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Use/non-use of *ne* in Spoken French by L2 and L3 French Speakers

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ABSTRACT

The present paper examines the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by proficiency-matched third language (L3) and second language (L2) French speakers whose first language (L1) is either English or Sinhala. The ability to change the register of the target language appropriately according to different social contexts is the most important aspect of sociolinguistic competence that L2/L3 learners need to acquire. However, previous studies show that non-native speakers often find it difficult to use sociolinguistically appropriate language even after many years of learning an additional language in formal settings. Further, previous L2 studies have focused on corpora derived mainly from immersion students who speak European languages. Therefore, there have been, to date, virtually no variationist studies on the use of French sociolinguistic variables by L1-Sinhala-L2-English-L3-French learners. The present study intends to fill the gap in research by investigating knowledge of verbal negation in the French-Sinhala interlanguage. The originality of the present study lies in the research design. It compares data derived from proficiency-matched L2 and L3 French speakers. The results suggest that the L2 group can use socially appropriate speech more effectively than the L3 group.

1. Introduction

This study investigates how adult first language (L1) Sinhala speakers acquire verbal negation in third language (L3) French. The present study contributes to the growing research strand in the field of second language (L2) acquisition studies that focuses on sociolinguistic competence by L2 and L3 learners. Previous L2 studies have focused on corpora derived mainly from immersion students who speak European languages [1,2,3,4,5,6,7]. Furthermore, there have been, to date, virtually no variationist studies on the use of French sociolinguistic variables by L1-Sinhala-L2-English-L3-French learners [1,3,4,7]. Therefore, the present study intends to fill the gap in research by investigating knowledge of verbal negation in the French-Sinhala interlanguage.

The ability to change the register of the target language appropriately according to different social contexts is the most important aspect of sociolinguistic competence that L2 learners need to acquire [2]. However, it is generally observed that non-native speakers often find it difficult to use sociolinguistically appropriate language even after many years of learning an additional language in formal settings [8].

L2 acquisition studies mainly focus on the acquisition of invariant morphosyntactic structures [6,7]. However, this study was conducted within the framework of L2 variationist sociolinguistics. Labov [10] introduced the variationist approach to the study of languages (L1s), and the main assumption of this approach is that variations in language use are not random but highly systematic. Further, L1 variationist studies maintain that native speakers' choice between variants is constrained by social factors [9,10]. Turning to variationist L2 studies, they investigate whether non-native speakers can use socially appropriate and acceptable speech in the target language [6]. Further, they try to ascertain whether patterns of interlanguage variations are similar to the variations observed in native speech [10, 2].

Dewaele [6] maintains that instructed L2 learners seem 'reticent about using informal variants. Further, he found that non-native French speakers prefer to use formal variants in informal contexts. Turning to another debate in L2 acquisition, Blanche-Benveniste [11] argues that L2 grammars remain permanently non-native-like, whereas other scholars argue that the acquisition of subtle grammatical properties can be acquired [7,12,13,14]. Therefore, the present study will also provide evidence regarding the debate, which concerns the question of whether L2/l3

learners could acquire subtle grammatical properties in the target language.

According to Dewaele [6], the ability to use socially appropriate language in French is mainly determined by the ability to delete *ne* (the first particle of verbal negation in French). Therefore, the present study focuses on verbal negation as a way of ascertaining sociolinguistic competence of L3 French speakers whose L1 is Sinhala. Further, the originality of the present study lies in the research design. It compares data derived from proficiency-matched L2 and L3 French speakers whose L1 is either English or Sinhala.

Turning to the syntax of verbal negation, in contemporary written French, the verbal negation comprises two elements: the preverbal particle *ne* and the postverbal negator *pas* 'not' as in (1) [6]. In addition to the postverbal negator 'pas', French uses other postverbal negators like *plus* 'no longer, *rien* 'nothing', jamais 'never'. In spoken French, the native speakers often delete the preverbal particle *ne* as in (2).

1. Il ne parle pas
   He NEG talk not.
   'He does not talk.'

2. Il parle pas
   He talk not.
   'He does not talk.'

The organisation of the paper is as follows. First, I briefly review previous studies on verbal negation. Research objectives and predictions precede the research design, which is followed by a discussion in which I discuss the results in light of the predictions.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Omission of *ne* in L1 French

The behaviour of native speakers in relation to sociolinguistic variables has been the focus of many studies [13,14,15]. According to Coveney [10], the negative particle *ne* is 'the best-known sociolinguistic variable in French'. Coveney [10] looked at the retention and deletion of *ne* in Picardy French, and he found an average omission rate of 81.2 percent. Further, he noted that young informants from lower socio-economic classes omitted *ne* more frequently.

