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Acquiring sociolinguistic competence

A longitudinal study into developing sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in specialized L2 English

Abstract

In this paper, we focus on training future translators. More specifically, we analyze how L2 sociolinguistic competence develops in translation trainees. As intercultural communicators, translators must constantly judge language appropriateness in specialized communicative contexts. Therefore, they require advanced levels of L2 sociolinguistic competence. Using monolingual (English), style-based revision tasks, we collected data from 21 Dutch-speaking translation trainees for three consecutive years. We highlight how translation trainees detect and correct linguistic (in)appropriateness in formal contexts. Our data reveal that trainees' overall sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality is underdeveloped when they start undergraduate training. It consistently improves during training, but generally falls short of the 50 % benchmark. More nuanced insights into sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality follow similar trends, with *receptive* sensitivity being relatively better developed than *productive* sensitivity. Our results demonstrate that high-quality L2 English training in translation programs requires sociolinguistically responsive language curriculum design to maximize the development of L2 sociolinguistic awareness.

1 Introduction

In this paper, we investigate the development of sociolinguistic competence in L2 English as an essential component of translation competence. Since translators are expected to comprehend and produce language that is sociolinguistically appropriate in various specialized communicative contexts, L2 sociolinguistic competence is an essential feature of translation competence. Therefore, developing L2 sociolinguistic competence is crucial in translation training. Translation requires translators not only to grasp meanings in source texts (STs), but also to interpret STs stylistically to ensure appropriate stylistic transfer to target texts (TTs).¹ The importance of (L2) sociolinguistic competence goes

¹ This is the case for direct (L2–L1) and inverse (L1–L2) translation. Translators often work into their L1s. However, in practice, inverse translation is inevitable, especially in countries where the primary language is a language of lesser diffusion (Ferreira/Schwieter 2017). Since Dutch is an example of a language of lesser diffusion, the participants' translation training program in our study includes both direct and

beyond ST comprehension and TT production. Translators must also be able to judge ST style for alignment with the style of the materials they want to use as translation tools (e. g., corpora, dictionaries, search engines), for example, by taking the translation brief into account. For languages such as English, with an abundance of (online) materials and tools, the appropriate selection of materials and tools becomes a competence in itself, which is often recognized as a crucial component of translation (revision) competence (e. g., Robert/Remael/Ureel 2016). Consequently, it is imperative that L2 learners specializing in translation develop receptive *and* productive sensitivity to stylistic (in)appropriateness during their training. The ability to make style-related linguistic judgments is fundamental to the development of sociolinguistic competence, which Holmes and Wilson (2017: 463) define as “[t]he knowledge which underlies people’s ability to use language appropriately.” In this paper, we expound the significance of L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees’ L2 training. Our aim is to map if and how translation trainees’ receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality develops as their proficiency in L2 English increases during undergraduate translation training. This paper is part of a larger research project, in which we collected quantitative and qualitative data. In this paper, we focus on the quantitative data, reporting the results for linguistic appropriateness judgment (LAJ) tasks and focusing on *overall* sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (i. e., combining grammar and lexis). In another publication for the same research project, we focus on grammatical (in)formality, excluding lexis (Ureel et al. 2022). In Section 2, we introduce our study. First, we highlight the relevance of developing L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation (and L2) training (Section 2.1). Next, we define key concepts and formulate our research questions (Section 2.2).

2 L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation training

2.1 L2 linguistic competence in translation competence models

In 2007, Gouadec controversially stated that translation training curriculum design is a somewhat overrated discipline:

It is high time academics stopped pretending the design of translator training courses is a complicated matter. After many years of well-informed debate, everyone now knows what the contents and methods should be, and those who do not should not really be attempting to set up courses at all.
(Gouadec 2007: 327–328)

What appears straightforward to Gouadec does not appear so to others. For instance, Kearns (2013) reacts to Gouadec’s claim by asking why – if translation training curriculum design is so self-explanatory – considerable research is still ongoing in the field of Translation Studies and why there is still much disagreement about the contents of translation curricula. Studies regularly cast new light on the question of how translation trainees can be best prepared for their future profession. This highlights that agreement

inverse translation. The concept of directionality adds even more importance to the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence for our trainees.

on translation training curriculum design is less unanimous than Gouadec presumes. The rapidly changing nature of the translation industry and the heterogeneity of the profession itself fuel debates on translation training curriculum design. Every translation assignment sets different requirements, which makes preparing translation trainees for their future profession all the more challenging. Nevertheless, scholars and practitioners agree that developing linguistic competence is one of the main priorities of translation training.

