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Vous or tu? Native and non-native speakers of French on a sociolinguistic tightrope¹

JEAN-MARC DEWAELE

Abstract

Sociolinguistic rules governing choice of pronouns of address are notoriously difficult in French, despite the fact that the number of variants is rather limited: the more formal vous versus the more informal tu. Children with French as L1 learn to use pronouns of address appropriately as part of their socialization process. The learning curve is much steeper for instructed learners of French and many never reach the summit. The present contribution focuses on the effects of situational and sociobiographical variables on the self-reported and actual use of pronouns of address in native and non-native French. Data on self-reported pronoun use in different situations were collected from 125 participants through a written questionnaire. A corpus of conversations between native (n = 9) and non-native (n = 52) speakers of French provided data on the actual use of address pronouns.

1. Introduction

Mastering the rules that govern polite behaviour is difficult enough in one's native tongue, as any child or parent of young children can testify. Yet, to the second language learner, already struggling with grammatical rules, with verb morphology, with a limited lexicon, with lower fluency, and with higher levels of communicative anxiety, the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence must seem like the crossing of a linguistic minefield. Moreover, once the new set of rules have been learnt, they must be used appropriately without any hesitation, hence the metaphor of the tightrope in the title. There is no way back onto the rope after a fall. One of the trickiest aspects of verbal interaction in a foreign language is the use of address forms. Students feel intimidated when having to use address forms (Wolfson 1989: 82). Address forms such as pronouns, kinship terms, names, titles and honorific terms are frequently used and easily observed in everyday conversations. Such words reflect social norms: choice of address forms depends upon social variables such as age, gender difference, formality of settings and social distance or familiarity between a pair of speakers. Forms of address are inextricably linked to politeness, i.e., the presentation of self in communication and the negotiation of face (Ervin-Tripp 1972; Keshavarz 2001; Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990). In French, the choice of pronoun of address is linked to the dimensions of power and distance and thus contributes to the realization of face systems: *tu* (second person singular, informal) or *vous* (second person plural or singular, formal). According to Morford (1997) the enduring complexity of the address system in French derives from the coexistence of two orders of indexical relations, which link particular patterns of pronominal usage with various contextual dimensions. As Kinginger (2000: 24) puts it, speakers must resolve the "inherent sociopragmatic ambiguity whereby the same linguistic behavior may be interpreted as following either from perceived status difference or from desire to index social distance". The *vous* can be used as a form of respect, but it can equally serve to indicate a social distance between the interlocutors and the superiority of one of them. The *tu* on the other hand, can be perceived as a sign of solidarity, but it can also carry a value of familiarity or inferiority.

Vincent (2001) undertook a large-scale study on the self-reported use of address pronouns in Québécois French. The 3,000 respondents from a variety of age, gender and social groups allowed her to capture a generational change as well as an age-grading. She found that young adults use *vous* more often than adolescents which she sees as an indication of a progressive introduction of *vous* during the socialization process (Vincent 2001: 20). Yet, compared to fifty years ago, *vous* has lost ground to *tu* in Québec.

A smaller scale study by Gardner-Chloros (1991) reveals similar patterns in the use of pronouns of address in France. She interviewed 78 native speakers (NS) of French in Alsace. Participants (except children and teenagers) reported a preference for *vous* with strangers. *Tutoiement* was

found to be more likely in same-sex dyads. The interviewees declared that they very rarely openly discussed the choice of pronoun because they considered it inappropriate, as the transition from *vous* to *tu* had to be “felt” and could not be dictated by rule. A transition from *vous* to *tu* could happen when the person who would have the most right to be addressed with *vous* switches to *tu* (Gardner-Chloros 1991: 153). Gardner-Chloros states that her research does not allow the formulation of general rules as too many factors come into play. She concludes that the reluctance with which many of her interviewees talked about the subject suggests that many offenses against these rules of address are probably committed without the perpetrator being conscious of it (1991: 154). One possible explanation for this is Schoch’s (1978) finding that francophone Swiss speakers from different social classes attribute different meanings to the use of *vous*. While highly educated participants use *vous* to signal distance or reserve, other participants interpreted the use of *vous* as a way to express respect.

A recent study by Hughson (to appear) on pronoun choice among 43 NS of French from the Paris area showed that reciprocal use of *tu* is the norm in interactions between members of a family and between friends. *Vous* is preferred when addressing elderly people or interlocutors who are older than the speaker. Members of higher social classes and older speakers tend to be more formal. The choice of address pronoun seems also to be linked to socioprofessional categories (Schoch 1978; Lambert and Tucker 1976), with members from lower socioprofessional categories preferring *tu*.

2. Research into the acquisition of sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence of non-native speakers

Three major approaches can be distinguished in the literature on the acquisition of sociolinguistic and sociopragmatic competence in French interlanguage. The first could be described as variationist sociolinguistic, the second as sociolinguistic with a didactic angle, the third as sociocultural.

