, Canada. Performance was measured by means of a pre-test and post-test of oral proficiency, administered at the beginning and at the end of the academic year. The omission rates of *ne* for the experimental group were found to increase significantly from 21.3 to 27.3 percent after the study abroad, while the control showed an opposite pattern, with a significant decrease: from 32 to 19.7 percent.

Sax (2003) used a cross-sectional design to study the development of sociolinguistic competence among 35 American students at three different levels of French study, including a control group of five native speakers. She gathered her data through two role plays: one a simulated formal and, the other, an informal situation. A VARBRUL analysis revealed that time spent in a French-speaking environment was the most significant factor for the omission of *ne*. Learners who had spent little to no time abroad had an average omission rate of 3 percent in both the informal and the formal situation. Learners with between two and 5.25 months abroad had an average omission rate of 25 percent in the informal and 23 percent in the formal situation, and learners who had spent between 8.5 months and four years abroad had a 75 percent omission rate in the informal and 63 percent in the formal situation. It also emerged that learners with more years of pre-university French study were less likely to delete *ne* than learners with fewer years of pre-university study. Sax suggests that more formal instruction may lead to higher levels of linguistic prescriptivism. These findings are particularly interesting because they show how prolonged authentic use of French with NSs triggers the development of stylistic variation. The grammar of those students who had never been abroad is characterized by a complete absence of stylistic variation, with an identical omission rate of 3 percent in both the formal and informal settings. The intermediate group with between two and five months of experience abroad, omit *ne* more frequently, but the stylistic variation is not yet statistically significant. Those students who spent the most time abroad display

not only higher levels of omission but also significant stylistic variation, with a 12 percent difference in omission rates between the formal setting and the informal setting. Finally, Sax found that omission rates and stylistic variation were higher for the five NSs compared to the group of learners. The NSs omitted *ne* in 88 percent of the cases in the informal situation and in 54 percent of the cases in the formal situation.

Dewaele and Regan (2002) analyzed omission rates of *ne* in a cross-sectional corpus of oral IL of 27 Dutch L1 students at the Free University of Brussels. Participants were interviewed by the first author in an informal and a formal (oral exam) situation. A non-significant difference was found between the individual omission rates in the formal situation (mean = 12%, SD = 13) and the informal situation (mean = 15%, SD = 12) which was interpreted as an illustration of the incomplete grasp of sociolinguistic rules in the TL by the learners. An analysis of individual variation patterns showed that omission rates decreased in the formal situation for a majority of participants but that the opposite pattern emerged for a number of participants. An analysis of the independent variables linked to omission rates of *ne* led to the following findings: length of formal instruction in French had no effect but the amount of active use of French outside the classroom and the amount of exposure to French through radio and television were positively correlated with omission rates. The degree of extraversion of participants was also found to be marginally linked to omission rates of *ne*. Gender, however, had no direct effect on omission rates. Another striking finding was the high level of inter-individual variation. This could be due to a so-called U-shaped development of the omission of *ne* in French IL. Beginning and intermediate learners might use the more salient post-verbal particle to express negations. The absence of *ne* in their negations would thus not be the result of a conscious decision to omit but rather an absence caused by incomplete grammatical knowledge. At a following stage, learners may grasp the morpho-syntactic complexity of the structure of negation in French and produce both the preverbal and post-verbal particles categorically. Only at the highly advanced stage do learners reach a level of sociolinguistic competence that allows them to realize that the particle *ne* is omissible. As groups of learners are rarely homogeneous in terms of development, it is likely that different informants omit for different reasons, hence the non-linear increase in omission rates. A similar developmental pattern was also discovered in the variable use of the pronouns *nous* versus *on* (Dewaele 2002b).

Coveney (1998) argued that learners may be aware of sociolinguistic variation of *ne* but that this knowledge only transpires at later stages of development. Using an 'Intuitions Elicitation Test', he found that highly advanced English learners of French outscored NS of French in identifying the linguistic constraints that determine the use of *ne* (Coveney 1998: 183). Coveney speculates that very advanced learners attach particular attention to form and monitor their speech more closely than do NSs.