Moreau [3] analysed a corpus derived from radio speech where the retention rate was only 50.2%, whereas Armstrong [16] examined a corpus of adolescent's speech from Lorraine and found that the *ne* retention rate is significantly low (2.9%). Diller [17] also reports similar results. He investigates the retention and deletion of *ne* by twelve rural speakers in southern France, and he found a 65.5% *ne* retention rate. Hansen and Malderez [18] investigated the verbal negation in Parisian French and found the retention rate is only 18%.

Turning to the other verities of French, Fonseca-Greber [19] analysed a corpus from Switzerland and found a significantly low retention rate of *ne* (2.5%). However, their sample size was relatively small (n=14). Sanfoff and Vincent [20] examined verbal negation in Canadian French. They analysed the speech of sixty L1 French speakers from Montreal and found that the *ne* retention rate was close to zero.

2.2. Omission of *ne* in non-native French

Trevise and Noyau [1] conducted one of the seminal studies on the omission of *ne* in L2 French. They collected data from L2 French speakers with Spanish as an L1. They interviewed the participants (n=8) in two situations. First, they used an elicited production task to collect data, whereas, in the second instance, the participants were asked to listen to the recording and comment on their own production. The authors expected the participants to use the informal variant in the first recording. However, in the second recording, they expected the participants to use a formal register. They found that their registers do not differ in the two recordings. Interestingly, their data showed inter-individual variations linked to the participants' linguistic history in French. They maintain that the length of stay in a francophone country, age, and frequency of use of French are linked to the *ne* omission rate.

Rehner and Mougeon [21] looked at the *ne* omission rate of forty English-speaking Canadian pupils. They also found a positive correlation between the frequencies of *ne* non-use in students' speech and their exposure to native spoken French both outside and within the school context. They also found that the pupils who worked with native French teachers demonstrated a higher *ne* omission rate than those who worked with non-native French teachers (20% versus 32%). However, as expected, the overall results showed that L2 learners deleted *ne* less frequently (28%) than native speakers.

Regan [5] studied a corpus gathered through sociolinguistic interviews. Her participants were L1 Irish English speakers. She interviewed participants before and after participating in a study abroad programme. Although she found inter-individual variations, the overall results suggest that the participants omitted *ne* considerably more after their stay abroad (65 versus 38%).

Interestingly, Sax [7] also reports similar results by analysing a corpus gathered through interviewing Anglo-American students (*n*=35). The results indicated that learners who had not spent time in a francophone country had an average retention rate of 93 %. In contrast, those who have spent time abroad recorded an average omission rate of 75%.

Dewaele [6] examined a corpus produced by a large sample size (*n*=73). The corpus consists of both

native and non-native speakers. The participants were enrolled in the BA French program at Birkbeck College, University, and they were pre-advanced, L2 French speakers. As expected by the author, he found that native speakers deleted *ne* more frequently than the non-native speakers. The findings showed no positive correlation between the omission of *ne* and gender. The results also suggest that the non-native speakers' linguistic history (frequency of use of French) strongly influences the *ne* omission rate.

The researchers have also discussed the relationship between L2 learners' knowledge of sociolinguistic competence and classroom instructions [22,23,24]. L2 studies show that learners encounter difficulties acquiring target sociolinguistic features through implicit classroom instructions. Therefore, scholars recommend introducing target sociolinguistic features through explicit instructions [24].

3. Hypotheses

Based on the findings of previous research related to studies of *ne* use by non-native speakers of French, I formulated the following hypotheses.

3.1 Hypothesis 1

The native speakers will have a higher *ne* omission rate than the non-native speakers.

3.2 Hypothesis 2

Frequent users of French will have higher omission rates of ne.

3.3 Hypothesis 3

L1-Sinhala-L2-English-L3-French speakers and L1-English-L2-French speakers will have similar omission rates.

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Forty-five participants took part in the study. There were two non-native groups and a native group. The first non-native group included sixteen L3 French speakers (female: 14; age mode: 22; range: 21-25), and their prior languages were Sinhala and English. The second non-native group had seventeen L2 French speakers (female: 15; age mode: 19; range: 18-25) whose prior language was English. The native group included twelve L1-French speakers (female: 09; age mode: 22; range: 21-25).