In recent years, translation competence models have been developed and updated in an attempt to streamline the design of translation training programs. These competence models all share a clear linguistic dimension. A European example is the EMT translation competence model (EMT Expert Group 2022), in which the first competence is called ‘Language and culture’. It encompasses “all the general or language-specific linguistic, sociolinguistic, cultural and transcultural knowledge and skills” and it is “the basis of advanced translation competence” (EMT Expert Group 2022: 6). Another well-established competence model is the model suggested by the PACTE (Process of Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation) research group. In the PACTE model, the ‘bilingual sub-competence’ includes “pragmatic, sociolinguistic, textual, grammatical and lexical knowledge in the two languages” (Hurtado Albir 2017: 39). The fact that translation trainees are first and foremost L2 learners is at the center of our paper, since we focus on the development of L2 linguistic competence in translation trainees. More specifically, we focus on translation trainees’ sociolinguistic competence. The development of sociolinguistic competence in the language of study is essential for all L2 learning processes, but even more so for translation trainees. In Section 2.2, we elaborate on the importance of L2 sociolinguistic competence for (future) translators, in addition to other concepts relevant to our study.

2.2 Style-shifting competence, (L2) sociolinguistic competence and sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality

As mentioned above, sociolinguistic competence is the ability to use language appropriately. Howard (2022: 152) defines sociolinguistic competence as “the speaker’s ability to vary his/her language use in context, with various factors affecting the choice of linguistic features used”. Sociolinguists generally distinguish between two types of language variation: interspeaker variation (i. e., variation between speakers) and intraspeaker variation (i. e., variation within a speaker). While interspeaker variation results from social constraints (e. g., class), intraspeaker variation results from stylistic constraints (Rickford/Eckert 2001; Honeybone 2011). Individual language users shift their style in accordance with the communicative context. This choice is determined by different contextual elements, such as topic, setting and conversational partners (Labov 1972; Holmes/Wilson 2017). In this study, we focus on one particular component of intraspeaker, or stylistic, variation: sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality.

Increasing L2 learners’ language awareness makes their language more native-like. Geeslin and Long (2014: 237) explains that L2 learners must “develop the tools to

respond appropriately to the social (interactional) situations in which they find themselves” and, in doing so, they are “able to demonstrate precisely the linguistic variation that native speakers use to respond to differing situations.” To analyze social context, translation trainees must develop sensitivity to source-language (SL) and target-language (TL) style. Boase-Beier (2020: 1) explains that, “style is central to the way we construct and interpret texts.”² However, translation trainees’ development of stylistic awareness has not been explored systematically to our knowledge. Our paper examines linguistic (in)formality as a key component of style. Pinker (2014: 201) highlights that “[e]very writer commands a range of styles that are appropriate to different times and places. A formal style that is appropriate for the inscription on a genocide memorial will differ from a casual style that is appropriate for an email to a close friend”. Informal situations may require an informal style (e. g., *She has lots of responsibilities*), while formal situations may call for a more formal style (e. g., *She has numerous responsibilities*). The more linguistic choice language users command, the better equipped they will be to act appropriately in different social contexts (Crystal 2004). The differences between informality and formality are not either/or distinctions, but rather, distinctions in terms of *degree* of formality. Language users move along a continuum when they undertake informal-to-formal or formal-to-informal style-shifting (see Figure 1).

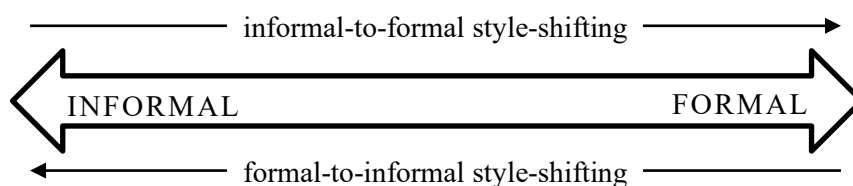


Fig. 1: Style-shifting on the linguistic (in)formality continuum

Developing sociolinguistic competence implies making language users more sensitive to style-shifting and enabling them to move along the linguistic (in)formality continuum. This is crucial for all L2 learners, but even more so for translation trainees, since they will be required to assess ST style and translate the text accordingly into the TL. Consequently, translation trainees are L2 learners who must develop high levels of receptive and productive sensitivity to stylistic (in)appropriateness to facilitate appropriate comprehension and production of style in the translation process.

Developing sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in L2 learners has to date received limited academic attention, despite burgeoning research into L2 sociolinguistics. Our paper aims to fill that gap. Previous studies have touched upon important elements related to linguistic (in)formality, but the studies are limited in at least three ways. First, much research into linguistic (in)formality has focused on linguistic (in)formality in L1 English (e. g., Joos 1967; Labov 1966, 1972, 2006). Second, studies into linguistic

² Boase-Beier’s use of the concept of style differs slightly from ours. Boase-Beier focuses primarily on literary translation, whereas we approach style from a sociolinguistic perspective.