To sum up, apart from the linguistic factors, the following endogenous factors have been linked to omission rates in French ILs: L1 background and proficiency; frequency of use of French; length of stay in a francophone environment; amount of exposure to French on TV and radio; length and intensity of formal instruction in French; and degree of extraversion of the speaker. Formality of the situation and formality of the topic are the most salient exogenous factors determining omission rates.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

This study, based on an extensive corpus of IL data, investigates the following hypotheses:

1. Female and older speakers will have lower omission rates of *ne*.
2. Extraverts will have higher omission rates of *ne*.
3. NSs will have higher omission rates of *ne* than NNSs.
4. Frequent users of French will have higher omission rates of *ne*.
5. Participants in mixed dyads in terms of age and gender will have lower omission rates of *ne*.
6. NNSs interacting with NSs will converge on omission rates of *ne*.

METHODS

Participants

Seventy-three university students, 40 female and 33 male, aged between 21 and 65 (mean age = 35.6, SD = 10.3), contributed to the corpus examined here. They were enrolled in the BA French program at Birkbeck College, University of London, and had received between five and 11 years of instruction in French. Their French could be described as 'pre-advanced to advanced'. Thirty-eight participants were administered the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck and Eysenck 1984) in order to determine their degree of extraversion. All participants filled out a sociobiographical questionnaire that elicited information about age, gender, L1/L2/L3, native language, and frequency of previous use of French. Thirty-six participants reported that they rarely spoke French outside college, 17 reported doing so occasionally and 20 reported doing so frequently. Among those who used French frequently were the nine NSs of French. They had lived in London for at least four years. The NNSs of French mainly had English as an L1 ($n = 36$), followed by Spanish ($n = 5$), Mauritian Creole ($n = 5$), Italian ($n = 4$), Arabic ($n = 4$), Dutch ($n = 2$), and German ($n = 2$). Other participants were NSs of Farsi, Gouro, Lingala, Portugese, and Turkish. French was the L2 of 48 participants, English was the L2 of 14 participants. Other L2s included Armenian, German, Mandarin

Chinese, Gaelic, Kimbundu, Italian, Dutch, Spanish, and Punjabi. Data concerning the type of dyad the individual participated in were later added by the researcher: composition of dyad (mixed/same sex; different/same age group ('different' was defined as being more than 10 years younger or older than one's interlocutor)); and endolingual or exolingual interaction for the NNS only (NNS with NNS or NNS with NS).

Material

The corpus is based on one-to-one audio-recorded conversations between 73 participants including the researcher. One participant had two conversations with different interlocutors. Conversations were based on a list of 12 topics ranging from personal to more general. They included the composition of the family, motivation to study French, political beliefs, likes and dislikes in music, literature, food, danger of death experiences, best and worst holidays, and experience with muggings or burglaries. Participants assumed the role of interviewer or interviewee and changed roles after about ten minutes. The transcribed interviews amount to 13,050 words for the NSs and 66,234 words for the NNSs. Instances of omission and retention of *ne* in negations were singled out and omission rates were calculated for every participant. Out of a total of 991 negations, we identified 363 cases of omission of *ne*, and 628 cases of retention.

ANALYSIS

The following extract offers a glimpse of the interaction between Jean-Marc (the researcher) and 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:

Extract 1

- Henry: J'0aime pas j'0aime pas trop les cours de français parce que je trouve ça ennuyant.
- Jean-Marc: Pourquoi ?
- Henry: Parce que je sais déjà parler français assez bien mais euh c'0est 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.
- Jean-Marc: Ah oui.
- Henry: Mais je 0 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.
- Jean-Marc: Mmm.
- Henry: Et quand même il faut parler dans le registre soutenu et j'0 aime pas ça c'est tellement euh artificiel.
- Jean-Marc: Ah hmm.

- Jean-Marc: Vous n'êtes pas d'accord ?
 Jean-Marc: Haha.
 Henry: I don't like, I don't like the French courses very much because I find them boring.
 Jean-Marc: Why?
 Henry: 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 yes.
 Henry: 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.
 Henry: And still one has to speak in a formal register and I don't like that, it's so artificial.
 Jean-Marc: Ah hmm.
 Henry: Don't you agree?
 Jean-Marc: Ha ha.

