

HS 202
LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY
ASSIGNMENT/REPORT

**A Brief report on some
linguistic variables in French
and Hindi**

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1 Introduction

“When I began interviewing and recording people, I found that their every-day speech involved a great deal of variation, which the standard theory was not equipped to deal with.”

William Labov

Brief Information about me and the structure of the assignment:

My mother tongue is Hindi. The other languages that I speak are English, French and Marathi, which I have listed in the order of my proficiency in them.

In this thinking assignment, I have listed out some of the linguistic variables which I came across while learning as well as speaking French and Hindi. However, most of my claims are backed up by significant research work from linguists which I have attested in the end, in the references section. I try to analyse everything using my experiences in these two languages and the concepts learnt in class.

2 French

Some Linguistic variables in French, based mostly on French as a foreign language (FFL):

William Labov developed a sub-field of sociolinguistics whose central aim is to not only observe but also quantify sociolinguistic variation from within the linguistic repertoire of an individual (intraspeaker variation) or from speaker to speaker (interspeaker variation).

Background

French is a language spoken as a first language by around 136 million people worldwide as of 2019. A total of 500 million speak it as either a first, second, or foreign language. Moreover, some 200 million people learn French as a foreign language. French speaking communities are present in 56 countries and territories. Most native speakers of the language live in France, the rest live essentially in Canada, particularly the province of Quebec, with minorities in the Atlantic provinces as well as Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, and the U.S. Most second-language speakers of French live in Francophone Africa, arguably exceeding the number of native speakers.

In India, French is the most popular foreign language to learn in schools. It is reported that over 100 thousand students have taken French as a part of their curriculum in Delhi alone. Even though there are no official figures, the amount of people living in India who identify French as their second/third language is estimated to be in the millions.

Being a non-native speaker of French who has never travelled to Francophone regions, my experiences are limited to treating French as a Foreign Language (FFL).

I have listed down various linguistic variables that I came across while learning French from 2013-2017. I mainly came across these after I had completed my formal courses in French in school and when I tried to really apply my knowledge by interacting with French discussion forums online. I was surprised by many of these. The rest were picked up from books and while learning the language. I have attached supplementary references at the end of the document.

1. **Degree of ne omission/retention:** In French, verbal negation is achieved by the words ‘ne’ and ‘pas’. ‘Ne pas’ literally means ‘do not’ or ‘does not’ in English. To put it simply, in order to make a sentence negative in French, we simply wrap the verb within the words ‘ne’ and ‘pas’. So, the sentence structure becomes:

ne + verb + pas \rightarrow *negation*.

A few beginner examples:

Il mange: He is eating.

Il ne mange pas: He does not eat/ He is not eating.

Je sais: I know.

Je ne sais pas: I do not know.

However, ‘ne’ is mostly omitted by native speakers of French while is almost always used by non-native French speaker.

Je ne sais pas (I do not know): Non-native speaker.

Je sais pas (I do not know): Native speaker.

Students learning and speaking French in foreign countries like Canada, UK, India, etc. almost never omit ‘ne’ whereas in France, it is omitted by the native speakers.

Even with increased attention to speech, non-native speakers retain the use of ‘ne’ in their speech. It has been observed that more exposure to native French (via a stay in Francophone regions/ contact with native French forums/media, etc.) correlated positively with ne omission.

This linguistic variable can also serve as a marker (one of the three categories of variables distinguished by Labov), as in frequent omission of ‘ne’ in negative sentences can be a good indicator of a whether a speaker is a native speaker or a non-native speaker of French.

On the other hand, it has been observed by researchers that many non-native learners who study French and spend some time in France often end up overdoing it (omission of ‘ne’) in interviews or questionnaires which challenge their French skills to impersonate a native speaker or show their ‘native’-ness in French.

This phenomenon is also called ‘Hypercorrection’.