(in)formality in L2 English are mostly confined to English-as-a-lingua-franca (ELF) contexts. For example, Durham (2011, 2014, 2016) conducted research into the use of English in Switzerland, where English is used as a lingua franca alongside the four national languages (German, French, Italian, Romansh). Durham (2014) concluded that many Swiss L2 speakers of English do not attain native-like stylistic range in English. A third line of enquiry has examined linguistic (in)formality in L2 learning, but these studies have focused on L2 French. Most of these studies have investigated the educational contexts in which L2 learners acquire sensitivity to stylistic appropriateness in French (e. g., Rehner/Mougeon/Nadasdi 2003; Sax 2003; Etienne/Sax 2009). Like the learners in Durham's research, the L2 learners in the studies into L2 French did not attain the same stylistic range as L1 speakers.

In our paper, we focus on linguistic (in)formality; more specifically receptive and productive sensitivity to L2 English in a formal academic context. Our participants are undergraduate translation trainees studying L2 English in Antwerp (Belgium). We hypothesize that our trainees experience difficulties accommodating to formal contexts, basing our hypothesis on experience with teaching L2 English and on existing research (e. g., Guilquin/Paquot 2008). The amount of informal input that L2 learners of English are exposed to outside of language classrooms (in the Western world) substantially outweighs the amount of formal input that they are (or can be) exposed to in classroom settings. In recent years, we have witnessed an influx in the use of informal English because of societal and technological changes. The ubiquity of Anglo-Saxon popular culture and the increased use of digital communication have led to increased informalization in English (e. g., McCulloch 2019). Guilquin and Paquot (2008: 41) argue that "one of the problems experienced by EFL learners is that they tend to use features that are more typical of speech than of academic prose, which suggests that they are largely unaware of register differences". This suggests that L2 learners of English are not always able to detect inappropriate uses of informal English in more formal contexts. We believe that a myriad of documented factors (e. g., omnipresence of Anglo-Saxon popular culture, increased digital communication, informalization of English, register unawareness) have created an input bias for L2 learners of English in much of the Western world. This imbalance puts learners at a disadvantage in formal communicative contexts and creates pedagogical challenges.

This paper aims to find out if and how translation trainees develop receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality as their proficiency in L2 English increases during undergraduate translation training. We formulated the following main research question: How does sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees' L2 English develop during undergraduate translation training? To answer this question, we formulated two sub-questions: (1) How does translation trainees' sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality develop in (monolingual) style-based LAJ tasks during undergraduate translation training? and (2) Are there developmental similarities and/or differences between

receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality?³ In what follows, we will first discuss our methodology (Section 3). Subsequently, we will present (Section 4) and discuss (Section 5) our results, concluding our study in Section 6.

3 Methodology

We opted for a pre-experimental one-group pretest–posttest research design, using an online (Qualtrics-administered) survey as our data-collection tool. The first part of the survey contained questions about the participants' profiles (e. g., age, nationality, L1, educational level). In the second part, we asked the participants to perform a number of style-based LAJ tasks. In what follows, we provide information about the participants (Section 3.1), the data-collection tool (Section 3.2) and operationalization considerations (Section 3.3).

3.1 Participants

Our participants were 21 undergraduate translation trainees, studying English Applied Linguistics at a Belgian university. We had full data sets (spanning three consecutive years of data collection) on all measures for all participants. At the beginning of our study, the participants' average age was 18.7 years ($SD = 1.4$) and the age range was 17–23 years. The majority of the participants were Belgian ($n = 18$), of whom three had dual citizenship (Belgian combined with Australian, Moroccan or Norwegian). The remaining three participants were Dutch ($n = 2$) and Chinese ($n = 1$). All participants indicated that Dutch was their L1, with three indicating bilingual (1 Dutch–Berber, 2 Dutch–Chinese) and one trilingual (Dutch–French–Norwegian) status.

3.2 Apparatus and materials

We collected longitudinal data over three consecutive academic years (2016–2017, 2017–2018, 2018–2019) and tracked participants' progress throughout their undergraduate translation training (3-year bachelor's program of Applied Linguistics). Every year, we asked the participants to perform style-based linguistic appropriateness judgment (LAJ) tasks for 50 English sentences.⁴ Students were asked to judge the (in)appropriateness of each sentence in formal written academic English and to

³ The current study and Ureel et al. (2022) form the pilot study (i. e., diagnostic phase) of a larger experiment-based research project (Ureel et al. 2022). In the larger research project, the question of *how to develop L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees* is addressed.

