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Discourse Competence in Near-Native Speakers of French

This dissertation examines highly successful second-language learners of French. Non-native speakers who have attained the highest possible levels of competence in a second language are known as near-native speakers. Existing research on near-native competence has focused predominantly on abstract mental representations of grammar. By contrast, little is known about how near-native speakers use language in everyday situations. To converse fluently and coherently, speakers must coordinate grammatical knowledge and pragmatic or discursive knowledge, an interface where second-language learners are known to experience difficulties. How a speaker constructs an utterance or a series of utterances depends on whether the information to be communicated has already been mentioned, is inferrable from context, or is entirely new to the discourse. Casual spoken French differs from the formal variety by making extensive use of numerous syntactic constructions to differentiate new from old information. Fluent and coherent speech depends on the mastery of these constructions, which serve as signposts for the other participants in the conversation. Ten second-language speakers of French were identified as having near-native grammatical competence as measured by their performance on Birdsong's (1992) acceptability judgment task for near-native speakers. The discourse knowledge of these speakers was then evaluated by means of data from three paper and paper/audio tasks as well as recordings of spontaneous conversations between each near-native speaker and a native-speaker friend or close acquaintance. Each conversation lasted between 45 and 55 minutes, yielding a corpus of 8.5 hours of casual speech. The near-natives constructed their spoken discourse in a nativelike way that suggests that they have mastered the interface between syntactic and discursive knowledge, despite the challenges that this area of linguistic competence presents to second-language learners. They were able to successfully use the syntax of spoken French to construct entirely nativelike discourse.