The first approach is inspired by Labovian variationist sociolinguistics and has been applied to interlanguages. (For an overview see Young 1999). French interlanguage in particular has been the focus of extensive research. (See Mougeon, Nadasdi, and Rehner 2002 for an overview). The object of investigation is the speakers’ use of variable rules as reflected in the frequency of use of certain variants, determined by both linguistic and extralinguistic constraints. Variation in interlanguage has traditionally been conceived in a diachronic perspective, i.e., researchers focus on progress of the interlanguage system towards a categorical target language (TL) norm. Studies on sociolinguistic competence typically combine diachronic and synchronic perspectives: i.e., how do synchronic variation patterns evolve over time? Variation patterns in the interlanguage have been found to approximate to native speaker-like variation but to rarely reach it. L2 learners seem reticent in using nonstandard variants, producing higher proportions of formal variants instead (see also all the contributions in the present issue). Mougeon, Nadasdi, and Rehner (2002) argue that the overuse of formal variants is linked to learners’ exposure to formal speech styles used by teachers and to French coursebooks containing texts supposed to reflect oral French, which don’t contain informal variants. Moreover, learners often have very little authentic informal communication with native speakers of their own age group, where vernacular styles would be used (Tarone and Swain 1995). It comes as no surprise that increased contact with native speakers allows learners to develop their sociolinguistic competence and their stylistic range (Dewaele and Regan 2002; Dewaele 2002a, 2002b; Regan 1995; Sax 2003). Other factors have been linked to the overuse of formal variants in interlanguage, such as social class, gender, personality, language transfer, and educational input.

The second approach focuses on specific teaching methodologies in order to stimulate the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence. Lyster (1994) used a functional-analytic approach to enhance the sociolinguistic competence of learners of French in immersion programs in Toronto. He showed that the experimental group which had received 7 weeks of instruction based on a combination of an analytic approach with its focus on correctness, awareness of the variable rules through explicit instruction, and a communicative approach outperformed the control group which had received standard experiential instruction. Lyster and Rebuffot (2002) investigated the acquisition of pronouns of address in French in Canadian French immersion programs. An analysis

of a corpus of audio recordings of teacher-student interaction in immersion classrooms revealed an absence of singular *vous* from classroom discourse. The authors show that *tu* serves as a second person pronoun of address to indicate singular and familiar reference, but in teacher speech it also indicates indefinite reference as well as plural reference. The latter adds to the difficulty already experienced by these young learners of French whose L1, English, uses only one pronoun to encode the functions fulfilled by *tu* and *vous*. Despite occasional feedback from their teacher, as shown in example (1), the learners lack systematic instruction in appropriate use of address pronouns (Lyster and Rebuffot 2002: 65).

(1) Teacher *Bien. Oui? Qu'est-ce que tu voulais dire, toi?*

'OK. Yes? Want did you (T) want to say, you?'

Student 1 *Tu avais . . . tu as aussi besoin de le "t".*

'You (T) had . . . you (T) also need the "t".'

Teacher *"Tu as"? Moi c'est pas "tu"*

' "You (T) have"? I'm not "you" (T)'

Students *Vous avez.*

'You (V) have.'

Lyster and Rebuffot (2002) conclude by proposing ways of facilitating the learning of pronouns of address for classroom learners of L2 French.

One obvious way to improve learners' sociolinguistic and intercultural competence is through the use of video extracts during classroom instruction. Planchenault (in progress) analyzed the activities proposed in recent books on the use of video in language teaching and discovered that with respect to French, authors tend to focus on purely linguistic phenomena. Exercises aimed at developing the learners' understanding of registers generally avoid ambiguous situations where the choice of the pronoun is not clearcut or where the interlocutors may shift from *vous* to *tu*.

The third approach has been inspired by Lantolf and is named sociocultural theory. One of the basic ideas is that language learners should be seen as people rather than as bundles of variables (Lantolf and Pavlenko 2001). Using this approach, Kinginger (2000) and Belz and Kinginger (2002, 2003) analyzed the acquisition and use of address pronouns in French and German. Considering the complexity of address form use, the authors assume that "participation in relevant social interaction, where issues of personal identity are at stake, plays an important role in learners' discovery of the significance of address form choice. That is, learning to use these forms and to understand their meaning is as much a function of language socialization as of language acquisition" (Belz and Kinginger 2002: 208).

In their two studies Belz and Kinginger explore the effect of telecollaborative learning via electronic interaction on the development of L2 pragmatic competence in foreign language learning. Telecollaborative language classes allow learners to interact and negotiate social meaning with native-speaking peers and thus develop a wider range of registers. The native speaker partners pointed to instances of inappropriate use of address pronouns during these interactions, and this led to changes in the learners' language use. A microgenetic analysis of a limited number of learners showed that increased opportunities for interaction and assistance from peers led to a disambiguation of the numerous sociopragmatic meanings of the pronouns of address in French and German. Learners became more aware of the use of the informal forms of solidarity (Belz and Kinginger 2002).

To sum up, approaches and methodologies may vary in the study of pronouns of address in French but a consistent pattern emerges: instructed learners of French struggle with the use of pronouns of address because of a certain confusion regarding the use of L1/L2 address forms in the classroom. Textbooks do offer rules, i.e., 'use *vous* with older people, strangers, and people of higher social status; use *tu* with children or peers' but none of these rules captures the complexity and ambiguity of 'real life' use. Teachers may teach address forms but the lack of opportunity to practice in a variety of authentic situations means that learners' understanding about pronoun choice remains largely theoretical.