⁴ We developed linguistic appropriateness judgement (LAJ) tasks prior to setting up our study, bearing in mind some fundamental components discussed in Section 3.2 and methodological findings about collecting judgment data. For additional information about using judgments in linguistic and L2 research, please consult Spinner and Gass (2019).

determine whether style-based revision was required.⁵ The academic context remained unchanged for the 50 sentences and was specified for each sentence to avoid confusion (see Figure 2). Ten of the 50 sentences tested the participants' sensitivity to stylistic *appropriateness*. These ten sentences were acceptable in formal academic English and required no revision (see Example Sentence 1 below). We tested sensitivity to stylistic *inappropriateness* in the remaining 40 sentences. Of the 40 sentences, 20 tested sensitivity to *grammatical* inappropriateness (see Example Sentence 2 below) and 20 tested sensitivity to *lexical* inappropriateness (see Example Sentence 3 below). In this paper, we report on the results of the overall test (i. e., 50 items).⁶ We also compare the participants' receptive sensitivity (i. e., ability to *detect* stylistic mismatches) and productive sensitivity (i. e., ability to *correct* stylistic mismatches) to linguistic (in)formality.

For each sentence, we asked the participants the same question: Is the sentence below acceptable in formal written academic English? If the participants deemed the sentence acceptable, they had to indicate this and leave the sentence unchanged. If they deemed the sentence unacceptable, they had to indicate which element of the sentence was problematic and revise the sentence if they knew a more appropriate alternative. For each sentence, we used the same question–answer format (see Figure 2).

The book is still considered the best book on qualitative methods, with a huge section on models of evaluation and useful insights into interviewing participants.

I think ...

- The sentence is acceptable in formal written academic English and no change is necessary.
- The sentence is not acceptable in formal written academic English. The only problem is I don't know which part has to be changed to make the sentence acceptable.
- The sentence is not acceptable in formal written academic English and I know which part of the sentence has to be changed to make the sentence acceptable. The only problem is I don't know a formal option for that part (please copy the problematic part into the text box without any change).
- The sentence is not acceptable in formal written academic English. I think a formal option for the sentence is the following (please copy the problematic part into the text box with your suggestion for a formal option).

Fig. 2: Style-based LAJ task: Standard question–answer format

⁵ We kept the sentences the same throughout the three years of testing. A test–retest approach has advantages and disadvantages. The main advantage was item consistency throughout the testing period. However, using the same sentences might be seen as a threat to internal validity. This is a valid point, especially in short-term testing. However, this threat was minimized by allowing for ample time between testing (12 months) and by randomizing the order of the sentences for each participant during testing.

⁶ In Ureel et al. (2022), we focus on the 10 appropriate items and the 20 grammatically inappropriate items.

The 40 inappropriate items always contained one element that would generally be considered inappropriate in formal written academic English. We clarified at the beginning of the test that participants were not allowed to make more than one change. Example sentences presented in the LAJ tasks are the following:

- (1) Anyone faced with managing multiple teams has a limited set of potential team members and has to use various mechanisms to assign individuals to groups. [appropriate]
- (2) Many critics of survey research conclude that questionnaires simply *can't* achieve the kind of accuracy that is needed for commonly used scientific measurement purposes. [inappropriate–grammatical: contracted verb form, *can't* vs appropriate: *cannot*]
- (3) Although the interviewers admitted that they found the interviewees' lack of overt enthusiasm *a little bit* annoying, they were able to conduct the interviews professionally. [inappropriate–lexical: *a little bit* vs possible appropriate alternatives: *somewhat, slightly*]

To construct the sentences, we used existing academic texts to ensure content authenticity. We adapted sentence length so that the sentences had an average sentence length of 25 words ($SD = 0.9$, range: 24–26) and an average character count of 143 per sentence ($SD = 11.9$, range: 109–165). For the 40 inappropriate sentences, we integrated stylistic mismatches based on the grammatical and lexical items dealt with in the participants' bachelor's program (in English proficiency and grammar classes).⁷ We also tested the reliability of the survey as a data-collection tool. For the three consecutive years, Cronbach's alpha values were .80 or above: BA1 ($\alpha = .81$), BA2 ($\alpha = .80$) and BA3 ($\alpha = .87$).⁸

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data were collected at the beginning of the three academic years. The tests were organized on-campus by two principal investigators of the study (a lecturer and a PhD researcher). Participants had one and a half hours to complete the tests. We gave the participants style-based LAJ tasks in a random order to reduce effects of order bias and

⁷ We realize that the salience of the features under investigation in our study may play a role in how L2 learners detect and correct stylistic mismatches. Because of our focus on acquiring L2 sociolinguistic competence, we were unable to integrate salience-related insights. In future research, we plan on investigating salience (perceptual salience, constructed salience, salience in context), since our result suggest that detecting stylistic mismatches can be challenging because of salience-related features.

⁸ For this study, we worked with monolingual, sentence-level LAJ tasks. However, we grant that decontextualized sentences do not fully reflect translation practice. Translators are generally asked to work with texts and not individual sentences. Our focus in this study was on the participants' linguistic competence, which is considered a fundamental component of translation competence (EMT Expert Group, 2022). This study was the pilot study of a larger research project. In a follow-up study (NNb, 2022), stylistic revision tests were developed at text-level and participants had access to TTs and STs.

fatigue. We clarified that some sentences required a change and others did not. The participants were not informed about the ratio of linguistically appropriate and inappropriate sentences. We also stressed that the tests would not affect the participants' grades.

