

The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence in a Study Abroad Context

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The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence in a Study Abroad Context

Vera Regan, Martin Howard
and Isabelle Lemée

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*Et lui répondit que la beauté du cosmos est donnée non seulement
par l'unité dans la variété, mais aussi par la variété dans l'unité.*

Umberto Eco, *Le Nom de la Rose* (p. 19).

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Chapter 1

Second Language Acquisition and Linguistic Variation

Introduction: Aims and Scope of this Book

One might well ask the reason for another book on learning languages, especially one which does not exclusively focus on learning English. In our 21st century global village, are we not all traversing the globe, either physically or virtually, with English as our passport? Perhaps those of us whose first language is not English should be investing all our resources in learning English and forgetting any other languages we may happen to have. The new technologies and the role they play in our lives have surely made clear that only English matters any more. However, contrary to predictions from a few generations ago, it appears that the story is not so clear cut. In fact, language still matters, and language diversity is far more enduring than some might have thought a few decades ago. In our globalised world, greater contact with other societies and other people highlights issues of language learning and language competence.

It might have seemed that with the internet leading to global homogeneity, English, being the 'international' language, would increasingly be the only important one. However, this is turning out to be a far too simplistic view of how things are developing. The internet is global, but the content that it carries is local; if you access the internet, you receive advertisements that are adapted to local conditions and interests. The news that you receive is tailored to your locality. So that people in southeast France, for example, find advertisements on the internet tailored to their specific needs and interests, and will only be effective if the language used is appropriate. In fact, recent developments in the internet are to enable language other than English. Language diversity on the internet is only one example. In international trade, it is now clear that one must be sensitive to local conditions, needs and cultures, and this also implies local languages. This is

why language competence in many languages remains important today, contrary to the dire predictions some years ago. And in the same way that communication involves specific knowledge of individual local cultures, it also involves knowledge of the detail of languages, not just a generalised 'inter-nation' knowledge of the structure and shape of those languages, but how they are embedded in use for the communities who use them. This implies knowledge of the detailed texture of the language, the sociolinguistic detail and variation which is part of every language in social use and is indeed an integral part of linguistic competence. Competence at this level of language is what permits people to communicate fully with others in a manner which respects fully their humanity as social beings, over and above what is needed for more immediate aims such as trade. This is a book about the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation in other languages, how and where it happens.

Since the beginning of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), we have learnt a lot about language learning, but there are aspects that have received less attention until recently. One of these is the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. This describes the dimension of SLA which colours the way the second language (L2) speaker relates to the community or communities they are living in and may wish to be a part of in some way: how they want 'to be' in the particular group or community, what in fact is their linguistic identity within this group and how they construct this identity through language. Needless to say the effect of this dynamic is two-way: the community is affected as much by the presence of the L2 speaker as (s)he is by the community. For a long time in SLA research, this area of SLA was considered a sort of frill around the 'real' issue of learning grammar, something like icing on the cake; if indeed it was considered at all in a heavily linguistic-orientated approach which pertained for much of the beginning of SLA research. However, we are now beginning to understand that this aspect of language acquisition and its related areas is as crucial in enabling learners to communicate with other people as is grammar.

Another somewhat unexamined notion about language learning has been the assumption that the best way to learn a language was to go to the country where the language is spoken. Until recently, however, there has not been a lot of data to prove this. We are now beginning to understand more about this particular way of learning second languages such that it is increasingly clear that the context or surroundings in which people learn second languages is very important. The 'year abroad' for university students – a stay in the community of the L2 we wish to acquire – is one such context. In fact, these two dimensions of language learning are interlinked. The aim of this book is to demonstrate the link between the

acquisition of sociolinguistic competence, on the one hand, and learning language by immersing oneself in another society, on the other. We aim to show that the year abroad is one context, perhaps one of the best contexts available to certain categories of second language learners, for acquiring sociolinguistic competence.

These issues have policy as well as theoretical implications. In a globalised, multicultural, multilingual world, communities are constantly shifting and coalescing, and individuals move in and out of communities and are members of multiple communities simultaneously. The vast majority of the world's population today is multilingual; the monolingual speaker is in a minority (Cook, 2002: 1, 2003: 4). L2 (or L3, L4) speakers adapt to the constant shifts in communities and identity, finding a space of their own in the speech community or communities they happen to be part of at the time. Knowledge of grammatical and structural elements of the L2 is only part of the skills and competencies which are necessary for this process of adaptation. Sociolinguistic and sociocultural competences are equally important. These competences condition the L2 speaker's view of themselves in the L2 speech community, their view of their own community as well as the way the L2 community perceives them, and this consequently affects the place they occupy in, and progress through, that community or communities. People rarely remain in one fixed community or have a fixed identity for the span of their lifetime but undergo multiple changes of identity as they move in and out of different, sometimes overlapping, communities depending on what is happening to them at any particular moment. Sociolinguistic approaches to SLA or multilingualism in particular have been recently focused on these issues in SLA (Bayley & Regan, 2004; Bayley & Schecter, 2003; Bucholtz, 1999; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Rampton, 1995).