The L2 French speakers were recruited from the University of York, UK, whereas the L3 speakers were recruited from Sri Lanka. All non-native speakers were enrolled in French classes as part of a French-language degree. The L1 French speakers were visiting students from France enrolled in undergraduate degree programmes at the University of York. A language and socio biographical questionnaire was administered to all the participants. The L2 group confirmed that they speak French as an L2, whereas the L3 group indicated that they speak French as a foreign language (L3). Ten participants in the L3 group reported that they rarely use French outside the classroom. However, the number of participants who use French rarely in the L2 group was relatively small (see Table 2). The data collected via a questionnaire (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Summary of participants background questionnaire

Group	Age		Gender
	Mode	Range	Male
L3 Speakers *(n=16)*	22	21-25	02
L2 Speakers *(n=17)*	19	18-25	02
L1 Speakers *(n=12)*	22	21-25	03

Table 2: Active use of French outside the classroom

Frequency	Number of participants	
	L3 speakers	L2 speakers
Rarely	10	5
Occasionally	4	4
Frequently	2	8

The non-native speakers completed a validated cloze test in French, developed by Zac and Garrison [25]. The authors report that the main purpose of creating the cloze test was to create a "valid, reliable and practical tool which helps researchers to discriminate between L2 French learners from a wide range of proficiency levels'' (p. 84). The cloze test had been validated by recruiting French learners from the University of Illinois. The test involves filling in forty-five missing words in a text. For the base text, the authors selected a non-academic article selected from *le Monde* (Newspaper). The missing words included 23 content words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.) and 22 function words (determiners, prepositions, pronouns, etc.). The results of the proficiency test are reported in Table 3.

The independent samples t-test showed that the L2 speakers (*M=16.60, SE=2,41*) and L3 speakers *(M=14.38, SE=2.75)* are not significantly different with respect to the French language proficiency ($t(31)= -1.87$, $p> .05$). Further, the results confirm that the non-native speakers are intermediate speakers of French.

Table 3: Proficiency test scores

	Minimum	Maximum	Test mean score (SD)
L2 Speakers (*N=17*)	10	23	16.60 (2.41)
L3 Speakers (*N=16*)	08	22	14.38 (2.75)

***French proficiency scores (out of 45)**

4.2 Corpus

The corpus is based on one-to-one audio-recorded conversations (between the participants and researcher). It is believed that an informal speech style can best be obtained in spontaneous speech [2,6,10]. Therefore, the researcher asked questions related to the informants' immediate environment (family, friends, university life, and motivation to study French, weather, holidays, reading books, watching movies). The researcher obtained ethics approval from the University of York, UK. To adhere to the accepted ethical standards, the researcher avoided sensitive topics like death, politics, health and religion. The conversations were 30 to 40 minutes long. The conversations were recorded using a voice recorder. Following the Labovian variationist approach, the researcher transcribed only the occurrences of the variable that he intended to analyze.

The participants were briefed about the objectives of the study, and informed consent was obtained. The anonymity of the participants was ensured through the use of codes, and confidentiality was safeguarded. The participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point. The following section reports the results of the present study.

5. Results

The native and non-native speakers used 634 verbal negations. Further, I identified 243 cases of omission of *ne* and 391 cases of retention (see Table 4). The results show that the native speakers preferred the omission of *ne* over its retention (52.31% versus 47.68%). This shows that the results of the native speakers are compatible with previous results reported in previous studies.

Turning to the non-native speakers, unlike the native speakers, they preferred the retention of *ne* over its omission. Interestingly, the L3 speakers looked very different from the other two groups. Their retention rate of *ne* is over 80%, and the omission rate is less than 20%. The L2 speakers omitted *ne* more frequently than their L3 counterparts (29.41% versus 19.53%).

Table 4: *Ne* use and non-use by native and non-native speakers.

Group	Verbal negations (n)	Use of ne (n)	Non-use of *ne* (n)	Use of *ne* (%)	Non-use of ne (%)
L3 Speakers (*n=16*)	128	103	25	80.47	9.53
L2 Speakers (*n=17*)	204	144	60	70.59	9.41
L1 Speakers (*n=12*)	302	144	158	47.69	2.31

Turning to the inferential statistics, Following Dewaele [26], I run a two-sample K-S test to determine whether there is a significant difference in the non-use of ne between the L2 speakers and L3 speakers (see Table 5). Thus, Field [27] also recommends K-S test as it has a better power than the Mann-Whitney test when samples are less than about twenty-five per group. The result was statistically significant (K-S Z =1.80, p = < .05). Therefore, the results suggest that the two non-native groups differ from each other with respect to the use of particle *ne*.

Table 5: Non-use of *ne* between L2 speakers and L3 speakers.

Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.629
	Positive	.000
	Negative	-.629
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.805
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.003
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Point Probability		.000

Let us now consider *ne* use and non-use in relation frequency of speaking French language outside the classroom. The non-native speakers who use French rarely outside the classroom clearly showed a strong preference for the retention of *ne* (see Table 6). The non-native speakers who used French either occasionally or frequently omitted *ne* more frequently than those who speak the target language rarely (10.54 versus 15.06). The data presented in Table 5 are further illustrated in Figure 1. Thus, Table 6 clearly shows that the participants who used French rarely outside the classroom look very different from those who use it occasionally or frequently.