3. Rationale

In this study we will focus on the choice of pronoun of address in the French of native speakers (NS) and non-native speakers (NNS) combining the independent effects of endogeneous variables (i.e., speaker characteristics) and exogeneous variables (i.e., dyad characteristics). The relative paucity of research in this domain might be linked to the fact that pronouns of address are relatively rare in corpora of oral French interlanguage as these are often based on interviews where the researcher asks the questions. We noticed that direct questions contain more occurrences of pronouns of address than responses (Dewaele 1993). A typical limitation of oral corpora is that they are usually based on one single type of asymmetrical interaction where the learner is usually a non native speaker, younger and lower in social status. To overcome this methodological problem we had 62 adult participants (9 NS and 53 NNS of French) recording each other (i.e., not only the teenagers or young adult undergraduates who are predominantly used in empirical research in applied linguistics and psychology). This provided a rich diversity in dyads. To broaden our understanding of the factors that determine the choice of pronoun, we used written questionnaires with closed-ended questions relating to frequency of use of *vous* or *tu*. Participants were thus provided with 5 ready-made response options to choose from, forcing them to condense a life-long communicative history to a single score on the dimension under investigation. Questionnaires with Likert scale responses have been tried and tested extensively in sociopsychological research (cf. Dörnyei 2003). They can provide excellent baseline data, provided they are backed up by different types of data.

4. Research hypotheses

The first four hypotheses are concerned with endogeneous variables, the last three focus on exogeneous variables.

1. NS and NNS will differ in their choice of address pronoun.
2. Gender and age of the speaker will affect the choice of address pronoun.
3. Frequency of use of French by the NNS will affect the choice of address pronoun.
4. NNS who have a system of multiple pronouns, will differ in their choice of address pronoun compared to the NNS who have a single pronoun of address in the L1 (i.e., English). A similar distinction is expected within the latter group between those who have an additional language with a complex system, and those who have no such additional language.
5. Gender and age of the interlocutor will affect the choice of address pronoun.
6. The status of the interlocutor (known/unknown) will affect the choice of address pronoun.
7. The status of the interlocutor (NS/NNS), and the subsequent exolingual or endolingual character of the interaction will affect the choice of address pronoun.

5. Study 1

5.1. Method

One hundred and twenty-five multilinguals filled out a written questionnaire with closed-ended questions relating to pronoun choice. The group of NNS of French consisted of 50 NS of English, 27 NS of Dutch and smaller numbers of speakers of 11 other languages. The group consisted of 68 females and 38 males, with a mean age of 31.4 years (SD = 11.4 years). The NS group consisted of 24 native European Francophones (mean age = 31 years, SD = 13).

The questionnaire contained a sociobiographical section, soliciting information concerning gender, age, and frequency of usage of French (*daily, regularly, sometimes, rarely*). The questionnaire consisted of 12 closed-ended questions concerning habitual pronoun choice with different interlocutors in dyadic interactions. The following variables were manipulated: sex of the interlocutor, known or unknown interlocutor, age of the interlocutor compared to that of the speaker

(*younger, same, older*). There are hence 7 different categories. Participants were asked to underline an answer on a 5-point Likert scale. Among possible answers were: (1) use (1) always *tu*; (2) often *tu*; (3) sometimes *tu* – sometimes *vous*; (4) often *vous*; (5) always *vous*. The questions were requests for information and services, for example: *Vous demandez l'heure à une amie du même âge que vous* 'You ask a female friend the same age as yourself what the time is'.

Mean scores for the 7 categories were calculated for the whole corpus. Multiple analyses of variance (MANOVA) allowed us to measure the effect of native versus non-native status and the between-subject analysis allowed us to identify the variables where the difference between NS and NNS was most significant. The groups of NS and NNS were separated for subsequent analyses. Multiple t-tests were used to determine the effect of dichotomous variables on pronoun choice. The age of the participants and frequency of contact with French were correlated with the dependent variables. This allowed us to check whether the independent variables had similar effects in the groups of NNS and NS.

5.2. Results study 1

A look at the mean values (see Table 1) for the whole corpus (NS and NNS) suggests that the status of the interlocutor (known versus unknown) is crucial in pronoun choice: *vous* is predominantly used with strangers, *tu* with familiar people. A subtle difference appears within the group of known and unknown interlocutors, where younger interlocutors tend to be addressed with *tu* more often than older ones.

A MANOVA shows that native versus non-native status significantly affects the choice of pronoun: (Wilks' Lambda = 0.89, F (1,121) = 2.39, p < .033, $\eta^2 = .11$) (see Figure 1).