This exchange is interesting for two reasons. First, as far as content is concerned, it highlights Henry's frustration at the lack of opportunity to use vernacular registers in French since his return to the U.K. He has obviously been told by teachers that these registers are not appropriate in the classroom. And yet, he wants to speak like a Frenchman, and he is clearly proud of his newly acquired knowledge of informal speech styles. In other words, he cannot use the language of the group of NSs he identifies with, and feels therefore unable to convince his interlocutors that his French IL has progressed considerably. Second, at a formal level, the exchange nicely illustrates Armstrong's (2002) description of micro-stylistic variation. The exchange is mostly a monologue by Henry, with occasional backchanneling from his interlocutor, and Henry omits *ne* five times in all five negations. The only retention of *ne* occurs in the last turn, which is pragmatically different from the previous ones, that is, a direct question by Henry to Jean-Marc. The retention of *ne* is combined with a polite third-person pronoun of address *vous*.

There are many more cases of variation in identical contexts. In the second example presented below James (Catalan and Spanish L1s) interviews Rachel (English L1) and asks her about her plans for the future. She uses exactly the same utterance at the beginning and at the end of her turn, and yet she omits *ne* the second time but not the first:

Extract 2

- James: Alors quel projet tu as à l'avenir avec euh, vers ce par rapport à ce que tu es en train d'étudier maintenant?
 Rachel: Je **ne** sais pas exactement. Je voudrais euh après la fin de la cours peut-être euh un emploi plus élevé que j'ai maintenant. Euh peut-être comme la

traduction ou ou pour peut-être, je sais, pour euh la euh pour un prof peut-être. Je 0 sais pas exactement.

James: So what project did you plan for the future with *er* in connection with what you're studying now?

Rachel: I don't know exactly. I would like after the end of the course maybe *er* a better job than I have now. *Er* maybe like translation or or for maybe, I (don't) know, for *er* the *er* for a teacher maybe. I don't know exactly.

The patterns of variation observed in the two previous extracts give a fair illustration of variation in the complete corpus which contains 991 negations, with 363 cases of omission of *ne*, representing 36.7 percent of the total. As the focus of our research is on inter-individual variation, we calculated individual omission rates. The average of individual omission rates in the corpus is 31.7 percent ($SD = 28.9$). Figure 1 offers a view of the distribution of the results along six frequency categories (0% omission, 1–20%, 21–40%, etc.). It is striking that 18 participants (i.e. a quarter of the total and all NNSs) do not omit *ne* a single time during their exchange and that as a consequence the distribution is skewed towards the lower omission rates (skewness value = .66, $SE = .28$). Yet, a one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test shows that the distribution is normal ($Z = 1.16$, $p = .13$), which means parametric statistics can be used.

In this first section we will analyze the link between omission rates of *ne* and endogenous variables (Hypotheses 1–4). A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a non-significant negative correlation between age of the participants and omission rates of *ne* ($r(72) = -.14$, $p = ns$). A t-test for equality of means revealed non-significant differences between omission rates of *ne* for the female participants and the male participants (see Table 1). Gender patterns within the native and the non-native group were similar. A Pearson correlation analysis revealed a marginally positive correlation between degree

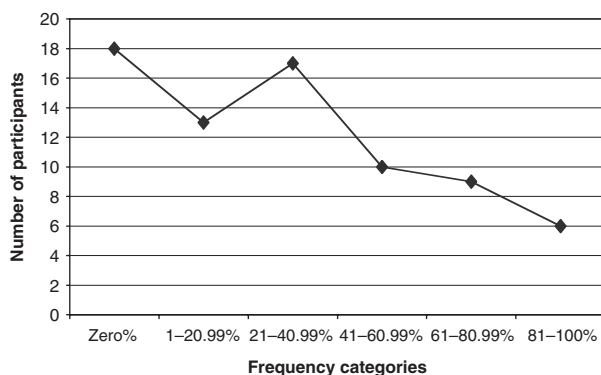


Figure 1: Distribution of participants in six frequency categories for omission rates of *ne*

Table 1: The effect of endogeneous variables on omission rates of *ne*

Independent variables		N	Mean (%)	SD	Statistical results
Gender	Female	40	32.7	29.9	$t = -.02, p = \text{ns}$
	Male	33	30.9	28.4	
Status of French	NS	9	63.7	27.4	$t = -3.9, p < .0001$
	NNS	64	27.2	26.3	
Frequency of speaking	Rarely	36	18.3	22.4	$F = 10.1, p < .0001, \eta^2 = .22$
	Occasionally	17	40.3	24.6	
	Regularly	20	48.7	31.9	

of extraversion and omission rates of *ne* ($r(37) = .31, p = .061$). As expected, the NSs were found to omit *ne* much more frequently than the NNSs (see Table 1). A look at the range shows that NSs vary between 27 and 100 percent omission of *ne*, while the NNSs vary between zero percent and 89 percent. A one-way ANOVA with frequency of speaking French as main independent variable and omission rates as dependent variable showed a highly significant effect: a higher reported use of French is clearly linked to higher omission rates (see Table 1).

