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Speaking Style and Oral Text Construction in Second Language French

Mireille Bilger
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Draft

Introduction

We propose to look here at oral text construction by second language learners of French. In this exploratory paper¹, which seeks to apply some of the descriptive tools developed by the Aix group of linguists, GARS² for the analysis of first language spoken French, we will essentially be focussing on two aspects: first, the use of the two axes of text construction; second, the make-up of the syntactic units produced by the speakers. The aim of this paper is to explore the types of elements that can be linked to the difference in level of acquisition and to compare findings with those of native speakers of French.

The data analysed here is taken from a corpus of spoken French produced by undergraduate learners at the University of Surrey in 2003. The productions of 8 learners are observed: 4 first years and 4 finalists³. This represents around 17,000 words overall, though individual word counts vary considerably depending on the duration of the recording. The recordings were all carried out during the students' end of year oral examinations, in which the students first make an oral presentation (prepared) and then answer questions by the examiners. Generally, the oral examination lasts between fifteen and twenty minutes. Transcription was carried out using GARS/DELIC⁴ conventions.

1. The notion of oral text

It is often remarked that oral language does not resemble that accounted for in many textbooks or grammars. This does not mean all elements of speech are completely alien from the types of examples we find in such works. However, what it does mean is that spoken language contains certain features that are typically not accounted for in traditional works as well as many elements which, though not necessarily discarded, are often considered superfluous for the analysis of language content and structure.

The approach to the study of spoken language developed in the 1980s by GARS, led by Claire Blanche-Benveniste, has a double agenda: to provide a comprehensive description of spoken French⁵ syntax; and also, importantly, to account for the manner in which the oral text takes shape through production. For GARS, if somebody says “*d’abord je je je pen-j’es- j’espère que vous le savez*”, then this is not only what we must transcribe but also what we must work with: the “dysfluencies” become an integral part in looking at how productions take shape during the interaction. Whilst there is obviously no denial that planning processes are at work before and during speech production, and that these are unlikely to include features such as those highlighted in the above utterance, there is behind

¹ We are grateful to Ros Mitchell for her comments on a draft of this paper.

² *Groupe Aixois de Recherches en Syntaxe*.

³ First years: Anna, Jo, Rhys, Stuart; Fourth years: Debbie, Lisa, Mark, Vikram. No attempt is made here to look at gender differences.

⁴ *DEscription Linguistique Informatisée sur Corpus*.

⁵ Although GARS is known for its work on spoken French, the analytical framework within which it works (Pronominal Approach – see Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* 1984) is by no means specific to the study of spoken language. Indeed, one of the main aims of GARS’s studies has been to show that spoken and written French are not two separate languages (see Blanche-Benveniste & Jeanjean 1987), as some would claim.

the GARS stance—which is also our own—a refusal of the idea that speech performance is somehow an imperfect, “degenerate” version of the “real thing”. There is, in fact, very little evidence to suggest that the integral linguistic message (devoid of the type of “accidents” highlighted in the above example) actually exists conceptually prior to production (Krötsch 1999). Indeed, many linguists see syntax as being borne out of the wider discourse and communication framework. For example, A. Berrendonner (e.g. 1990), in his workings on the notion of “macro-syntax”, which serves to relate smaller syntactic constructions to one another through social cognition, questions the totally mentalist approach to language construction:

[...] toute interaction verbale met en jeu un ensemble évolutif **M** (mémoire discursive, ou savoir partagé), contenant les informations qui, à chaque instant, sont validés pour les deux interlocuteurs et publiés entre eux. En parlant, ceux-ci opèrent tour à tour dans **M** des révisions, transformations, incréments, etc., qui visent à porter **M** jusqu’à un état stable, satisfaisant pour les deux parties. Le discours n’est donc que la trace de ce processus coopératif de retraitement de l’information. Et si l’on entend par fonction communicative le fait d’opérer une transformation quelconque dans **M**, on peut alors faire l’hypothèse qu’il existe un niveau auquel la chaîne parlée s’articule en unités minimales à fonction communicative.