A two-sample K-S was run to determine whether there is a significant difference in the non-use of *ne* between frequent and rare users of French (See Table 7). Again, the result was statistically significant

((K-S Z =2.33, p = < .05). Therefore, the results suggest that frequent use of French is clearly linked to an increased deletion of *ne*.

Table 6: Frequencies of *ne* use and non-use by non-native speakers

Frequency of speaking	Use of *ne* (n)	Non-use of *ne* (n)	Use of *ne* (%)	Non-use of ne (%)
Rarely	150	35	45.18	10.54
Occasionally or frequently	97	50	29.21	15.07

Figure 1: *Ne* use and non-use in relation to frequency of speaking French

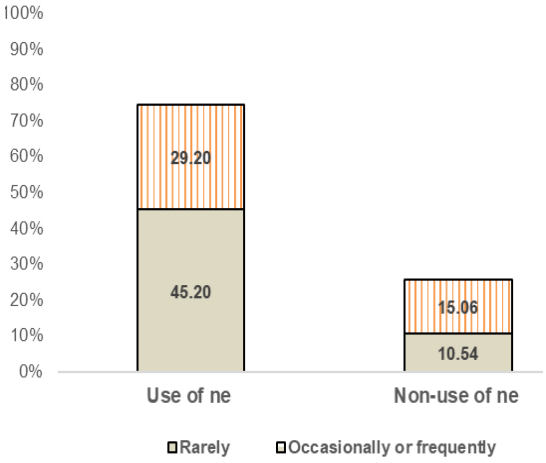

Table 7. Non-use of *ne* between frequent and rare users of French

Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.864
	Positive	
	Negative	.000
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		2.339
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Exact Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Point Probability		.000

6. Discussion

This section discusses the results detailed in the previous section in light of the hypotheses. Three hypotheses were formulated based on previous studies on the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by non-native French speakers. First, I recall these hypotheses and then examine them in relation to the results before concluding which hypotheses support the results.

Hypothesis 1 maintains that the native speakers will have a higher *ne* omission rate than the non-native speakers. Hypothesis 1 is borne out by the results by low rates of *ne* non-use (52.31%) in the native group. Further, the non-native speakers differ greatly with respect to the *ne* non-use (19.53% and 29.41%).

Turning now to Hypothesis 2, it claims that frequent users of French will have higher omission rates of *ne*. The results show that non-native speakers who frequently used French had a high omission rate of *ne* (15.07%). In contrast to Frequent French speakers, those who speak the language rarely showed a relatively low *ne* omission rate (10.54%). Further, A two-sample K-S result shows that the two groups significantly differ from each other. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 is supported by the results.

Hypothesis 3 maintains that L3 French speakers and L2 French speakers will have similar omission rates. The L3 group showed a strong preference for the use of the preverbal particle (80.47%), whereas the L2 group used the preverbal particle less frequently (70.59%). A two-sample K-S result shows that the two groups significantly differ from each other.

The results suggest that the L2 group can use socially appropriate speech more effectively than the L2 group. Why do the two non-native groups differ with respect to the *ne* omission rate? One possible variable that could influence their choice would be their knowledge of grammar. As mentioned previously, the two non-native groups do not differ with respect to French language proficiency. Therefore, we can conclude that knowledge of grammar could not be an important variable.

The other variable worth considering is the frequency of language use (outside the classroom) by the two groups. Table 6 shows that the L2 speakers use French more frequently than the L3 speakers. Therefore, lack of exposure to the target language could have influenced the L3 speakers to retain the *ne* particle more frequently in their speech. Previous studies also show that the use of the target language outside the classroom helps L2 learners to develop sociolinguistic competence. Therefore, the present study provides further evidence to show that interaction and exposure outside the classroom are required to develop L2 sociolinguistic competence.

7. Conclusion

The present paper investigated the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence by proficiency-matched L3 and L2 French speakers whose L1 is either English or Sinhala. The negative particle *ne* has been identified as the best-known sociolinguistic variable in French [10,26]. Therefore, as a way of investigating the knowledge of L2 sociolinguistic competence, this study focuses on the use/non-use of *ne* in French. Further, Previous L2 studies on French sociolinguistic competence have focused on corpora derived mainly

from immersion students who speak European languages [1,2,3,4,5,6,7,28]. To the best of my knowledge, there have been, to date, virtually no variationist studies on the use of French sociolinguistic variables by L3-French learners whose L1 is Sinhala. Therefore, the present study aimed to fill the gap in research by investigating knowledge of verbal negation in the L3 French. The findings showed that the native/non-native status of the speakers was correlated with omission rates. The results also suggest that frequency of French use helps non-native speakers to acquire sociolinguistic competence in the target language.

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