Next, the data were processed and analyzed at the conclusion of the three-year period (2018–2019). One researcher analyzed the data first.⁹ Next, the analysis was discussed with three other researchers in order to assure objectivity and consistency over the three years of testing. We distinguished between receptive and productive sensitivity. If participants were able to detect linguistic (in)appropriateness (i. e., *receptive* sensitivity), we awarded 1 or 2 points, depending on the accuracy of their answer (partial detection = 1, full detection = 2). This means that if they selected Option 1 (see Figure 2) in the case of appropriateness, we awarded 2 points. If they selected Option 2 in the case of inappropriateness, we awarded 1 point. If they selected the Options 3 or 4 in the case of inappropriateness, we awarded 1 or 2 points, depending on the accuracy of their answer.¹⁰ If participants were able to provide a linguistically appropriate alternative in the case of inappropriateness (i. e., *productive* sensitivity), we awarded 1 or 2 points, depending on the accuracy of their answer (partially accurate = 1, fully accurate = 2). Again, there were cases where we awarded only 1 point (and not the full 2 points) as students had only partially corrected the mistake.¹¹ This scoring scheme meant that, for the 10 appropriate sentences, participants could score a maximum of 20 points (2x10 = 20) and for the 40 inappropriate sentences 160 points (2x40 for detection + 2x40 for correction = 160). Consequently, the maximum score for the entire test was 180 points (20 + 160) and this was our scale for overall sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (see Table 1 3). The LAJ tasks were used in such a way that we calculated only total scores (using the method as explained above). This means that we did not compare the participants' performances for the 50 individual items.

⁹ This researcher (the primary investigator of the study) was a PhD student who was not a lecturer of the participants. Consequently, this researcher did not know the participants whose data she was analyzing.

¹⁰ In some cases, we were able to infer from the students' answers that they had not fully detected the error. For example, in one sentence, the singular verb in [...] *of all the participants, 30% becomes [...]* had to be replaced with the plural *become*. Some students provided *became* as an alternative. We gathered from this reply that these students had only partially detected the mistake and therefore awarded one point.

¹¹ For example, in one sentence, the students had to replace *like* with the more formal alternative *such as*, but some students wrote *as* instead. We deemed that these students had only partially corrected the mistake and therefore awarded one point.

4 Results

We now present the results, which we discuss adopting a multi-layered approach (Table 1).

Layer	Description	Value
1	Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (<i>n=50, all items</i>)	180
2a	Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (<i>n=10, appropriate items</i>)	20
2b	Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (<i>n=40, inappropriate items</i>)	160
3a	Receptive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (<i>n=40, inappropriate items</i>)	80
3b	Productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (<i>n=40, inappropriate items</i>)	80

Table 1: Multi-layered approach to analyzing sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality

Layer 1 provides the overall results for the entire set of LAJ tasks, while Layers 2 and 3 provide more nuanced information for subsets of results, taking into account the distinction between appropriate and inappropriate items (Layers 2a and 2b) and between receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (Layers 3a and 3b). For our statistical analyses, we applied significance levels of .05. We conducted repeated measures (RM) ANOVA tests. None of the assumptions for conducting RM ANOVA tests were violated. We conducted post-hoc tests to identify significant differences by pair and used Bonferroni corrections wherever required. We report effect sizes, using partial eta squared (η^2_p) for RM ANOVAs and eta squared (η^2) for *t*-tests. We present mean test scores as both absolute numbers (ABS) and percentages in Table 2. In the remainder of the paper, we will report only the percentages. The layers have different maximum scores and percentages enable us to compare sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality across layers more transparently.

Layer	Year	<i>M</i>		<i>SD</i>	<i>95% CI</i>		Min	Max
		ABS	%		LL	UL		
1	BA1	55.6	30.9	15.2	48.7	62.6	27	89
1	BA2	69.1	38.4	16.2	61.7	76.4	38	93
1	BA3	80.1	44.5	20.2	70.9	89.3	42	123
2a	BA1	11.1	55.5	2.7	9.8	12.3	6	16
2a	BA2	10.3	51.5	4.4	8.29	12.3	2	20
2a	BA3	11.4	57.0	4.5	9.4	13.5	2	18
2b	BA1	44.6	27.9	14.7	37.9	51.3	17	77
2b	BA2	58.8	36.8	15.6	51.7	65.9	30	82
2b	BA3	68.7	42.9	20.9	59.2	78.2	28	111
3a	BA1	31.5	39.4	8.0	27.8	35.2	16	48
3a	BA2	38.0	47.5	7.8	34.5	41.6	22	49
3a	BA3	42.4	53.0	10.3	37.7	47.1	26	64
3b	BA1	13.0	16.3	8.6	9.1	17.0	0	30
3b	BA2	20.7	25.9	9.3	16.5	24.9	3	36
3b	BA3	26.3	32.9	12.0	20.9	31.8	2	47

