Exploring French native speakers’ language attitudes toward ne-deletion by non-native speakers of French
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An understanding of native speakers’ expectations is essential to prepare language learners proficient enough to communicate in a foreign language in socially acceptable ways. However, French native speakers’ expectations have been very little documented. The existing literature has underscored French speakers’, and by extension instructors’, general attachment to a very prescriptive and purist norm (Siskin, 2007). However, empirical data available to support this claim are limited, not French specific, and often outdated (See for example Behnsted, 1973).

This presentation features preliminary results of a pilot study on French native speakers’ language attitudes to ne-deletion by non-native speakers of French in semi-formal contexts. Although prescriptive grammars call for a two-element negation structure in French, consisting of a preverbal ne and a postverbal element (e.g., pas, plus), in spoken language, ne is often omitted (example: ce n'est pas bon. / c'est pas bon ‘It’s not good.’). According to the literature (Ashby, 1981, 2001; Coveney, 1996; Sax, 2003), native speaker omission of the negative particle ne among educated middle-class speakers is common in both informal and formal settings. However, in current pedagogical materials, ne-deletion is prescriptively labeled as colloquial and virtually not taught to learners of French (Etienne & Sax, 2009).

In order to evaluate native speakers’ perception of ne-deletion, I built on Lambert et al (1960), Labov (1972), Laur (2008), and Bender (2004). Thirty participants responded to an online pilot survey combining three questionnaires: the first one provides background biographic information; the second one indirectly tests participants’ perceptions of ne-deletion by non-native speakers through a matched-guise protocol; the third one asks participants to report on their own use of this variant. Participants were French university students between 20 and 60 in a variety of degree and non-degree programs.

Participants were asked to listen to 8 brief recordings and to evaluate in each case the speaker’s personality using eight scales. Four of these recordings were used for data collection; the other four were fillers. Recordings featured very brief excerpts of small talk uttered by one individual. Each recording contained 5 contexts for ne-deletion. Speakers recruited to tape the stimuli were four American female students with near-native command of oral French. Each of them taped two guises, one featuring ne-deletion, the other one ne-retention.

Findings were not conclusive but suggested slightly more prescriptive evaluations of the guises retaining ne. Self-reported uses indicated participants’ tendency to describe their own speech as favoring ne – retention in contradiction with research on native use mentioned above.

This pilot study has methodological and pedagogical implications. It stimulates reflection on the needs and challenges of researching language attitudes and representations in French. It provides suggestive data to ascertain attitudes toward ne-deletion. Its outcome could serve to refine the definition of a pedagogical norm for teaching French as a foreign or second language (Valdm an, 1989) and thus influence textbook writing and production of teaching materials in general. In a broader perspective, the study could contribute to determine the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful native/non-native interaction in French.