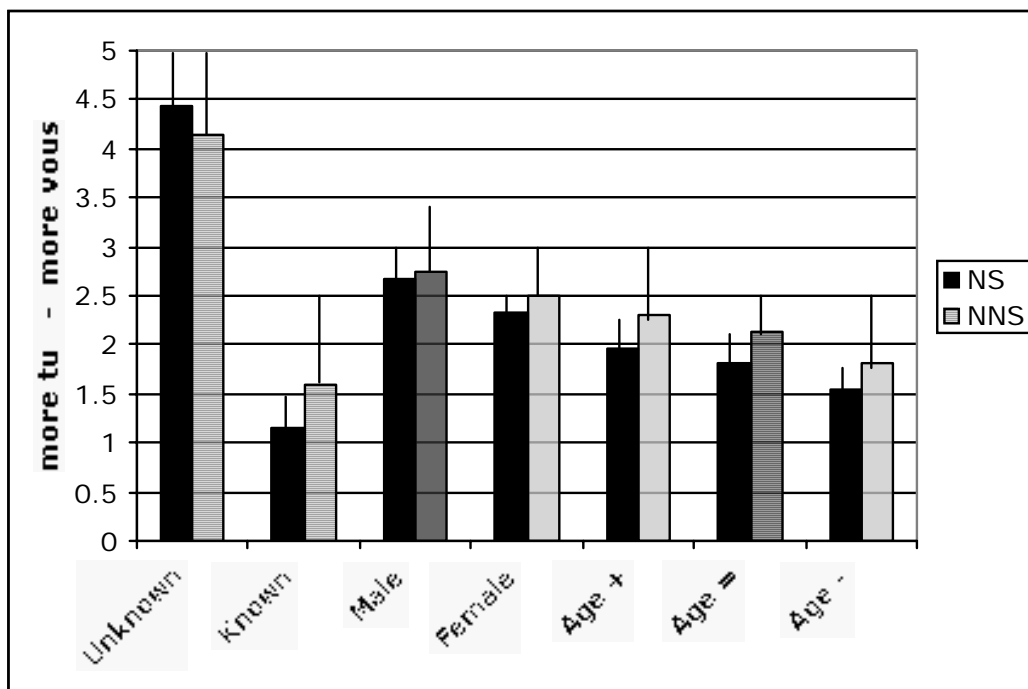
The between-subjects analysis reveals that the difference between NS and NNS is significant (p < .05) in three situations only: (known interlocutor, older interlocutor, and interlocutor of the same age). The difference is marginally significant (p < .09) in two situations (unknown interlocutor and younger interlocutor). NNS report a higher use of *vous* in the latter situation, and a lower one in the former. There is no significant difference between the NS and NNS in addressing a male or female interlocutor. One striking difference concerns the standard deviation values of the NNS, which are usually more than double that of the NS. This is indicative of a much wider dispersion of the data around the mean.

Table 1. Mean values and standard deviation for self-reported pronoun choice among 125 participants according to characteristics of the interlocutor

| Interlocutor | Mean* | Std. Deviation |
|--------------|-------|----------------|
| Unknown | 4.2 | 0.75 |
| Known | 1.5 | 0.73 |
| Male | 2.7 | 0.62 |
| Female | 2.5 | 0.57 |
| Older | 2.2 | 0.68 |
| Same age | 2.1 | 0.65 |
| Younger | 1.8 | 0.63 |

* High values indicate a preference for *vous*, low values indicate a preference for *tu*.

Figure 1. Mean scores (with SD) for self-reported address pronoun use among NS and NNS



5.2.1. *Variation among native speakers.* Pearson correlation analyses reveal mainly positive relationships between the participants' age and use of *vous*, in other words, older participants tend to prefer the use of *vous*. The correlation values are significant in two situations: interaction with a stranger ($r = .64, p < .001$)² and with a male interlocutor ($r = .58, p < .004$). The participants' own gender was not linked to pronoun choice, whether the interlocutor was male ($t = 0.95, p = ns$) or female ($t = 1.00, p = ns$). A series of t-tests confirms that NS vary their choice of pronoun across situations (see Figure 1). A stranger is almost always addressed with *vous* ($t = 28.8, p < .0001$) in contrast to addressing a familiar person. Male interlocutors attract more *vous* than female interlocutors ($t = 5.7, p < .001$), which is a rather unexpected finding. Older interlocutors are addressed with *vous* more often than an interlocutor of the same age ($t = 2.9, p < .008$), while a younger interlocutor is less frequently addressed with *vous* than an interlocutor of the same age ($t = 7.9, p < .0001$).

Table 2. Pearson correlation values for relation between age, frequency of use of French and choice of *tu* in 7 situations ($df = 100$)

| Speaker | Characteristics of interlocutor | | | | | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|-------|
| | Unknown | Known | Male | Female | Age + | Age = | Age - |
| Age | -.36*** | -.27* | .44*** | -.33** | .36*** | .35*** | -.26* |
| Frequency of use | -.22* | -.05 | -.20* | .12 | -.13 | -.04 | -.11 |

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$ *** $p < .0001$

5.2.2. *Variation among non-native speakers.* Highly significant negative relationships emerge between the age of the participant and use of *tu*. The correlation values are highly significant in every situation (see Table 2). Younger NNS thus prefer *tu*, thereby following the general pattern in francophone countries (cf. Vincent 2001). Frequency of interactions in French was found to correlate significantly with use of *tu* in two situations: stranger and male interlocutors. Regular users of French use fewer *tu* in both situations. They approximate NS usage, where use of *vous* with strangers is close to 100 %.

