Review


Within the field of second language acquisition, the range of topics and research questions seems to grow every year. For example, the topics addressed at a recent conference in second language acquisition ranged from Universal Grammar, discourse analysis, second language (L2) reading, and interlanguage variation to typological universals, input, and second language instruction. One result of this increasing specialization is that it is difficult to keep up with the various assumptions that are held and with the approaches that are used by the researchers in each specialized area.

Richard Young's Variation in Interlanguage Morphology takes a step in the direction of presenting his colleagues with an approach to research that may be unfamiliar to many in other subareas of second language acquisition research. The approach taken espouses a multidimensional view of L2 speech production, which takes into account factors such as L2 proficiency, ethnicity of interlocutors, linguistic environment, and functional value. Essentially, Young's argument is that "the cause of variation in interlanguage cannot be attributed to one factor or factor group alone" (p. 162). Research in the area of

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interlanguage variation must account not only for the multiplicity of factors, but also for the complex interactions among those factors.

Whereas the study presented here is unique in the number of factors that it includes and informative in the results obtained, of equal interest is Young's discussion of the theoretical framework in which the study is situated and the approach that he takes to the investigation of interlanguage variation. The result is a work that is not only instructive, but also thorough and interesting.

My discussion will focus on three separate areas: (a) the general formal characteristics of the book, (b) the preliminary theoretical chapters, and (c) the study itself. From a formal perspective, the book has several notable features. First, it is very well-organized and thorough. For example, each chapter is concluded by a list of summary statements that focus on the major points of the chapter. Because each chapter covers a lot of material, these statements are helpful. Also, the appendices include a sample transcript and the entire body of coding strings used in the analysis of the data, both of which are quite interesting. Finally, Young's style is easy to read.

From a theoretical perspective, Young's three preliminary chapters constitute a valuable guide to issues of research design for those interested in second language acquisition and variation. Chapter 1 lays out the assumptions underlying variation studies. This chapter includes a general discussion of terminology pertinent to variation studies (e.g., Gumperz', 1964, notion of *verbal repertoire*, and Hymes', 1967, categories basic to the analysis of speech: *setting, participants, ends, art characteristics, communicative key, instrumentality, norms, and genre*). Young also introduces notions relevant to studies of variation in second language acquisition, including the distinction between *vertical* and *horizontal variability* (Corder, 1977), *attention to form* (Tarone, 1979) and *formality/informality of style* (Beebe, 1980; Tarone, 1985). Therefore, for those unfamiliar with variation studies, this chapter provides a
suitable background for understanding the key concepts in this area of research.

A review of native speaker variation studies in Chapter 2 groups the research based on the methods used (i.e., proportions of target-like variants displayed on a style diagram, implicational scaling, and variable rule analysis) and weighs the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. Of greater interest is the review of the empirical studies in interlanguage variation. These studies are examined based on the possible causes of variation: task, interlocutor, topic, and linguistic environment. Not only does Chapter 2 offer a concise, comprehensive review of studies of interlanguage variation, but it also presents a clear perspective on the different factors involved in interlanguage variation and on the ways in which different researchers have chosen to deal with the various factors.

In Chapter 3, Young briefly reviews several issues that must be addressed when choosing a research methodology. Included in this discussion is the use of observational data versus subjective data, quantitative versus qualitative approaches, direct or indirect data collection, longitudinal or cross-sectional data collection, and the appropriate linguistic level for analysis of variation. For example, Young examines the use of observational data and subjective data such as learners' introspections, think-aloud protocols, and grammatical intuitions in second language acquisition studies. He concludes that most learners are "not consciously aware of the ways in which their speech varies" (p. 59), thus making introspective data inappropriate for studies of variation. Although Young's treatment of each individual issue is brief, the discussion serves to provide sufficient background for the questions he addresses in the subsequent study and for the choices he has made in his research design.

These theoretical chapters leading up to the discussion of his own study make the volume well-suited for a research methods class. What makes this treatment of the issues especially instructive for students is that it takes the reader
through a research question step by step. Therefore, even though one might not always agree with the conclusions that Young draws, the presentation allows the reader to follow the formulation of his research question through to the implementation of a research design. Although the book presents only one type of research, Young is successful in highlighting some of the major issues in L2 research and in presenting the problems inherent in interlanguage variation research.

The remaining four chapters present the study itself (i.e., the design, hypotheses and motivation, analysis and results, and discussion and conclusions), which aims to offer some insight into the understanding of the “highly variable speech of learners of second languages” (p. 1). Specifically, Young addresses the following questions:

(a) How far is the observed morphological variation in interlanguage speech systematic? (b) Does the pattern of variation in learners’ systems change as acquisition proceeds? and (c) What are the relative causal contributions of linguistic environment, sociolinguistic context, stage of acquisition, and communicative redundancy to interlanguage variation? (p. 1)

Based on the research issues presented in the previous chapters, Young categorizes his research design as an objective approach, espousing a multidimensional view of second language acquisition, and using a quantitative method of analysis, with a direct means of data collection, and a complex multivariate research design.