(Berrendonner 1990: 25-6)

In a sense, then, speaking, rather like writing, can be seen to involve a number of elaboration procedures before the “final” version is produced (Halliday 1985). The fact that someone writes “Thank you for your ~~very~~ kind invitation” does not necessarily mean that the element “very” is an accident or error; rather it shows that this element was deemed by the writer not to be desirable in what he/she wanted as the end product. It does not matter whether we think this word was part of the original plan or not. So, by choosing not to differentiate between that which is intentional (what we think the speaker “had in mind” to do in terms of linguistic structure, an area of some debate in psycholinguistics – Harley 2001: 358) and that which is not, we are not so much ignoring the role of psychological planning as simply agreeing to show the broader picture, i.e. how spoken language comes together on the virtual page: text construction rather than unit planning and production. We take the view here that language construction need not be viewed as merely the product of covert processes (whether conscious or not). Indeed, we see language use not only as a “doing” activity, but also as redoing, (re)working, editing activity.

2. Axes of construction

2.1 Representing speech over two dimensions

Oral texts can be accounted for by “grid representation”, whereby the two axes of construction (syntagmatic *versus* paradigmatic) become apparent. The syntagmatic (horizontal) axis accounts for the forward nature of the text in terms of the different combinations that occur (e.g. S-V-O); the paradigmatic (vertical) axis accounts for similarity between elements from a lexico-syntactic point of view. Let us take an example⁶:

1. j’avais une bourse au collègue

In terms of the syntactic makeup, this can be termed as a wholly linear unit, i.e. it only makes use of the syntagmatic axis:

⁶ Examples which appear without specific reference are taken from Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* (1990). All others are referenced, with details of either the published source or, in the case of our corpus, the learner’s first name.

j'avais une bourse au collège



However, if we admitted that this was not really what was produced and that the actual production was in fact

1'. j'avais une une bourse euh au chose au lycée quoi au collège

we could use a grid to sort out the linear from the vertical. So, this is what we in fact get:

```
j'avais  une
          une bourse euh  au chose
                              au lycée quoi
                              au collège
```

In other words, from a syntactic point of view (i.e. in terms of the S-V-O structure), the production remains unchanged. However, we now see from our inclusion of the vertical dimension that certain paradigms have been used to refine the content of what is said: the speaker dwells in a given paradigm, for whatever reason, before moving on along the horizontal axis. Dwelling in a paradigm does not necessarily mean that the speaker is experiencing difficulty: it may be due to conscious listing (as in “*I grew **turnips, parsnips and beetroot***”) just as it may be due to repetition in order to bar the floor to other speakers (“*IIII I* [said with increasing volume] *grew turnips, parsnips and beetroot*”) or to redefine something following a look of incomprehension from the audience (as in “*I grew **turnips, parsnips*** [correction: parsnips are what I grew, not turnips] *and beetroot*”).

By accounting for all types of listing in the same way in terms of the grid representation, it may appear as though we are blindly cutting across the sacred divide operated by Chomskyans between “deep” and “surface” forms. Indeed, it does mean we are ruling out the option of looking at either purely performance-related or purely intentional forms of listing. However, given both the extreme difficulty (impossibility even in many cases) in differentiating between types of verticalisation (Tannen 1987), and the overly “modelistic” idea of trace insertion in intentional lists (unrealistic in actual production terms), we consider it more useful here to group within the same paradigm all syntactically like elements, whatever the *actual* motivation behind their physical presence. Moreover, it must be understood that paradigms are not “closed” series. In other words, is not because we have moved on to a new paradigm that the previous one is necessarily finished: existing paradigms can be added to, or even split apart by the insertion of new ones as can be seen in example 2.