The NNS's gender has no discernible effect on pronoun choice when speaking with male interlocutors ($t = -1.4$, $p = ns$) or female interlocutors ($t = -1.3$, $p = ns$).³

Compared to participants with a single address pronoun in the L1, those who have a system with multiple address pronouns in the L1 report using more *tu* in all situations but one, where the difference is only marginally significant ($p = .06$) (see Table 3). This finding might seem counter-intuitive but a similar pattern was observed in the oral corpus (cf. *infra*). It must be pointed out that the preference for *tu* includes interactions with unknown interlocutors where the use of *tu* would be considered inappropriate as well as interactions with known interlocutors where *tu* would be appropriate.

A series of t-tests suggest that, as was the case for the NS, pronoun choice depends on the situation (see Figure 1). Strangers are almost always addressed with *vous* ($t = 25.3$, $p < .0001$) contrary to known interlocutors. Male interlocutors are more frequently addressed with *vous* than are female interlocutors: ($t = 6.8$, $p < .0001$). Older interlocutors are addressed with *vous* more often than an interlocutor of the same age ($t = 4.9$, $p < .0001$), while a younger interlocutor is less frequently addressed with *vous* than an interlocutor of the same age ($t = 13.2$, $p < .0001$).⁴

Table 3. *T-test values for difference between single and multiple pronoun system in L1 and choice of tu in 7 situations (df = 100)*

| Speaker | Characteristics of interlocutor | | | | | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|-------|------|--------|-------|-------|-------|
| | Unknown | Known | Male | Female | Age + | Age = | Age - |
| Pronoun system in L1 | 2.0* | 1.9 | 2.5* | 2.3* | 2.3* | 2.3* | 2.0* |

* $p < .05$

To sum up, the findings of Study 1 support hypothesis 1 (NS and NNS differ overall in their reported use of *tu*, although the between-subject analysis showed significant differences in three situations only); partially support hypothesis 2 (older NS and NNS tend to report using fewer *tu*, but no gender difference emerged); partially support hypothesis 3 (frequent users of French report a higher use of *tu* – but not significantly so in 5 situations); and support hypothesis 4 (NNS with a system of multiple address pronouns in their L1 generally used more *tu*). The results show that the exogeneous variables have similar effects on NNS and NS. There is strong support for hypothesis 5 (female and younger interlocutors are reportedly addressed more often with *tu*) and strong support for hypothesis 6 (both NS and NNS reported using *vous* almost exclusively with strangers).

6. Study 2

6.1. Methodology

Sixty-one university students and the researcher, (34 females, 28 males; mean age = 35.3 years, SD = 10.2), contributed to the second corpus. The students were enrolled in the BA French program at Birkbeck College, University of London, and had received between 5 and 11 years of instruction in French. Their proficiency in French ranged from intermediate to advanced (cf. Bartning 1997). Participants completed a questionnaire concerning their linguistic history. Twenty-nine participants reported that they rarely spoke French outside college, 13 reported that they did so

occasionally and 20 reported that they did so frequently (among these 9 NS of French who had lived in London for at least 4 years). The other participants were NS of English, Spanish, Mauritian Creole, Italian, Arabic, Dutch, Farsi, Gouro, Lingala and Turkish. The corpus is based on one-to-one audio-recorded conversations between the participants based on a list of 12 topics ranging from personal to more general. Participants assumed the role of interviewer or interviewee and changed roles after about 10 minutes. The transcribed interviews amount to about 70,000 words. Participants provided information about age, gender, L1/L2/L3, NNS/NS, composition of dyad (mixed/same sex; mixed/same age; exo-[NNS-NS]/endo-lingual [NNS-NNS]); NS status versus NNS; and frequency of previous use of French.

Table 4. *Distribution of participants in frequency categories according to the proportion of tu in occurrences of address pronouns*

| Frequency category | Number of NNS | Number of NS |
|--------------------|---------------|--------------|
| Zero % | 13 | 0 |
| .01%-50% | 10 | 0 |
| 50.01%-99.9% | 14 | 1 |
| Hundred % | 16 | 8 |

6.2. Analysis

The corpus contains 1,187 pronouns of address, 442 tokens of *vous* and 745 tokens of *tu*, which represents 62.3% of the total number of tokens of address pronouns. As the focus of our research is on interindividual variation, we calculated the proportion of instances of *tu* for every participant.⁵ The average of individual proportion of use of *tu* is 62.1% (SD = 41.9%). The large standard deviation suggests that the data are not normally distributed. A one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test shows that this is indeed the case: $Z = 2.02$, $p < .001$. We will therefore use nonparametric tests (two-sample K-S tests as alternatives to t-tests and Kruskal-Wallis tests instead of one-way ANOVAs). A nonparametric Spearman Rho correlation analysis will be used with age. Table 4 offers a view of the distribution of the participants across 4 frequency categories based on the proportion of *tu* in occurrences of address pronouns.

It is striking that 13 participants (i.e., 21% of the total number and all NNS) do not use *tu* a single time during their exchange, while 24 participants (i.e., 44% of the total and 8 out of 9 NS) use only *tu*. Other participants (but no NS) alternate between *vous* and *tu* within the same utterance. An illustration of this free variation can be seen in examples (2) and (3).

(2) Tara *bon d'accord, et euh quand tu finis votre examen vous voulez travailler où et faire quoi?*

'good OK, and err when you (T) finish your exam you (V) want to work where and do what?'