To sum up, the findings of the study: reject Hypothesis 1 (female speakers and older speakers do not omit the *ne* significantly less than do male and younger participants); partially support Hypothesis 2 (more extraverted participants tend to omit *ne* more frequently); fully support Hypothesis 3 (NSs omit *ne* more frequently than NNSs do); and fully support Hypothesis 4 (the more one uses French, the more one omits *ne*).

We will now consider the link between the exogenous variables and the omission rates, that is dyad characteristics. A *t*-test for equality of means shows that the gender composition of the dyad has no effect on omission rates (see Table 2). Did the age of the interlocutor affect the participants' omission rates? A *t*-test for equality of means reveals that despite an apparently large difference in means, the age composition of the dyad has only a marginal effect on omission rates (see Table 2). The last exogenous variable to be considered is that of the endolingual or exolingual character of the interaction for the NNSs. Omission rates are significantly lower for the NNSs interacting with other NNSs, compared to the NNSs speaking with NSs (see Table 2). The results provide, as far as the link between the exogenous variables and omission rates is concerned, partial support for Hypothesis 5 (gender of the interlocutor is not significantly linked to omission rates, but there is a marginal effect for age of the interlocutor, with slightly higher omission rates in same-age dyads); and seem to support

Table 2: The effect of exogeneous variables (i.e. dyad composition) on omission rates of *ne*

Independent variables	N	Mean (%)	SD	Statistical results
Same gender dyad	49	31.1	28.8	$t = -.28, p = ns$
Mixed gender dyad	24	33.1	29.6	
Same age dyad	54	34.5	30.2	$t = 1.74, p = .090$
Different age dyad	19	22.4	23.9	
NNSs in endolingual exchange	65	24.5	25.6	$t = 2.3, p < .026$
NNSs in exolingual exchange	8	46.5	24.7	

Hypothesis 6 (NNSs speaking with NSs omit more than NNSs speaking with other NNSs). We are aware of the danger of running multiple t-tests on the same data, and we also realize that comparisons between sub-samples of unequal size require extra caution. The results should therefore be interpreted with care.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that omission rates of *ne* in conversations between a majority of NNSs and a smaller group of NSs are linked to both endogenous and exogenous extralinguistic factors. Socio-demographic variables do not seem to be linked to omission rates of *ne*, but personality and, more importantly, the individual's linguistic history (frequency of use of French) strongly affect omission rates. The gap between average omission rates of NSs and NNSs is considerable. These findings confirm earlier research on the omission of *ne* (cf. Dewaele and Regan 2002).

The effects of endogenous variables on omission rates uncovered in the present study confirm earlier research on sociolinguistic competence in IL, and on the omission of *ne* in particular. NNSs use informal variants less frequently than NSs, but prolonged contact with NSs of French and active use of that language stimulate the use of vernacular speech and lead to an increase in frequency of informal variants. Extraverts are known to be risk-takers and this seems also to have sociolinguistic consequences as they dare to use informal variants including omitting *ne* and using more colloquial words (Dewaele 2004; Dewaele and Furnham 1999, 2000). The most interesting finding in the present study is the accommodation effect in exolingual interactions, that is the fact that NNSs tend to converge with NSs in their omission of *ne*. The cultural and social divide between participants can be particularly wide in exolingual interactions. Not surprisingly, convergence goes in the direction of the NS who emerges as the linguistic expert in the dyad. All our participants were BA French students and the interactions

happened inside the university building. In other words, the NNSs were temporarily cast in the role of L2 *learners* rather than legitimate L2 *users*. They might have interpreted this particular social interaction as another learning experience; hence their desire to sound as much as possible like the NSs they were talking to, and converging maximally. One can assume that the NNSs could converge towards the NSs on a wide range of linguistic indices. The choice is probably more limited in practice. We failed to find NNS > NS convergence in the same corpus for two other variants, namely the choice of the formal address pronoun *vous* versus the informal *tu* and the proportion of colloquial words (Dewaele 2004 to appear). The age of the interlocutor was found to have a much stronger effect on the choice of *vous* than the difference in status (NNS/NS). It is possible that general use of informal variants that are more salient, or even stigmatised, might be perceived as being incompatible with NNS status, while other features might be too difficult to reproduce (phonological variables, complex syntactic or morphological forms).