2. **Use of on/nous for 1st person plural referents:** A native speaker of French will generally use the word 'On' for 'We' whereas speakers in foreign language use 'Nous'. (H) means that certain variety of speech is designated as prestigious variation and L means it is designated as the lesser variation (slang/more informal).
Nous vous attendons: We are waiting for you. (H)
On vous attend: We are waiting for you. (L)

It has been observed that there is positive correlation between these variables, i.e., a person more likely to omit 'ne' will also use 'on' more often and vice-versa for retention of 'ne' and usage of 'nous', further indication of these variables as strong markers.

Many linguists believe that limiting the teaching of French to Standard French and textbook French, and thus ignoring these variations results in students' inability to understand the most basic interactions in oral everyday French. They argue that, given their widespread usage in spoken French, less prestigious variants (such as 'ne' omission and the usage of 'On' instead of 'Nous') should be included more explicitly in the curriculum.

In my experience, it was a shocker for me too when I used Duolingo, an app used to practise languages (mostly foreign) and the frequency of 'On' usage in the stories and podcasts was much more than 'Nous' to refer to plural subject pronouns. Even outside a classroom environment, whenever we practised informal French, we always used 'Nous' and practised 'ne' retention.

3. **/l/ deletion as a phonological variable in French:**
/l/ deletion/retention in speech is mainly seen while pronouncing third person subject pronouns, namely 'il' (He), 'elle'(She), 'ils'(They) and 'elles'(They). It again is a marker, as non-native speakers mostly include /l/ in their speech whereas native speakers of French almost exclusively delete /l/.
Research (1st reference in reference section) has shown that non-native speakers who have never been to France show almost no /l/ deletion, with rates of /l/ deletion as low as 6%. In contrast, the rate of /l/ deletion for those who had spent just a year in France was 33%.
Clearly, contact with native speakers during a stay in the speech community had a marked effect on /l/ deletion in non-native speakers

of French. But both these percentages are too low as compared to /l/ deletion in case of native speakers, as native speakers show /l/ omission rates of up to 90%.

Thus, it was concluded that:

- Instructed non-native speakers almost never delete /l/ prior to a prolonged stay in the native speech community.
- The speakers delete /l/ considerably more after a year in France but still much less than native speakers.

In my own experience, within informal as well as classroom environments, I have observed that almost all of us used /l/ to pronounce 'Il' or 'Elle'. However, the more I became acquainted with native French via music, movies and the media, I learnt that native speakers almost always excluded /l/ and it reflected in my speech later on as well.

3 Hindi

Some Linguistic variables in Hindi:

Background

I am a third generation Mumbaikar, that is my great-grandfather came here to settle as a young adult. Before that, my family lived in Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh so majority of my experiences in Hindi is based off a code mixing of Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Khariboli from my parents' side whereas the spoken Hindi in Mumbai is almost always mixed with Marathi and Gujarati.

1. **Semantic:** "Hafta" [hɑːftə] in Standard Hindi is used to refer to a week while in Mumbai, the word is used to refer to money received as bribe.
"Topi Pahnana" [tɒpī pahnanā]: Standard Hindi: to get someone to wear a hat, Usage in Mumbai: to fool someone.
2. **Social variation (sex):** Work on women's language use of Hindi over the last few decades (Reference no. 3) has shown that women's

language is closer to the standard prestige variant (H) than the men's language (closer to L).

It is said that it is due to women's linguistic insecurity due to their subordinate position in society (as a result of discrimination) for a long period of time. Usually, men's speech is the norm and women's speech is judged against this.

Usually, women's speech is marked by an expression that is more polite. I have observed it in effect, too mostly during my trips to rural parts of Hindi speaking areas (in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in India). Women's speech is closer to standard speech whereas men's speech is more informal and definitely closer to the less prestigious variant. The diglossic situation in Hindi is evident when we take social factors like sex and education into context.

4 References

1. **Lemee, Isabelle Regan, Vera. (2006).** The L2 acquisition of a phonological variable: The case of /l/ deletion in French. *Journal of French Language Studies*. (ResearchGate Online).
2. **Dewale, Jean Marc. (2004).** The Acquisition of Sociolinguistic Competence in French as a Foreign Language: An Overview. *Journal of French Language Studies*. (ResearchGate Online)
3. **Pande, A. (2004).** Undoing Gender Stereotypes in Hindi.
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