(3) Rachel *et votre vous vous avons dit euh tu as dit euh euh avant que vous êtes une Catalane?*

'and your (V) you you (V) have said err you (T) have said err err before that you (V) are Catalan?'

These NNS who switch back and forth between *tu* and *vous* are typically less advanced speakers. The sociolinguistic appropriateness does not seem to be a question, rather somehow expressing "you" seems to be the main goal.

Several NS in our study found that the transition from *vous* to *tu* with their non-native interlocutors required explicit comments. Hence a negotiation phase at the start of the interaction. In Example (4) Aman (a female NNS) starts the interview with Angela (a female NS from France) using the formal possessive adjective *votre*. Angela tells her explicitly to use the second person singular. As Aman

does not seem to know the meaning of the verb *tutoyer*, Angela repeats the verb in the infinitive: *il faut me tutoyer* and after a short pause adds the pronoun *tu*. Aman agrees, using the *vous* form again. Angela insists on the use of *tu*. After avoiding using either pronoun in the following sentence, Aman, switches effectively to *tu* but persists in the second person plural for the verb (*dites*). She does use the correct possessive adjective (*ton*) but does not agree the gender correctly with the noun *famille*.

(4) Aman (NNS) *All right d'accord je suis en compagnie de Angela aujourd'hui # maintenant nous parlons de votre famille.*

'All right, OK, I'm in the company of Angela today # now we speak about your (V) family.'

Angela (NS) *Oui tutoie-moi # non.*

'Yes, use (T) *tu* with me # no.'

Aman *Pardon?*

'Sorry?'

Angela *Il faut me tutoyer # euh tu.*

'One has to use *tu* with me # err *tu*.'

Aman *Tu oui # d'accord si vous voulez.*

'*Tu* yes # OK if you want (V).'

Angela *Non non tu # si tu veux oui.*

'No no *tu* # if you (T) would be so kind yes.'

Aman *Aujourd'hui on parle de toi et moi # de toi et moi # d'accord tu me dites euh de quelle chose de ton famille ?*

'Today we speak about you and me # you and me # OK you (T) tell (2nd person plural) me err about what thing about your (T) family?'

This exchange could be an indication that Aman's unwillingness to switch to *vous* may be linked to her unease with the second person singular. As Aman continues to use the formal address form (example [5]), Angela insists again on the use of *tu*, explaining that she does not like to be addressed that way. Aman then admits that she does not know the meaning of the verb *tutoyer*. Angela code-switches to English, to make her wish clear.

(5) Aman *Oui vous êtes trop gentille excusez-moi.*

'Yes you (V) are too kind forgive (V) me.'

Angela *Tutoie-moi.*

'Use *tutoiement* (T) with me.'

Aman *Haha?*

'Haha?'

Angela *Tutoie-moi.*

'Use *tutoiement* (T) with me.'

Aman *Tutoie-moi qu'est-ce que c'est ?*

'"Tutoie-moi" what does it mean?'

Angela *Oui you know don't be ne soit pas trop formelle avec moi.*

'Yes you know don't be don't be too formal with me.'

Aman *Ah d'accord.*

'Ah OK.'

Angela *Il faut me tutoyer.*

'One (i.e., Aman) has to use *tu* with me.'

Aman *Ah tu ah d'accord.*

'Ah "tu" ah OK.'

We will now analyse the relation between the use of *tu* and *endogenous* variables.⁶ A Spearman correlation analysis revealed a nonsignificant negative correlation between age of the participants and use of *tu* ($Rho(61) = -.19, p = ns$).

A two-sample K-S test showed no significant difference (see Table 5) in the use of *tu* between the female participants and the male participants ($K-S Z = 1.14, p = ns$).

A two-sample K-S test did reveal a significant difference in use of *tu* ($K-S Z = 1.63, p < .01$) between the NS and the NNS, the former using more *tu* than the latter (see Table 5).

A Kruskal-Wallis ANOVA with frequency of speaking French as the main independent variable and proportion of *tu* as the dependent variable showed a highly significant effect ($df = 2, Chi2 = 23.5, p < .0001$). More frequent use of French is clearly linked to an increased use of *tu*.

A two-sample K-S test revealed that the NNS who have a system with multiple pronouns in their L1 used *tu* significantly more ($K-S Z = 1.38, p < .045$) than the NNS who only use one form in their L1 (i.e., English L1) (see Table 5).

The English L1 participants who knew an additional language with multiple pronouns of address did *not* use significantly more *tu* than the English L1 participants for whom French was the only foreign language ($K-S Z = .37, p = ns$), although the difference goes in the expected direction.

We will now consider the link between the *exogeneous* variables and *tu*, i.e., dyad characteristics. A two-sample K-S test shows that the gender composition of the dyad has no effect on use of *tu* ($K-S Z = .66, p = ns$) (see Table 5).

Did the age of the interlocutor influence the participants' choice of pronoun? The answer is clearly yes. A two-sample K-S test shows a highly significant difference between the two groups ($K-S Z = 1.77, p < .004$): the participants in same-age dyads use *tu* much more than the participants in different-age dyads (see Table 5). The last exogeneous variable to be considered is that of the endolingual or exolingual character of the interaction for the NNS. Use of *tu* seemed more limited for the NNS interacting with other NNS compared to the NNS speaking with their NS interlocutors (see Table 5). However, this difference is not statistically significant ($K-S Z = 1.13, p = ns$).