We wish to take a close look at how the L2 speaker acquires and uses language in a way which permits them to negotiate their identity and place in different communities. We particularly wish to provide detailed, empirical, close-up language data of negotiation and use by individuals. We look closely at the language practices of speakers in different situations and examine one particular situation of language learning; the one where the learner goes abroad and tries to learn by being in the country or community of the target language. We base our findings on research which we have carried out over a number of years, using multiple studies of L2 speakers and their study abroad experiences and the very rich databases resulting from this work. The studies we have carried out are both longitudinal and cross-sectional. It can seem recently that language itself is currently sometimes neglected in the area of sociolinguistics and so also in sociolinguistic studies of SLA, and we would like to redress this

balance by providing a body of fine-grained studies of the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in one context: the Year Abroad. Only by the placing of such linguistic detail centrally in the analysis can we gain the fullest picture of SLA and use. Recent work, as we said, quite rightly focuses on the ethnographic aspects of L2 acquisition in a line of research within the variationist tradition,¹ beginning with Eckert (1990) and continuing with Bayley (1996), Meyerhoff (2006) and others, in relation to issues such as language socialisation or communities of practice. This work addresses the earlier lack of emphasis on the L2 speaker as member of community and communities. However, the language which the speaker uses constitutes in itself invaluable data in the exploration of the full picture of the speaker and for this reason we feel it should be placed central to inquiries in second language acquisition and use. To explore these issues as indicated earlier, we take as a case-study the instance of year abroad in SLA, where previously instructed and (frequently) advanced learners² spend an extended period in the country of the target language. We examine in detail how the year abroad experience affects the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence.

The Year Abroad itself has become the subject of increasing investigation in SLA research. Recent work in the area generally covers a range of issues, some dealing with language issues, others with more social and cultural aspects, for example Freed (1998), Collentine and Freed (2004), Dufon and Churchill (2006). Thanks to this research, we are gradually beginning to have a better understanding of the year abroad experience. This is crucial not only for what it can tell us about the SLA process, but also for policy and programmatic considerations. Simply, considerable financial and other resources are being devoted worldwide to year/study abroad programmes on the basis of fairly generalised notions of their putative benefits. There still remains a shortage of very detailed investigations of the actual language use of those acquiring a language in this particular context – although such studies are increasing.³ This book aims to contribute to the growing literature on Study Abroad, by investigating the development of sociolinguistic competence by L2 learners in this particular context.

Contextual Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Research and Sociolinguistics

Among the central question asked by SLA researchers are the following:

- Who learns a second language?
- What does it mean to acquire a second language?
- What does the learner learn?

- How does the learner learn?
- Where does learning happen?
- Why are language learners different?

In fact the experience of learning a second language in a study abroad context can explain a considerable amount in relation to each of these questions. So viewing the acquisition process through the prism of the case of Year Abroad is an invaluable method of gaining a more complete picture of SLA. Theoretical positions in research on these major issues in SLA range broadly from nativist approaches, through interactionist ones, to sociocultural ones. Each of these approaches describes different aspects of SLA and they broadly complement each other. SLA research needs to find answers to the questions while taking account of both product and process in acquisition.

Until recently, through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, SLA research generally tended to confine itself to mainly psychological approaches. Long (1997: 320), however, has suggested that 'a broader, context-sensitive, participant-sensitive, generally sociolinguistic orientation might prove beneficial for SLA research'. In fact, for some time now, there has been a sharp rise in sociolinguistic and contextual approaches to SLA research, with many different perspectives from different areas of sociolinguistics. One particular approach within sociolinguistics – the variationist perspective – has been particularly influential in exploring the social aspects of second language acquisition. Variation studies have thrown light on many areas of acquisition and, through quantitative as well as qualitative studies of learner language, have furthered our understanding of second language acquisition by frequently highlighting aspects not taken into account or perhaps noticed by research from other paradigms. General accounts of SLA from a variationist perspective can be found in Gass *et al.* (1989), Preston (1989), Adamson (1988, 2005), Bayley and Preston (1996), Regan (1998a, 1998b) and Young (1999).

In the past 20 years or so, the two fields of SLA and sociolinguistics have increasingly tended to inform each other with mutually beneficial results. Researchers in SLA with a sociocultural interest increasingly use methods, concepts and constructs drawn from sociolinguistics to explore and elucidate aspects of acquisition. Approaches, both qualitative and quantitative, emanating from sociolinguistics have come from many subfields (Bayley & Regan, 2004). As we have noted, SLA at its inception tended to be predominantly psychological in approach and indeed currently has a strong cognitivist focus.⁴ An understanding of the process of acquisition requires an explanation also of the sociocultural context of this process. Since the late 1970s, there has been a small but consistent interest in the sociocultural