2. je revois le ce ce petit lit ce joli petit lit

```
je revois  le
           ce
           ce      petit lit
           ce  joli petit lit rose
```

Here, if we draw a line along the bottom of the grid, we obtain the “end product”, in other words what the speaker is effectively saying, i.e. “*je revois ce joli petit lit rose*”:

```
je revois  le
└──────────┘
           ce
           ce      petit lit
           ce  joli petit lit rose
```

2.2 The study

We looked at the following aspects of oral text construction, all typically found in native French productions: hesitation (production repetitions and false starts), left expansion, right expansion, redefinition or “paradigm work”, normative corrections.

(a) *Hesitation*

Under hesitation we traditionally find a whole range of phenomena, from unfilled pauses (silence) to repetitions, false starts, etc. We concentrate here on two aspects of “linguistic” filled hesitation, namely production repetitions (*bribes* or “*répétitions faits de parole*” – Henry & Pallaud 2004) and false starts (*amorces*). We look at these features not simply as performance errors but rather as basic elements of oral text construction.

We found that both groups of learners used *bribes* and *amorces* in their productions. In both groups, these features were generally less present in the initial stages of the oral presentation (although this did vary from one individual to another) and became more commonplace as the presentation became more interactive and as questions began to be asked. As in native speaker productions, *bribes* typically affected grammatical words (see examples 3 and 4). Whereas *bribes* were generally limited to two successive forms in the first year productions (example 3), in the fourth year productions, these were often longer (example 4):

3. **les les** parents ne l’aiment pas (Jo)

4. c’est ceux **qui qui qui** avaient **le le** droit **de de** chercher de l’asile (Vikram)

Amorces or false starts were again found in both groups. However, whereas these were generally limited to monosyllabic word-initial *amorces* in the first year productions (example 5), there were longer, polymorphemic *amorces* in the fourth year productions (example 6):

5. **i-** il manque maintenant **l’i-** **l’imagination** (Stuart)

6. on **on pourrait on pourrait** le décrire comme euh_ - l’adversaire euh français euh le plus médiatique (Debbie)

Typically, in the first year productions, verticalisation through combinations of *bribes* and *amorces* was associated with linguistic “stumbling” and uncertain terminology (example 7). This has been identified as a communication strategy by learners (Wiberg 2002) and typically results in the examiner completing the paradigm before the learner can move on:

7.

Rhys: il était très réali- [ri@list]⁷ -

Examiner: réaliste

Rhys: réali- réaliste <parce> <Examiner: hm> que euh - c’est - euh c’est pros- /c’est, c’é-/ c’était possible

This appeared to be less the case in the fourth year productions, where greater linguistic mastery appeared to enable learners to dig their own way out of paradigms. And when the examiners did intervene, this generally involved more phatic productions and less scaffolding. Typically, the fourth years spent less time silent pausing, preferring to keep

⁷ All phonetic transcriptions use SAMPA.

production going, albeit vertically (see example 8). Indeed our data showed a marked difference between first and fourth year productions in terms of silent pause length and frequency: silent pauses were found to be 3 times more frequent in the productions of first years. Also, whereas roughly half of all silent pauses in the first year productions were of medium or long duration (i.e. over a second), in the fourth year productions medium and long pauses accounted for only 30% of all silent pauses.

8.

je je je crois que les raisons pour laquelle on veut pas donner maintenant peu- peut-être dans à l'avenir mais maintenant euh les mêmes droits c'est_ est est - est à cause du du fait que pr- euh actuellement les les immigrants ou l- ou bien les immigrants euh ils ils s- ils euh saignent euh le euh_ l'Etat euh de euh de des des bénéfiques donc ils travaillent ils travaillent ici peut-être au marché noir - ou ils travaillent sans au- sans autorisation

(Vikram)

Finally, we would stress there was considerable intra-group variation in terms of hesitation (both silent and filled). The observations here, then, are fairly general, and do not claim to account for the fine detail. Further analysis of these features is required.