To sum up, the findings of Study 2 fully support hypothesis 1 (NS used *tu* more frequently than NNS); reject hypothesis 2 (the tendency for female and older speakers to use fewer *tu* fails to reach significance); fully support hypothesis 3 (frequent users of French used more *tu*); and fully support hypothesis 4 (NNS with a system of multiple address pronouns in their L1 used more *tu*).

The results provide, as far as the link between the exogeneous variables and use of *tu* is concerned, partial support for hypothesis 5 (gender of the interlocutor is not significantly linked to use of *tu*, but there is a strong effect for age of the interlocutor, with higher use of *tu* in same-age dyads); and no support for hypothesis 7 (NNS speaking with NS do not use significantly more *tu* than NNS speaking with other NNS).

7. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of the first study on self-reported use of address pronouns and of the second study on the actual choice of address pronouns in dyadic conversations allow us to draw a broad picture of variation patterns. The effects of age and gender of the speaker went in the expected directions but failed to reach significance. These two variables have a stronger effect when they are characteristics of the interlocutor. Self-reports indicate that males and older interlocutors are more often addressed with *vous* than females and younger interlocutors. Gender of the interlocutor was not a significant factor in actual use, but age clearly was. The most important exogeneous variable turned out to be the status of the interlocutor. Strangers are almost always addressed with *vous* by both our NS and NNS. However, clear differences exist between NS and NNS. The NS use *tu* much more frequently with known interlocutors but almost never with unknown interlocutors.

Table 5. Effect of the independent variables on the proportions of *tu* in the speech of NS and NNS of French

| Independent variables | | n | mean (%) | SD | Value of p |
|--------------------------------|---|----|----------|------|-------------------|
| Gender | Female | 34 | 52.2 | 29.9 | ns |
| | Male | 28 | 72.9 | 33.8 | |
| Status of French | NS | 9 | 95.6 | 14.8 | .01 |
| | NNS | 53 | 56.5 | 42.5 | |
| Frequency of speaking | Rarely | 29 | 32.7 | 39.7 | .000 ¹ |
| | Sometimes | 13 | 74.2 | 26.3 | |
| | Often | 20 | 96.9 | 9.9 | |
| NNS and address pronouns in L1 | Multiple pronouns | 31 | 76.9 | 36.9 | .045 |
| | Single pronoun | 22 | 45.2 | 41.2 | |
| English L1 participants with: | No knowledge of additional Ls | 14 | 29.9 | 40.3 | ns |
| | Knowledge of additional Ls with multiple pronouns | 16 | 57.7 | 38.7 | |
| Dyad composition | Same gender | 39 | 58.7 | 42.8 | ns |
| | Mixed gender | 23 | 67.8 | 40.3 | |
| | Same age | 46 | 72.7 | 36.6 | .004 |
| | Different age | 16 | 31.8 | 42.1 | |
| | NNS in endolingual exchange | 46 | 51.3 | 43.3 | ns |
| | NNS in exolingual exchange | 7 | 83.3 | 20.8 | |

The NNS follow this pattern, but not as consistently: they might occasionally use *vous* with known interlocutors, but also *tu* with unknown interlocutors. Both cases can lead to explicit intervention by the interlocutor to change the address pronoun (especially in exolingual interactions). We argued in Dewaele (2002b) that the phenomenon of instability or free variation in the choice of pronouns of address can be approached through Chaos and Complexity Theory (CCT) (cf. Larsen-Freeman 1997). CCT deals with complex, dynamical and nonlinear systems. It focuses on processes rather than states, and it considers the synthesis between systems by looking at interactions between individual components. There is no central executive entity directing the components, no global objective, only local interactions. Gleick (1987) used the metaphor of the herd to illustrate this type of system: it moves in one particular direction although some individual members of the herd might be running in different directions. Herdina and Jessner (2002: 2) have also relied on CCT to present a “psycholinguistic model which sees change on an individual level as a function of time, that is, a focus is placed on the variability and dynamics of the individual speaker system”. We argued in Dewaele (2002b) that the development of pronoun choice happens in a nonlinear fashion. It is firstly determined by learners’ levels of grammatical competence and by the amount of sociolinguistic knowledge. Secondly, it depends on the variable reliance on implicit versus explicit knowledge. Grammatical and sociolinguistic knowledge is first explicit in nature and based in declarative memory (cf. Ullman 2001). It is only after frequent use of the TL with NS that learners develop implicit knowledge stored in implicit memory. This implicit knowledge consists of conceptual representations about the multiple pronouns of address system allowing the user to make automatic

decisions about appropriate use. As long as these conceptual representations are incomplete, sociolinguistic variation patterns of learner groups are scattered widely. The excerpts from our corpus showed the total lack of control of and confusion about the pronoun system for some NNS.