Note. ABS = absolute (mean); CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for style-based LAJ tasks (Layers 1, 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b)

Throughout the three years of undergraduate training (BA1, BA2, BA3), we observed one dominant pattern of development. Sensitivity scores increase significantly for almost all layers. In other words, participants improve their sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality as they progress through undergraduate translation training. We were able to detect similar general trends when we focused solely on the grammatical items (Ureel et al. 2022). In what follows, we nuance this general observation, looking at Layers 1, 2 and 3 separately.

4.1 Layer 1: Overall sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality ($n=50$)

For the analysis of the overall set of LAJ tasks (50 items), we found statistically significant differences across BA1, BA2 and BA3, $F(2,40) = 29.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .593$ (large

effect). Participants improve their overall sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality as they progress through undergraduate training (see Layer 1, Figure 3). However, even by BA3 – the final year of the trainees’ 3-year program – the mean score did not reach 50 %. In the first year of testing (BA1), trainees averaged 30.9 % for the overall test. They were able to improve their sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in the second year of testing (BA2) (38.4 %) and continued this trend in BA3 (44.5 %).

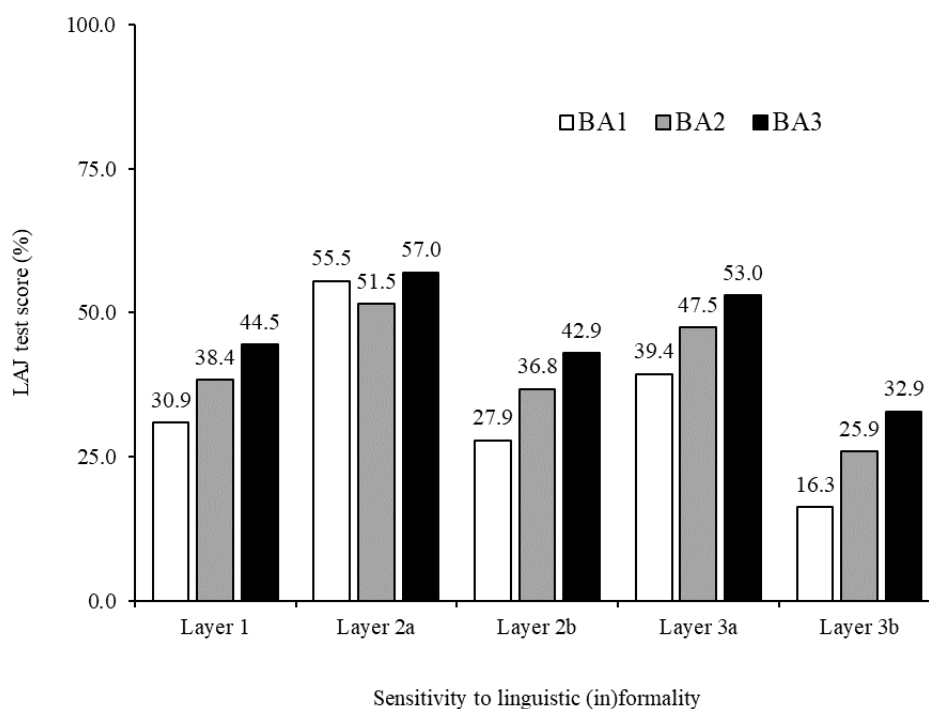


Fig. 3: Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality and LAJ test scores

4.2 Layer 2: Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for appropriate ($n=10$) and inappropriate ($n=40$) items

4.2.1 Layer 2a: Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for appropriate items ($n=10$)

For the 10 appropriate items, we did not find any statistically significant differences across the three years of training, $F(2,40) = 0.63$, $p = .537$ (ns). In other words, trainees’ scores for detecting linguistic appropriateness did not change significantly (see Layer 2, Figure 3). In BA1, trainees already have some sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for appropriate items, averaging 55.5 %. However, this sensitivity does not develop in statistically significant ways in subsequent years. In BA2 (51.5 %) and BA3 (57 %), scores reach the 50 % mark or slightly above.

4.2.2 Layer 2b: Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items (n=40)

For the analysis of the 40 inappropriate items, we found statistically significant differences across BA1, BA2 and BA3, $F(2,40) = 28.16$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .585$ (large effect). We observed the same pattern for inappropriate items as for overall sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality (see Section 4.1, Layer 1). Sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items improved in statistically significant ways from BA1 to BA2, from BA2 to BA3 and from BA1 to BA3 (see Layer 2b, Figure 3), meaning that participants improve their sensitivity as they progress through undergraduate training. Trainees begin with limited sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items in BA1 (27.9 %). They improve their sensitivity in BA2 (36.8 %) and BA3 (42.9 %). Despite this statistically significant improvement, the trainees' consistently average below the 50 % mark, even in BA3.