(b) Left expansion

Left expansion involves returning along the syntagmatic axis in order to insert new elements into the existing structure and thereby expand the utterance (see example 2 above). This is sometimes referred to as anticipation insofar as the first version effectively contains elements that arrive “too soon” in relation to the final message (though not necessarily in an unsyntactic way). Thus in the following example by a fourth year learner, we see the speaker coming back and prising apart the determiner and the adjective to fit in another element:

9. son mandat pendant les der- euh **les cinq** dernières années (Lisa)

son mandat pendant les der- euh
les cinq dernières années

Whereas there was some evidence of this in the productions by first year learners (see example 10),

10. personnellement je je euh préfère euh - - **pour les pour les enfants** je préfère euh - jouets - - qui aident euh l'é- l'éducation (Rhys)

this was found to be used fairly extensively by the fourth years:

11. ils m'ont dit que les routes spéc- euh **les chiffres pour** les routes spécifiques étaient classés (Mark)

12. la raison pour laquelle **la principale** raison pour laquelle ... (Vikram)

13. si on a des droits différents entre les les pays les **quinze** pays euh européens ... (Vikram)

14. parce que oui il y a des **avec toutes les crises** il y a il y a des personnes (Debbie)

(c) *Right expansion*

With right expansion, the speaker, rather than going back along the syntagmatic axis to insert elements, expands by going on to the right: we see a verticalisation within the existing paradigm (but no left-hand movement) before the syntagmatic development takes place (see grid for example 15). Whereas this procedure was found in small doses in the fourth year productions (examples 15 and 16), there was little or no evidence of this in the first year productions⁸:

15. je vais parler de euh de des facteurs des facteurs **déterminants**
qui ont mené ... (Lisa)

Je	vais	parler	de	euh
			de	
			des	facteurs
			des	facteurs déterminants qui ...

16. je savais pas je savais pas **trop** euh quel sujet choisir (Debbie)

In native spoken French, right expansion is less productive than left expansion and is generally associated with the formal context (Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* 1990).

(d) *Redefinition or “paradigm work”*

Both this feature and the following one (normative corrections) are interesting insofar as they demonstrate active use of verticalisation (i.e. “paradigm work”) as a means of showing sociolinguistic awareness: the speaker, aware that a particular term or expression does not fit either the requirements of the given production or indeed those of the situation, verticalises in order to reinstate a “better” version. Here, then, the speaker uses the vertical dimension of speech to redefine, in a more “precise” manner (not necessarily in real terms), what he/she is saying. This is in fact one of two processes which should perhaps be mentioned together: working towards precision through revision and working away from precision through revision. Whereas in the first case we see the speaker giving general information at first before going on to nuance this (example 17), in the second case, we see the speaker giving first a precise term which in turn becomes “un-precisioned” (example 18), whether through failure to find a better, more precise term or as part of a strategy to “dumb down” the original term, generally due to situational constraints:

17. elle était débordée par comment dire par ses par ses grossesses
par ses allaitements

18. il y avait euh un chef de groupe euh un pionnier euh un truc

In the L2 productions, whereas we found little evidence of redefinition through paradigm work by first years, we did find this with the fourth years:

19. c’est **quelqu’un** euh c’est **un personnage** qui s’alimente ... (Debbie)

20. je vais **parler de** je vais **aborder** le euh l’échec de ... (Lisa)

21. parce que **les gens** euh **les les Anglais** auront ... (Mark)

⁸ As with left expansion (and indeed other features), there are cases in the first year productions which could be considered. However, given the particular nature of these (frequently including very long pausing, interventions by the other speaker, agrammaticality) it is not easy to decide on any clear-cut cases.

22. ils sont **persé-** euh ils sont **soumis à la persécution** (Vikram)

23. les nouvelles **routes autoroutes** qui relient les grandes villes ...
(Mark)

(e) Normative corrections

The first feature we looked at here was evidence of correction (typically through verticalisation) not so much to bring about increased precision as to show awareness of sociolinguistic markedness of certain forms (this is not to do with correction of grammatical erroneous forms). In other words, where it was felt by the speaker that the element he/she had used was not in keeping with the register he/she was trying to maintain, so an attempt was made to rectify this. Again, this was found to be quasi-exclusive⁹ to the fourth year productions:

24. parce que **c'est ce sont** toutes des constructions ... (Mark)