The present study offers further evidence in support of that hypothesis. Firstly the standard deviation values were found to be higher for NNS than for NS and a similar pattern emerged in the comparison of low frequency users of French and higher frequency users. As developmental pathways towards NSlike variation patterns are idiosyncratic, the amount of fluctuation will always be greater in NNS corpora. It is our contention that the instability in the system of address pronouns of intermediate L2 users of French diminishes gradually as they become more advanced. It reaches equilibrium point for an increasing number of situations, and the system behaves in more NS-like ways. Secondly, while in the conversations frequent users significantly favoured *tu* (i.e., dealing with known interlocutors), in the self-reports it emerged that frequent users preferred *vous* when addressing strangers and males. It suggests that they had picked up the variation patterns in the TL community. Thirdly, the fact that participants who had a system with multiple address pronouns in the L1 (e.g., Spanish, Dutch) distinguished themselves significantly from those with a single address pronoun system in the L1 (e.g., English), suggests that having a conceptual representation of a complex system in the L1 facilitates the acquisition of the conceptual representation in French interlanguage. It remains unclear however why participants who had a system with multiple address pronouns in the L1 also used *tu* more frequently with unknown interlocutors. The fact that the same trend (albeit nonsignificant) appeared within the group of English L1 speakers between those who knew additional languages with complex systems and the English-French bilinguals suggests that prior exposure to non-native languages can affect learners' use of pronouns (De Angelis 2002). Rehner, Mougeon, and Nadasdi (2003) have also reported a strong L1 effect on the pronoun choice (*nous/on*) in French interlanguage. Our NNS may need some prodding towards use of the *tu*, but once it has been used successfully in authentic social interactions, they may realize that as legitimate L2 users of French they are allowed to use informal variants. As Belz and Kinginger (2003: 642) put it: "awareness required to control these features (address form use) is not in itself universal in nature, but historically constituted, through participation, by and for each individual language user". That specific context, as well as the teaching methods and pedagogical materials – which display "a preference for simplicity and parsimony over accuracy" (Belz and Kinginger 2003: 641) – might explain the striking difference between our findings and those of Lyster and Rebuffot (2002). Their students overused *tu* while ours tended to use *vous* as the early default form. Sax (personal communication) suggests that the emphasis on communicative language instruction in North America means that learners encounter more occurrences of *tu* in their textbooks, and are encouraged to use *tu* when working in pairs, since the conversation is between young people/peers. As a consequence, North American learners become much more comfortable with the *tu* form to the point of overgeneralizing it inappropriately (cf. the example from Lyster and Rebuffot 2002). Why then was *vous* preferred in our two populations? A number of reasons spring to mind. Our participants in the two studies were on average older than the population used in Lyster and Rebuffot (2002). They might therefore have been more "socialized", i.e., have a superior understanding of the need to express respect through pronoun choice. They would also have had more opportunities to use French, or indeed other languages with multiple address pronouns, and acquired a deeper understanding of variation in address pronouns. A large proportion of participants would have learned French before the advent of communicative language teaching and the ubiquitous *tu* in the classroom. However, it remains unclear why participants with an L1 having multiple terms of address report using *tu* more often with unknown interlocutors. One would expect these participants to be overall better at appropriately using *vous* and *tu*, depending on the situation and interlocutor.

Finally, with sufficient sociolinguistic competence in French, one will appreciate the humor that originates from pronoun choice in the following extract from the novel *Dieu et moi* by the Belgian author Jacqueline Harpman (2001). The story starts with the peaceful death of the narrator, an elderly lady writer who is a firm nonbeliever. An angel comes to escort her to heaven where she is to meet with God. The angel uses *tu*, while the narrator stubbornly refuses to reciprocate and maintains an asymmetrical use of *vous*, which can be interpreted as sign of respect but also one of defiance:

L'ange fronça les sourcils. "Que fais-tu la ? – Je m'assieds. – Il faut partir. – Je ne rends pas de comptes sans savoir à qui et à quel propos. – A ton Créateur, voyons, dit l'ange, sur l'usage que tu as fait de ta vie". Vraiment ! "Qu'est-ce qui vous permet de me tutoyer ?" Il parut déconcerté. "Je suis l'Ange de la Mort. Je tutoie toutes les créatures. – Et moi, je suis Jacqueline Harpman. Puis-je vous offrir quelque chose ? Un verre d'eau ? Un whisky ?"(Harpman 2001: 8–9).

'The angel frowned. "What are you (T) doing? – I'm sitting down. It's time to go. I refuse to account for my actions if I don't know who I'm accounting to, nor why. – To your (T) creator, of course, said the angel, about how you've (T) lived your life". Really! "Why do you (V) think you can use the *tu* form with me?" He seemed surprised. "I'm the Angel of Death. I use *tu* with all creatures. And I am Jacqueline Harpman. Can I get you (V) something? A glass of water? A whisky?" '

Notes

1. The present study has benefited from a grant from the British Academy (SG-32409). We would like to thank Alex Housen and Colette Noyau for allowing us access to their students.
2. Degrees of freedom = 22 in this set of analyses.
3. Degrees of freedom = 100 in this set of analyses.
4. Degrees of freedom = 100 in this set of analyses.
5. As the focus is on the proportion of *tu* versus *vous*, we could as well have selected *vous* to illustrate the same patterns.
6. We did not perform separate analyses on the NS and the NNS because the sample of NS is too small.

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