4.3 Layer 3: Receptive vs productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items (n=40)

For the 40 inappropriate items, we present the two phases of the style-based revision tasks (i. e., *detection* and *correction* of linguistic inappropriateness) separately (Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2) first and then contrast them (Section 4.3.3).

4.3.1 Layer 3a: Receptive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items

Trainees begin their training with some receptive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items in BA1 (39.4 %). They develop additional receptive sensitivity, showing statistically significant improvement in BA2 (47.5 %) and BA3 (53 %), $F(2,40) = 15.45$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .436$ (large effect) (see Layer 3a, Figure 3). In other words, trainees' ability to detect stylistic inappropriateness becomes more fine-tuned. By BA3, they average just over 50 %. However, post-hoc analyses show that trainees' scores stagnate between BA2 and BA3, meaning that trainees' ability to detect stylistic mismatches does not develop in a statistically significant way between BA2 and BA3.

4.3.2 Layer 3b: Productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items

We also looked at how trainees' ability to *correct* stylistic mismatches developed throughout training. We observed the same developmental pattern that we observed for the overall test and for the inappropriate items: students improve their sensitivity throughout training in statistically significant ways, $F(2,40) = 39.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .661$ (large effect). In BA1, they average 16.3 %. They score significantly better in BA2 (25.9 %) and again in BA3 (32.9 %) (Layer 3b, Figure 3). This means that trainees become relatively better equipped at correcting stylistic inappropriateness. However, trainees begin their training with an extremely limited level of productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in BA1. Despite the observed development towards increased sensitivity, development beyond the 50 % benchmark appears far from straightforward for trainees.

4.3.3 Layer 3a vs 3b: Receptive vs productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality for inappropriate items

When we compare participants' receptive and productive sensitivity to inappropriate linguistic (in)formality, we notice that trainees consistently score significantly better on detecting stylistic inappropriateness (i. e., receptive sensitivity) than on correcting stylistic inappropriateness (i. e., productive sensitivity) throughout their training (see Figure 3). In BA1, they average 39.4 % for receptive sensitivity vs 16.3 % for productive sensitivity, $t(20) = 11.0$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $\eta^2 = 0.86$ (large effect). That imbalance persists in BA2, where trainees average 47.5 % for receptive sensitivity vs 25.9 % for productive sensitivity, $t(20) = 11.0$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $\eta^2 = 0.86$ (large effect). Trainees are unable to eliminate this imbalance in BA3, where they average 53.0 % for receptive sensitivity vs 32.9 % for productive sensitivity, $t(20) = 9.3$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $\eta^2 = 0.81$ (large effect).

5 Discussion

Our results provide convincing evidence that sociolinguistic competence does indeed develop in translation trainees, but that this development is not entirely consistent and far from complete. For our first sub-question (*How does translation trainees' sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality develop in (monolingual) style-based linguistic appropriateness judgment (LAJ) tasks over three years of undergraduate translation training?*), we observed that participants develop their sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality as they progress through undergraduate training. In other words, they improve their ability to perform style-based LAJ tasks. When comparing results between BA1, BA2, and BA3, we observed this trend of consistent development for three of the five series of analyses (Layers 1, 2b, 3b). This consistent finding aligns with findings from sociolinguistic studies into L2 French. Dewaele (2002), Sax (2003), Li (2010) and Gudmestad (2012) have found that L2 learners of French become better at making increasingly informed style-related judgments as they progress through language training and their L2 proficiency improves. However, we also observed two distinct deviations from this dominant trend: (1) the *detection of appropriate items* (Layer 2a), which does not improve at all during undergraduate training and (2) the *detection of inappropriate items* (Layer 3a), which improves from BA1 to BA2, but subsequently stagnates in BA3. Detecting stylistic mismatches remains extremely challenging in all three years of undergraduate training. When we focused on the appropriate and grammatically inappropriate items (Ureel et al. 2022), we also concluded that trainees' overall mean scores did not reach 50 %. However, for the overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality (i. e., sensitivity to grammatically appropriate *and* inappropriate items) and for the sensitivity to grammatically inappropriate items only, we found that the development of sensitivity stagnated between BA2 and BA3.