25. euh **ça** veut dire euh **ce- cela** veut dire que ... (Vikram)

26. pour avoir une politique commune euh **pour - afin de** résoudre quelques uns des problèmes ... (Vikram)

The second feature we looked at was correction accompanied by apologies: recognising a “mistake” was made, stating it, rectifying it openly:

27. on recense chaque année euh de moins en moins euh de plus en plus **excusez-moi** de plus en plus ... (Debbie)

28. les raisons ... de l'échec de euh de **pardon** de la réussite ... (Lisa)

29. les journaux et la télévision ... ont beaucoup influencé - euh beaucoup parlé médiatisé **pardon** les ... actes d'agression (Lisa)

This feature was found to be exclusive to the fourth year productions. The only apologies as such (indirect) in the first year productions were ones accounting for breakdown in communication.

3. Syntactic units: organisation and typology

3.1 Situation and genre constraints

Research on oral productions by native French speakers has shown that syntactic patterning is typically affected by the type of speech situation, or how this situation is experienced by the speaker (see Blanche-Benveniste *et al.* 1990). It has been noted, for example, that productions which are prepared (with the use of notes or writing) prior to delivery, or even those which are not prepared as such but rather delivered under pressure, appear to favour a certain syntactic homogeneity: the speaker, by reiterating the same unit pattern, typically produces a “stacking” effect (see examples 30 and 31). The following examples, one from a lawyer's defence speech (prepared in advance), the other produced by a school child in the presence of the teacher (under pressure), show this:

30.
il s'apprête à rentrer chez lui

⁹ One example (après **ça** après **cela**) was found in the first year productions (Rhys).

il succombe à la tentation de boire un dernier verre
il se laisse alors aller à prendre sur sa gauche
il songe alors à rentrer chez lui

(ex Bilger 1990)

31.
on fait des sorties
on va à la piscine
on prend le sac tyrolien
on s'en va dans la forêt

(ex Bilger 1990)

3.2 The study

(a) Syntactic patterns

The reiteration of a similar pattern (S-V-O with some variation, notably in terms of the addition of other functional sequences¹⁰) was found in both groups. This was, though, more consistently used by the first years:

32.
j'ai choisi le texte s'appelle Chat alors - euh
il s'agit d'un nouvelle technologie -
/au N-, en/ Noël - - deux mille un une grand compagnie - a introduit
une nouvelle jouet
ce jouet [s] - s'appelle ch- Anim'Animaux - - -

(Anna)

In the fourth year productions, on the other hand, the unit types were found to be more varied (this does not mean there was *no* simple S-V-O reiteration), with a wider range of functional sequences before and after the governing verb, and typically serving different techniques of presentation and cohesion:

33.
ben - vache folle organismes euh génétiquement modifiés et listeria
il se passe euh - guère une semaine en France - sans qu'un de ces
faits euh ne fasse la une /euh, au/ au journal de vingt heures - -
on parle - on parle en fait de plus en plus euh - - des problèmes euh
de contamination et de euh d'intoxication en en France -
alors euh peut-on manger tranquille -
est-ce qu'il y a euh contamination alimentaire ou euh intoxication
médiatique en France - - -
j'ai choisi euh j'ai choisi ce sujet euh - en fait - car j'ai passé
euh environ quatre cinq mois en Normandie -
alors euh l- la première semaine j'ai vu euh une émission à la
télévision sur euh le salon de l'agriculture

(Debbie)

Also, features such as left dislocation (examples 34-38) and pseudo-clefting (examples 39 and 40) were found in the fourth year productions:

34. **Lionel Jospin** il a fait une mauvaise campagne (Lisa)

35. **Chevènement** il a beaucoup euh mené à l'échec (Lisa)

¹⁰ See Bilger & Campione (2002) on the identification of functional sequences.