NNSs may think that grammatical or sociolinguistic errors can ruin the effort of convergence, as an imperfect imitation of a feature of the interlocutor's speech might be interpreted by an NS as a divergence (albeit an involuntary one) and widen the cultural and social divide. The omission of *ne* must seem like a safe bet for the NNS of French: contrary to the choice of address pronoun or the decision to use stigmatised words, the omission of *ne* is only mildly marked. It is also relatively cost-effective; dropping a small element in the speech chain does not require a huge cognitive effort. Moreover, since it is omissible in the first place, there is less risk of 'getting it wrong' and losing face. It is impossible to know whether this convergence through omission of *ne* is conscious or not. It might shed light on the development of sociolinguistic variation patterns in advanced French ILs. Coupland and Giles (1988) similarly linked instances of synchronic variation with diachronic variation among monolingual speakers: 'interpersonal accommodative shifts are core mechanisms for understanding different long-term language/dialect changes of heterogeneous sub-sections of particular communities' (1988: 179). In the case of L2 users, one could argue that instantaneous convergence with an NS interlocutor who uses a particular linguistic item more or less during a single conversation means that the item has been noticed resulting in the 'selective internalization of language input in interaction with various L2 speakers' (Tarone 2002: 287). The NNS will keep this knowledge in mind for future interactions. It is possible that at that point a conceptual representation of omission patterns of *ne* is developed that includes a sociolinguistic value, in this case 'mildly marked'. A continuous exposure to omission of *ne* in daily input will allow the user to confirm that it is not a highly stigmatised variant and might therefore be used more frequently. This fits with the recent thesis that a learner's IL is passively and unconsciously derived from input frequencies (Ellis 2002). Language learners are sensitive to the frequency of

language constructions in all domains, including sociolinguistic variation patterns: 'The regularities of language emerge from experience as categories and prototypical patterns' (Ellis 2002: 143). The corollary to this phenomenon is that once the frequency of an item drops in the input, it will be followed by a significant drop in the output frequency of that item. Such a drop could be conscious or unconscious, but it is likely that it might also be forced upon him/her by teachers who do not tolerate some of the informal speech characteristics that were picked up abroad. Our participant, Henry, clearly stated his frustration at being forced to use formal registers in French again. It is likely that despite his desire to sound native, his omission rates would gradually decrease.

Regan (2002) discovered similar patterns in her corpus gathered at Time 3, that is, a year after the home-coming, after which the main contact with French happened in the classroom. While Regan insists that her participants had not lost their newly gained sociolinguistic competence in the TL and did not converge again (or regress) towards the classroom norm, the average omission rate for the group fell from 65 to 51 percent. She does not provide statistics that show whether this decrease is significant or not. It is possible also that once these L2 users were to re-immersé themselves in the TL community they would quickly revert to their previous omission rates of *ne*.

We argued in Dewaele and Regan (2002) that the development of the omission of *ne* follows a U-shaped pattern which might explain the large amount of variation in intermediate to advanced IL. Some learners omit because of incomplete grammatical knowledge, others omit because they discovered that it can be appropriate to do so. Yet, we find just as much variation, and an asymmetrical distribution of omission rates in the present corpus, with more advanced participants who have the necessary grammatical and syntactic knowledge to construct the 'embracing' structure of the negation correctly. Is the quarter of participants who used *ne – pas* categorically aware of the sociolinguistic rule that allows the omission of *ne*? Or did they judge the omission of *ne* inappropriate in that situation? Other participants, NS and NNS alike, omitted the *ne* to varying degrees. We found evidence of so-called 'micro-stylistic' variation (cf. Armstrong 2002) in the data of the NSs and the NNSs but we found as much evidence of apparently random variation.

We may conclude that 'To *ne* or not to *ne*' as Rehner and Mougeon (1999) put it succinctly, is a tough sociolinguistic nut to crack for learners of French. They have to perceive the patterns of variation in the input: the systematic retention of *ne* in written language, and its variable omission in informal oral speech styles, before attempting to reproduce these patterns in their own speech. Language teachers can help raise the learners' awareness of the variable nature of *ne*, but it is mainly through authentic interaction with NSs that the L2 users will gradually approximate NS-like sociolinguistic patterns.

NOTE

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