
Introduction

Two main questions:

1) Are there competence differences between native speakers and near-native speakers?

2) If so, in what grammatical domain do they surface?

Coppieters (1987): grammaticality judgements of 20 French native speakers vs. those of 21 near-native speakers of French (who had acquired it as adults, from a variety of L1 backgrounds)

Conclusions:

1) near-native speaker performance diverged from that of native speakers
2) they diverged less on universal aspects of language than on language-specific aspects of French


Conclusions:

1) near-native speakers do not diverge dramatically from native speakers (and several fall within the native speaker range)
2) divergences do not fall into neat universal vs. language-specific patterns

Criticisms of Coppieters (1987):

1) unclear which of the linguistic variables in the original study are universal and which are language-specific (i.e. moving target grammar)

2) reinterpreting two of the variables tested as universal in character eliminates the purported difference between universal and language-specific differences

3) purported percentage differences based on small numbers of exemplars anyway

4) around 40% of the data were elicited by offering the subjects a choice between two paired forms. They were then asked to decided (a) whether both forms were acceptable, and (b) if so, whether there was a difference in meaning between the two, and (c) if so, what that difference in meaning consisted of
the remaining data were elicited using straightforward grammaticality judgements

understandably, near-natives differed from natives most on data elicited by the first technique (comparison of two linguistic samples; more complex task involving syntax-semantics interactions), and less so on data elicited by grammaticality judgements (comparison of one linguistic sample to some extrinsic criterion of acceptability; more clearly involves only syntactic competence)

this provides a better explanation of the behavioral split than the purported universal vs. language-specific distinction

5) group differences -- near-natives more highly educated (Birdsong: this would affect prescriptive judgements only???)

Present Study - three separate tasks

1) acceptability of French sentences exemplifying universal and language-specific properties

2) judgements of the most probable interpretation of decontextualized ambiguous sentences

3) judgements of the most probable interpretation for ‘bien’ used in decontextualized sentences

Subjects

20 native speakers of English who were near-native speakers of French

Criteria for inclusion:

- three years of continuous residence in the host country prior to testing
- exposure to French after puberty
- fluent (but possibly accented) speech

(Birdsong’s rationale for not using more careful and objective screening measures for the near-native group is opaque if not obfuscatory, p. 717)

10 women, 10 men
all college-educated
average age 40 years
all linguistically naive (none were teachers of French)
all living continuously in France (most in Paris) for three years prior to testing (range 3-36 years)
all but two had had exposure to formal instruction in French; average length of study 6 years (range 1-14)
exposed to French after puberty; average age of exposure 14.9 years (range 11-28)
average cumulative (not necessarily continuous) length of residence 11.8 years
average age of arrival in France 28.5 years (range 19-48)

20 native speakers of French

13 women, 7 men
all college-educated
average age estimated at 35-40 years (not asked)
all linguistically naive (some were teachers of French -- !)
all lived in metropolitan areas of France

Otherwise the two groups were matched on linguistic, educational, and sociological dimensions

Acceptability Judgement Task (third in sequence of three tasks)

Procedure

"Subjects were presented with 76 grammatical and ungrammatical French sentences in written form and were asked to render scalar (1-5) acceptability judgements." (p. 718)

unpaced paper and pencil task
parallel optional think-aloud task which the subjects could record on cassette themselves (experimenter not present as in Coppieters study)
as they decided on the acceptability of stimuli

g single order of presentation used to ensure comparability of think-aloud data across subjects, who often refer to previous stimuli in their protocols

Scale:

1 = pas du tout acceptable; je ne la dirais pas
2 = acceptable dans de rares contextes
3 = acceptable dans a peu pres la moitie des contextes
4 = acceptable dans la plupart des contextes
5 = tout a fait acceptable; je la dirais

[This strikes me as a dubious scale -- how can a subject, particularly a linguistically naive one, possibly gauge how many contexts an utterance might appear in?? However Birdsong claims it was used to "guide all subjects toward a single search set...prior to judgement." (p. 718)]

Stimuli

Attempts made to:

1) include as many of Coppieters’ variables as possible 2) exclude those variables in Coppieters’ study that posed problems in elicitation or interpretation 3) include new structures that would allow unequivocal testing of universal and language-specific aspects of French

if new items were included, they were taken from the theoretical
linguistic literature whenever possible (with the exception of some that-trace sentences which were French translations of well-known minimal contrasts)

Results

1) Natives and near-natives differed significantly in their judgements on 17 of the 76 sentences (22% overall; Table 2)

"Divergence on 22% of items overall offers only modest evidence of differences in ultimate attainment. That is, these data constitute little support for the notion of generalized competence differences between natives and near-natives."

see also Table 4: each subject’s cumulative deviance from native speaker norm (i.e. mean judgement of all native speakers for each item, summed across all 76 items; maximum cumulative deviance from native speaker mean per subject: 4 points on a 5-point scale x 76 items = 304 points)

mean cumulative deviance of individual subjects from native speaker group mean:

near-natives: 85 (range 56-115)  
} significant difference

natives: 69 (range 51-96)

however 15/20 of the near-natives have cumulative deviance scores falling within the native speaker cumulative deviance range

5/20 near-natives have cumulative deviance scores in the lower-to-middle range of native speaker cumulative deviance

2) No clear pattern of universal vs. language-specific points of divergence (Table 3); inconsistent with Coppieters’ results

Correlations with Biographical Variables (Table 7)

"...since deviance scores are input into the correlation, a positive correlation indicates the association of a biographical variable with a departure from the native norm, while a negative correlation indicates that a given biographical datum is associated with minimal differences between nonnatives and the native norm." (p. 735)

positive correlation means near-natives differ significantly from native norm

negative correlation means near-natives differ minimally from native norm

Principal biographical factor: age of arrival in France

those near-natives who fall within the native speaker cumulative deviance
range are those who arrived at an earlier age

[but note that the earliest age of arrival was 11, which would be late in most critical period studies]

Also, self-assessment correlates negatively with several linguistic variables

Interpretation Judgement Tasks (first and second in sequence of three tasks)

Task 1

Subjects asked to indicate most likely interpretation for 20 lexically or structurally ambiguous sentences using a 5-point scale:

1 = one reading most likely
3 = both readings equally likely
5 = other reading most likely

near-natives differed significantly from natives on only 1/20 items

Task 2

Subjects asked to indicate by means of a 5-point scale the most likely interpretation of ‘bien’ in 15 sentences exemplifying three different uses of the adverb:

1 = ‘well’ interpretation
3 = either ‘well’ or ‘indeed’ interpretation
5 = ‘indeed’ interpretation

no significant differences between groups
scores on this task correlate with those on the acceptability judgement task
(r = .65)

Discussion

Four major findings:

1) As a group, near-natives differed from natives in cumulative deviance from the native norm on the acceptability judgement task; however, the majority (15/20) of near-natives fall within the native range

This is inconsistent both with Coppieters’ results as well as with Johnson and Newport’s (1989) results on Chinese-English bilinguals (in that the subjects in the present study were all late learners who approached native norms), but consistent with Sorace’s results

Too many differences in subject populations and methodology to compare reliably across studies

2) No clearcut differences found between universal and language-specific
aspects of language

3) Age of arrival in France is predictive of cumulative deviance from native speaker norms on the acceptability judgement task

4) The two interpretation tasks showed a high degree of similarity in performance between the two groups as well

Followed by some interesting discussion on pp. 742-743....