

**Social networks and study abroad:
The emergence of sociostylistic variation in L2 French learners**

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This longitudinal study uses a mixed-effects model (Rbrul, Johnson 2009) to examine the acquisition of target-like patterns of phonological variation by 17 American learners of French during study abroad (SA) in France. Naturalistic speech data are recorded via sociolinguistic interviews (Labov 1966) at multiple points during the SA period to provide empirical evidence for the incipient acquisition of three phonological variables showing sociostylistic variation in native speaker (NS) speech. The variables include: 1) the elision of clitic nucleic vowels (*je vois* [ʒœ vwa] ~ [ʒvwa] ‘I see’; *tu es allé* [ty e a le] ~ [te a le] ‘you went’); 2) the elision of /l/ in 3rd person subject pronouns (*il vient* [il vjɛ̃] ~ [i vjɛ̃]), and; 3) the reduction of word-final obstruent-liquid consonant clusters (*notre maison* [no tʁœ mɛ ʒɔ̃] ~ [not mɛ ʒɔ̃] ‘our house’).

The underlying hypothesis of this study is that the creation of dense, multiplex, exchange-based social networks (Milroy 1980) by L2 learners during SA is essential to the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in the target language. To provide empirical evidence for this hypothesis, speech data are compared and correlated, using a mixed-effects model, with the results of a *social network strength scale* (SNSS, Milroy 1980:139) designed by the researcher for the SA learning context. The SNSS includes both density and multiplexity measures related to the number of hours spent interacting with NSs, the strength and number of links between members of the social network, and the breadth of activities and topics covered in these interactions.

Previous studies of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by L2 French learners have demonstrated that the length of time spent in a francophone environment is the most influential factor in the learner’s development of sociostylistic variation (Regan 1995, 1996; Regan et al. 2009; Sax 2003). Studies of Anglophone speakers in French immersion classrooms in Canada have also shown that time spent outside of class interacting with native French speakers is positively correlated with the use of mildly-marked informal variants (Mougeon et al. 2004; Mougeon et al. 2010; Nagy et al. 2003). At the same time, these studies have shown that sociolinguistic competence is not acquired in the L2 classroom, immersion or otherwise.

The current study examines both the linguistic and the extralinguistic factors contributing to the L2 acquisition of sociostylistic variation patterns during SA. Data for this study include over 5,500 tokens of clitic nucleic vowels, 1,500 tokens of /l/ in 3rd person subject pronouns, and 1200 tokens of word-final consonant clusters. Results demonstrate that phonological variation patterns are acquired in a predictable order based on token type and collocation, that social networks with NSs are statistically significant predictors of phonological variation patterns for two of the three variables, and that social factors, such as previous (short-term) contact with French or previous coursework in French, are not statistically significant predictors of phonological variation patterns among L2 French learners.

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