36. **moi je je je** suis pas sûr (Mark)
37. **les immigrants** euh **ils ils** s- **ils** euh saignent euh le euh_ l'Etat (Vikram)
38. **les Français ils** n'ont pas besoin ... (Debbie)
39. **ce ce que** je dirai(s) en conclusion **c'est** que au au début euh au début euh je croyais vraiment qu'il y avait un problème ... (Debbie)
40. **ce qui** est important **c'est c'est** euh de garder euh de respecter euh le patrimoine français (Debbie)

(b) Unit expansions

Unit expansions introduced by *parce que* were found in both groups. In the first year productions, these often surfaced in the question-answer part of the examination, coinciding with the intervention of the examiner, pressing for more information:

41.
Examiner: comment ils réagissent
Jo: les les parents ne l'aiment pas **parce que** - euh - **parce que** toutes les choses qui symbolisent euh l'enfance - euh sont - sont jetées euh trop tôt

In the fourth year productions, unit expansions (to the left or the right of the governing verb – compare examples 45 and 46) were found to be introduced by a greater variety of forms. Thus, whilst *parce que* unsurprisingly topped the list (64 occurrences – proportionally slightly more than in the first year productions), there were also examples of *car* (5), *afin de* (10), *lorsque* (3) and *bien que* (1). None of these latter forms was found in the first year productions:

42. ils ont décidé de ne pas aller aux urnes **parce qu'**ils pensent que les hommes politiques ... (Lisa)
43. j'ai choisi ce sujet euh - en fait - **car** j'ai passé environ quatre cinq mois ... (Debbie)
44. il a essayé de de changer son image - euh **afin de d'**augmenter sa respectabilité (Lisa)
45. **lorsque** je fais mes courses - je euh je me pose régulièrement euh des questions (Debbie)
46. les prix sont trop élevés **bien qu'**ils aient diminué un peu (Mark)

In native-speaker productions, prepared interventions also typically include expansion through the use of relative clauses, as is exemplified by this passage from a town councillor's speech:

47.
je voudrais signaler que ce qui n'a pas été dit **c'est** que l'expérience semble être prévue pour huit mois - ce qui est une durée - euh disons relativement courte - par rapport à la somme investie - qui elle est quand même relativement élevée

This type of expansion, present in the productions of both groups, was found to be only slightly more frequent in the fourth year productions: roughly one in every 120 words as opposed to one in 140 for the first years. Also, in both groups, it generally occurred to the right of the governing verb, though some examples were found of left context (subject sequence) expansion:

48. les parents - - des enfants **qui** v- **qui** veulent - Anim'Animaux euh
- n'attendaient pas pour Noël (Anna)

49. d'autres facteurs déterminants **qui** ont empêché Jospin de réussir
euh - étaient par exemple la fragmentation de vote ... (Lisa)

(c) *Other stylistic features*

In the fourth year productions, we found subjects placed after the verb as well as subject sharing. Both of these features have been recognised as “stylistic” (i.e. not commonplace in everyday language) traits in first language French:

50. j'ai analysé ... la relation qu'entretiennent **les Français** avec euh
- avec euh_ leur alimentation (Debbie)

51. il **a poli** son image **et aussi a poli** son discours (Lisa)

52. les Britanniques **achètent** des maisons de vacances **et aussi émigrent** en France (Mark)

53. ses projets **ont amélioré** la ligne TGV **et ont réduit** le euh la durée du trajet (Mark)

Interestingly, the one example of subject postposition we found in the first year productions was a word-for-word citation from the article presented in the oral examination (example 54). Similarly, of the few examples of subject sharing, half were citations (examples 55 & 56).