Having observed a dominant trend of consistent development, we must also acknowledge a glaring trend of incomplete development. The development of sensitivity

to linguistic (in)formality is far from complete – even in BA3 – with participants averaging scores below the 50 % benchmark for three of the five series of analysis (Layers 1, 2b, 3b) or slightly above the 50 % benchmark for the remaining two series of analysis (Layers 2a, 3a). For instructional settings, this observed incomplete development inevitably raises the question of how curriculum designers can harness features of curriculum design (e. g., environment analysis, needs analysis, principles, goals, content and sequencing, format and presentation, assessment) to promote the successful development of L2 sociolinguistic competence and of sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality.

For our second sub-question (Are there developmental similarities and/or differences between receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality?), we found similarities and differences between receptive and productive sensitivity. On the one hand, we notice the same dominant trend for both types of sensitivity: participants improve their sensitivity as they progress through training. On the other hand, we observe one important difference for this trend: participants are significantly better at detecting than correcting instances of stylistic inappropriateness in formal contexts, although both detection and correction show ample room for improvement. Discrepancies between detection and correction scores are not entirely surprising, since participants can correct problems only if they have detected them. However, ideally, we would have liked to have found a more balanced relationship between receptive and productive sensitivity. Our results clearly show a detection–correction imbalance across all three years of training, because trainees are often unable to correct detected instances of stylistic inappropriateness. From a pedagogical perspective, this indicates that attention should be devoted to the development of receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in translation (and L2) training and that productive sensitivity merits additional focus in the curriculum.

The results confirm our hypothesis: as specialized L2 learners in training, translation trainees experience challenges when accommodating language to formal academic contexts. These results align with findings from previous research. For instance, Clark (2013: 125) states that “[t]here is a challenge, however, in education particularly, of moving pupils’ speech from an informal, everyday casual form to the more formal demands required of academic language and the genres beyond education in the everyday world of work”. Similarly, Guilquin and Paquot (2008) noticed that EFL learners do not always respect differences between (informal) speech and (formal) writing. By comparing learner and native speaker data, they found that EFL learners tend to use features from spoken language when writing academic prose, which results in an inappropriate ‘chatty’ style. Guilquin and Paquot (2008) claim that this is most likely due to EFL learners’ register unawareness. This claim aligns with our findings and would need to be investigated further by looking at a possible input bias in EFL learners’ contact with English outside of the classroom. Our trainees clearly struggle with stylistic (in)appropriateness in formal contexts.

In this study, we have highlighted the relevance of developing L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation training and, by extension, in L2 training. Our results clearly

show that this development poses challenges, confirming the need to address issues of linguistic (in)formality in translation training programs more actively and systematically. Based on our results, we are able to make some recommendations for future research. First, examining receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality, we found a detection–correction imbalance. Future research could help to reconceptualize receptive and productive sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality and establish attainable intermediate targets. Second, our preliminary comparison between all the inappropriate items and the grammatically inappropriate items revealed some differences between the development of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality, on the one hand, and to lexical (in)formality on the other. A more in-depth comparison between rule-based learning, which is often related to the acquisition of grammar, and item-based learning, which is often related to the acquisition of lexis, might indicate in which order the different types of sensitivity might best be introduced in a L2 learning context. Third, we have focused on translation trainees, but future research would benefit immensely from investigating the development of sociolinguistic competence in different types of specialized and non-specialized L2 learners. In this respect, insights from the field of English for specific purposes (ESP) could help to shed light mapping various types of learners and their L2 sociolinguistic requirements.

6 Conclusion

Sociolinguistic competence is an intricate feature of translation competence and, by extension, of L2 sociolinguistic competence. We have highlighted how L2 sociolinguistic competence develops in instructional settings by investigating sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality. Language curriculum design for translation training could benefit from a more structured (i. e., strategic) approach to developing L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees more explicitly, with a clearer pedagogical focus on variation in general and on stylistic variation in particular. Regardless of the languages under investigation (L2 English or any other L2) or the directionality of style-shifting (formal-to-informal vs informal-to-formal), learners experience difficulties with style-shifting along the (in)formality continuum because of documented register unawareness.

Two limitations of our study are the restricted scope of required style-based revision (sentence level, monolingual) and the focus on quantitative data. Future research will need to address how translation trainees deploy their L2 sociolinguistic competence in the revision of actual translations (text level, multilingual), which are cognitively more challenging but definitely more authentic instances of style-based revision for translation trainees. We grant that the results of this study were collected under test conditions and therefore suggestive of how sociolinguistic competence develops in translation trainees. Future research into the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence would benefit greatly from data collected under more realistic conditions. In addition, research into sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality could benefit enormously from supplementary insights gleaned from qualitative and mixed-methods studies.

High-quality translation (and L2) training requires effective, sociolinguistically responsive language curriculum design to maximize the development of (specialized) L2 sociolinguistic awareness. Only by actively addressing the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence can we provide translation trainees with the best possible chances of developing their L2 communicative repertoires. In turn, those repertoires will enable them to become fully functional language professionals in the complex, multilingual communicative contexts that we prepare them for.

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