One of the most valuable aspects of this book is the introduction to VARBRUL, the statistical analysis that Young uses in his study. This brief introduction is excellent for researchers who are unfamiliar with this program. In investigating the effects of multiple factors on variation, the VARBRUL program shows the probability of each factor’s influence on the resulting variation. In his presentation of the program, Young explains how the program works and how the coding is implemented. He lists all the possible values to be encoded for each
of his 10 factors and shows an example coding string for a single hypothetical set of values. For those interested in additional discussion of the theory behind the VARBRUL program, Young also cites various articles reviewing the use of VARBRUL and debating its conceptual basis.

Young's ambitious study examines the variability in L2 learners' speech production of the plural marker, referred to as (s) plural. The subjects were native speakers of dialects of Chinese who were residing in the United States at the time of the study. Young explores the possible causes of variation in suppliance of (s) plural, which were categorized by several factor groups:

1. **psychosocial factors**: ethnicity/L1 of interviewer
2. **developmental factors**: ESL proficiency level
3. **linguistic environment**: definiteness of NP, animacy of NP, position of noun within the NP, syntactic function of NP, preceding and following phonological segments
4. **communicative redundancy**: redundant plural marking within the NP and noun-verb concord.

Briefly, the findings revealed significant effects for proficiency level, definiteness of NP, animacy of NP, position of noun within NP (i.e., prenominal modifiers), syntactic function of NP (i.e., adverbials and complements), and preceding phonological segment. The study also found different effects for low and high proficiency subjects. For example, the preceding phonological segment was a factor influencing low proficiency subjects only. In addition, the animacy of the noun inhibited production of (s) plural for low proficiency subjects while promoting its production for high proficiency subjects. The results of the study are enlightening in so far as they reveal the complex interrelation of the different factors examined. Young's analysis and discussion of the data are insightful in making the connections between these different factors, specifically the interrelation between plural marking, numerals, adverbials and complements, definiteness, and the familiarity of the interlocutors.
Some of the conclusions, however, are not so straightforward. Young argues that interlanguage variation is indeed systematic based on the finding that for the low proficiency group, variation is

strongly conditioned by the phonological shape of the final segment of the noun stem, and occurs most often in measure expressions in which concord between numerals or quantifiers and the noun plural inflections appears to be a prototypical application of plural marking. (p. 164)

He further argues that because these subjects demonstrated systematicity in their variation, the notion of nonsystematic variability during the early stages of acquisition put forth by Ellis (1985) may be rejected.

Closer examination of the makeup of the low proficiency group, however, shows that the characterization of this group of subjects may not be totally accurate. The low proficiency group is defined as those subjects having a score below 410 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the Preliminary Test of English as a Foreign Language (PreTOEFL). However, the members of this group differ in an important way: the length of stay for each of the 6 subjects is quite varied, from 1 month to 16 years (i.e., the actual lengths of stay being 1 month, 4 months, 1 year, 3 years, 4.5 years, and 16 years). The combination of low proficiency and a long length of stay reveals something about three of these subjects: that they may not be considered active learners. The underlying assumption made in this study is that low proficiency subjects are active learners and that they ultimately progress toward higher proficiency. This is not necessarily true, especially in the case of the 3 subjects who have resided in the United States the longest and have not progressed.

This difference may indeed be a factor in the issue of systematic versus nonsystematic variation. That is, subjects who are not active learners—namely, those who may have fossilized—may exhibit systematic variation, whereas subjects who are truly active learners and who are of a low proficiency
level may indeed have nonsystematic variation. However, both types of subjects are characterized as having a low level of proficiency. Although it is true, as Young claims, that plural marking within the low proficiency group is systematically affected by the phonological environment, it can be argued that these subjects do not constitute a homogeneous group with regard to their status as active learners. It can further be argued that from this subject pool and this body of data, we cannot yet reject the notion of nonsystematic variability during the early stages of acquisition. If these subjects are indeed different, they may not be in the early stages of acquisition although their proficiency levels are low. Even with this caveat in mind, the study exemplifies an approach to L2 research that is worthy of serious consideration and debate.

The overall effect of this work is two-fold. From an instructional perspective, Young's work serves as an extensive introduction to studies of interlanguage variation and to a multidimensional view of interlanguage speech production. As previously stated, this book is relevant and instructive for students and researchers alike in not only the area of interlanguage variation, but in other areas of second-language acquisition as well. Secondly, the study itself offers many insights into interlanguage variation. The results do indeed demonstrate that different factors affect L2 speech production in intricately interrelated ways. If VARBRUL is a reliable analytical tool, then the application of this type of analysis may give a more complete picture of the causal contributions of these factors as well as of others (e.g., task, L1, or length of stay). To judge the effectiveness and reliability of this tool, I feel that it is necessary to expand its application in interlanguage variation studies to different subject populations.

Young has produced a work that is concise, interesting, informative, and thought-provoking.

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