Construction of L1/L2 use in informal social networks: A study of learners of Japanese in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This study examines opportunities for intermediate students of Japanese at an Australian university to use the language in their informal social networks. Through interviews as well as analysis of the students' natural interactions, the study focuses on the major factors affecting the construction of these opportunities.

The findings reveal that the students expanded their social networks with Japanese speakers during their first year of university. More importantly, the study indicates that the same students sometimes had difficulty constructing interactions in Japanese in these networks. This difficulty can be attributed to various factors, including the learners' history as an L2 learner/user and some norms in the community where the learners were situated. However, the analysis of L1/L2 selection and its negotiation in their interactions demonstrates that the construction of L2 interactions also appears to be mediated by certain other factors, such as accommodated goals of interaction and specific discourse strategies.

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Introduction

There are a significant number of studies that highlight the importance for students of moving beyond the classroom and participating in interactions in an L2 in real-life situations (Savignon, 1997; van Lier, 1996). The possible benefits of out-of-class L2 interactions include enhancing learners' sensitivity to the target culture, as well as increasing their self-confidence and their willingness to use the L2, which, in turn, has a positive effect on L2 learning processes (Archangeli, 1999; Stoller, Hodges & Kimbrough, 1995; Yorozu, 2001). However, few of these studies examine how opportunities for L2 use are constructed, and many seem to assume that as long as contact with speakers of the target language (TL) is available, TL use will be unproblematic.

There are, however, an increasing number of studies that discuss the construction of opportunities to use L2 from post-structural perspectives (Miller, 1999, 2000, 2004; Norton, 2000; Norton Peirce, 1995; Norton and Toohey, 2001; Pavlenko, 2002; Siegal, 1996). These studies argue that although learners actively shape their own L2 use and learning experience, they can construct such experience only to the extent that their sociocultural contexts allow them to do so, and that the construction of this experience is linked to that of the learners' identity. As Neustupný (1987, p. 7) rightly maintains, there will be no practice and no learning unless language learners can find speakers of the L2 who agree to communicate with them. One of the principal ways to find such speakers in out-of-class contexts is through the learners' personal social networks.[1]

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[1] The study employs Milroy's (1987, p. 178) definition of social networks, namely, 'the informal social relationships contracted by an individual'.

Linguistic behaviour occurring within speakers' social networks has been one of the major concerns in the field of soci-olinguistics. Despite the increasing importance of the concept of networks in this field, as well as in other disciplines, L2 use in learners' social networks has received little empirical attention to date, compared to network research relating to other sociolinguistic topics (de Bot & Stoessel, 2002; Preston, 1989). In particular, very little research has been concerned with foreign language (FL) learners' L1/L2 selection and the construction of opportunities for them to use an L2 in their social network contexts.

Furthermore, theories about language selection and types of code-switching have mostly been developed based on empirical studies conducted in bilingual community settings (for example, Auer, 1988; Myers-Scotton, 1998). Hence, apart from a number of studies in educational or semi-educational settings (for example, Kasper, 2004; Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2005; Masuda, 2006; Ustunel & Seedhouse, 2005), few studies to date have applied these theories to other social settings. The current study therefore aims to address the issue of the construction of L1/L2 use by applying some code-switching theories to the under-investigated setting of FL learners' social networks. In conjunction with these theories, the study draws upon some concepts from sociocultural perspectives in order to illuminate the social and interactive processes of creating opportunities for L2 use in learners' interactions at both micro- and macro-levels. Specifically, the study addresses two questions:

- What are the salient features in the L1/L2 use patterns within the informal social networks in which six learners of Japanese at an Australian university use the language?

  and

- How is this L1/L2 use constructed in the learners' actual social interactions?
  Even though the L2 under consideration is Japanese, the results presented here should be relevant more widely, as will be discussed below.

Research on L1/L2 use outside classrooms

Previous research into language selection, its negotiation and code-switching was predominantly conducted either in non-institutional bilingual communities (for example, Auer, 1984; Li Wei, 1994; Milroy & Li Wei, 1995) or in formal language-learning settings (for example, Duff & Polio, 1990; Liebscher & Dailey-O'Cain, 2005; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Ustunel & Seedhouse, 2005). As Rampton (1995) points out, however, research into bilingual code-switching often conflicts with SLA research in the sense that research into bilingual communities generally regards language mixing as a distinctive new variety or as a useful strategy, while research into formal language-learning settings tends to interpret it as an error or a lack of adequate linguistic competence. Rampton also explains that in the bilingual code-switching literature, code-switching is interpreted as an in-group phenomenon, restricted to those who share the same expectations and rules of interpretation regarding the use of the two languages. On the other hand, he claims that in the SLA literature, the methodological approaches that underpin the study of code-switching are very limited. Rampton (1995, p. 280) then proposes the term "code crossing" in order to focus on "code alternation by people who are not accepted members of the group associated with the second language they employ". He argues that the concept of "code crossing" allows for dealing with language proficiency issues that have been neglected in the bilingual code-switching literature, and also allows for integration of analysis of code-switching into the study of SLA.

As mentioned earlier, the language selection of L2 learners outside the classroom has provoked little interest. There are, however, some studies that examine the social significance of language choice in semi-instructional settings. For example, Kasper (2004) examined the orientations of some beginner learners of German as a FL towards the activity of a dyadic conversation with NSs of German. The participants had no instruction other than to talk about anything that they liked, using German as much as possible. Utilizing a conversation analysis (CA) approach, Kasper found that the learner's code-switching from L2 to L1 served as one device by which the learner, as a novice speaker of L2, requested an occasion for L2 learning from the NS, who acted as an L2 expert. In addition, Kasper revealed another function of the learner's code-switching to L1 as being one of the techniques that enable the learner to display interactional competence, including achieving strong agreement, without disrupting the flow of the on-going interaction. In a similar semi-instructional setting, Holtzer (2003) identified the use of code-switching to the learner's L1 by the NS to assist the learner. The researcher interpreted this code-switching behaviour as a communication strategy that interactants employ in an attempt to solve communication problems that occur due to problems in the learner's L2 comprehension.

Some poststructural studies underscore the idea that the conditions for the establishment of communication in L2 should not be taken for granted (Duff, 2003; Pavlenko, 2002). A number of studies demonstrate that some TL speakers regard L2 learners as incompetent interactants and refuse to interact with them (Kanno, 2000; Miller, 1999; Siegal, 1996). Siegal's (1996) case study of a white western woman learning Japanese in Japan, for instance, shows that NSs of Japanese may refuse to interact with western learners in Japanese; and furthermore, even if they do interact with them, NSs are unlikely to provide feedback about instances of inappropriate pragmatic usage. Siegal argues that ignoring pragmatic inappropriateness in the classroom as well as in everyday interaction deprives learners of some of the linguistic capital that they need to become proficient in Japanese.