

Laura Jensen. Michigan State University.

Sunday, March 8th: 10:15 -10:45

How Do English Speakers Learning French Make *Tu/Vous* Decisions?

In French the correct use of *tu* and *vous* (henceforth T/V) can show friendship or respect, while their misuse can be taken as an insult. For those learning French, fears of misstepping, and missteps themselves, can easily create a socially awkward situation. Research into the acquisition of T/V has been sparse, though researchers such as Dewaele (2004a, 2004b) and Lyster & Rebuffot (2002) have given us some broad insight. One finding in finding Dewaele (2004a) was that learners whose L1 has a multiple second person pronoun address system have an easier time acquiring T/V than those learners whose L1 lacks such a distinction. The current study seeks to further explore this intricacy of T/V acquisition by examining the T/V decisions of English-speaking Americans studying French to discover how they mentally represent T/V.

The preliminary study began with discussions with 3 students who had studied French for more than 5 years and had spent time immersed in a francophone country. Based on those discussions, 4 factors appeared important in the American speakers' decision process. These were: Age of interlocutor, Status of interlocutor, Familiarity of interlocutor, and Formality of situation. The discussions and the four factors that emerged were used as the basis for an online study. The online survey isolated each factor and tested the actual weight of its contribution to the T/V decision by having participants make T/V decisions. Then, the participants' perceived importance of the factors was tested by asking them to rank the factors they felt were important. 32 valid survey responses were collected from American learners of French.

The overall results of the questions testing actual strength revealed the order of the factors from strongest to weakest: Status>Familiarity>Formality>Age. However, the results of the participants' perceived importance ranked Age more highly, which suggests that what participants think they are doing, or should be doing, diverges from what they are actually doing.

When the data testing the actual strength of the factors is broken down by number of years spent studying, the results show a shift in the strength of the factors after 5 years of study and when broken down by time immersed in a francophone environment the results show the same shift at 2 months. These two points in time, 5 years of study and 2 months of immersion, seemed to mark the stabilization of a T/V heuristic.

This gap between classroom and immersion learning reiterates the importance of immersion, and suggests that either American lower level French courses do not include enough cultural education or that a T/V heuristic only stabilizes through sufficient interaction with proficient speakers. Certainly, though, this gap, and the disconnect between conscious perceptions and actual decisions shows that the mental conception of the T/V system is more nuanced than many give it credit for.

References

- Dewaele, J. (2004a). The acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in French as a foreign language: An overview. *Journal of French Language Studies*. 14(3), 301-319.
- Dewaele, J. (2004b). Vous or tu? Native and non-native speakers of French on a sociolinguistic tightrope. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*. 42, 383-402.
- Lyster, R., & Rebuffot, J. (2002). Acquisition des pronoms d'allocution en classe de français immersif. *AILE Acquisition et Interaction en Langue Étrangère*. 17, 51-72.