54. en mille - - neuf cent - quatre-vingt quinze - euh - naît **le Tamagotchi** (Anna)

55. c- c'est une chat qui **miaule ronronne frotte sa joue remue la queue - siffle et s'endort** - - - (Anna)

56.
Rhys: c'était possible - pour le /j-, 0/ - le jouet de - euh - - de
euh - - - SOUPIR - - - euh de [Ro~Ro~] - **et s'endort** - - **et s- s'est en- s'endort** - et - **aussi de miaule-** - - **miaule-** - - - <euh>
<Examiner: miauler> **miauler** oui

4. Discussion: style in second language

Stylistic variation in second language (but also to a large extent in first language) is typically evaluated according to the use of certain formal variable criteria identified for this purpose (e.g. “classics” such as negative *ne* deletion or *on* versus *nous*) and studied in contrasting situations. Results generally show that the lower level learners are globally more “rigid” in their productions, i.e. not deleting *ne*, not using *on* for “we”. However, this type of result, though useful, tells us very little about learners as actual speakers, i.e. as conveyers of thoughts, notions, feelings and desires through language. So, in our data, whilst it was not

surprising to see a certain amount of “rigidity” in the first year productions within the same situation (first years tended to use more linear, “simple” units, though they did have *bribes* and *amorces* and show evidence of unit expansion and variation), it was interesting to note that the fourth years, without giving the impression of sounding “casual” or disrespectful of the formal situational constraints, made more use of overt construction techniques (knowing “how to hesitate”) and showed a wider stylistic palette within the same formal setting. These two aspects would appear to work together, with the former helping the cause of the latter: for example, verticalisation of the relative pronoun *qui* allows the speaker to plan better the following expansion whilst keeping the production “alive”; left expansion is used to insert an extra functional sequence to the left of the verb, etc.

We would suggest, then, that second language speaking style is not simply a matter of applying a general filter or being able to strike up an appropriate “level” of language (identified according to certain salient features) and stick to it, nor is it simply a matter of knowing the range of different possible structures. Rather, it is a question of being able to put all of this to use in an appropriate but also an effective manner in actual speech. This has been identified in first language French productions: for example, Bilger & Cappeau (2004) identify “style multiplication” as the speaker assumes different roles during the interaction. This has also been observed elsewhere in advanced learners’ productions (e.g. Tyne 2004 on the use of colloquial *versus* standard lexical items).

5. Conclusion

From the small data set explored here, albeit in rather general terms, differences have emerged between first and second year learners of French. Whilst it is true that individuals vary considerably from one to another (we did not concentrate on intra-group discrepancies here), and that each learner has/her own personality and his/her own history of learning, it would appear, nonetheless, that certain group tendencies can be observed. Still, in further studies, we should not be surprised to find “good” first years behaving like fourth years in terms of text construction and *vice versa*.

The combined study of the “end product” *and* the various stages in its forming is, we think, an instructive way of looking at learners as actual speakers of the second language. Whereas the first year speakers preferred typically to remain silent for long periods of time, as though waiting for the finished product to be conceptually “ready” before speaking, the fourth years were more willing to keep the production going (not letting communication break down) and, like native speakers whose linguistic competence is not put into question, work the message openly into its “final” state. It is as if the more advanced learners, through their greater linguistic ability, can allow themselves to dispense with the primary micro-syntactic preoccupation of “getting the grammar right” (which is ideologically seen to include no “performance errors”!), and move on to the important communicational task of expressing things in the manner they feel is appropriate for the given situation or moment in the situation. We could perhaps deal with this as a part of “communicative competence”. Or we could consider it in more general terms within the notion of second language fluency.

We believe that mastery of the overt nature of text construction is an essential part of speaking style since it enables the speaker to edit and refine the oral text as a part of the social interaction. Spontaneous text production typically requires overt text construction techniques, even in very formal situations, in order to be able to develop and to gain in complexity and richness (there will obviously be intra-group variation, with some speakers being more “Mozartian” than others). This is required if language is to serve in an effective manner as the expression of the thoughts, desires and sociolinguistic awareness of the speaker, but also if communicative principles are to be respected and cooperation between

speakers to take place. As suggested by W. Chafe in his 1979 article “The Flow of Thought and the Flow of Language”, we could say that the relation between style and language structure is apparent in the way the oral text is worked into an “appropriate” form through successive spates of formulation and reformulation (it does not have to be the whole of the utterance that is reformulated). The very fact that speech is socially situated means that the “final” version, whatever it turns out to be, is largely determined by the particular nature of the social situation.

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