

Review Article

Application of Variationist Sociolinguistic Method in SLA: A Research Overview of China and Abroad

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Abstract: Combining insights from variationist sociolinguistics and SLA, the present paper is situated within the SLA research which applies variationist sociolinguistic method. The quantitative research method in sociolinguistic variation theory provides a new perspective for the research of SLA. This paper expounds and analyzes the SLA research in the light of variation theory, particularly focusing on the variation research of interlanguage both in China and abroad, and further presents the application of variationist sociolinguistic method in interlanguage research. The combination of variation theory and SLA research is crucial to deepen the development of SLA research, specifically, in L2 learning and teaching to provide suggestions to L2 learners and teachers. In so doing, L2 learners do not use or underuse the appropriate form in context, such that there is a form-function mismatch in their interlanguage. Specifically, first, although the quantitative research methods in sociolinguistic variation theory provide a new perspective for second language acquisition research, it should not be regarded as the only effective way to study interlanguage variation. To accurately analyze the interlanguage of learners, sometimes other methods such as oral reports and participant ethnography are also needed. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods can help obtain more reliable research results. Secondly, the phenomenon of variation should not only remain at the level of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, etc., and the writing system can also be studied as a phenomenon of variation. In the process of acquiring the target language, it is also worth exploring whether learners will imitate the writing habits of native speakers, or whether learners will be influenced by their own mother tongue to create new forms of writing. Finally, although the research findings on interlanguage variation have implications for classroom teaching, when applied to second language acquisition classrooms, teachers need to carefully consider their classroom applicability.

Keywords: Variationist Sociolinguistic Method, SLA, Interlanguage, Sociolinguistic Variation Theory

1. Introduction

The beginnings of SLA are usually dated in the late 1960s or early 1970s. It was established as an independent discipline marked by “*The significance of learners’ errors*” and “*Interlanguage*” [71, 10]. The leading figure in SLA for generation, Corder, in his article constituted the origins of SLA as a field of research. A theoretical base for examining SLA had been proposed and the field of SLA was born. In the mid-1980s, second language research focused on its ontology, and discussed its characteristics and development direction. Then, second language research began to explore

the internal factors affecting SLA (e.g. psychological factors, native language transfer, learning strategies, etc.), external factors (e.g. society, culture, education, information technology, etc.) and individual differences of learners. Many scholars devoted to this field and contributed greatly to theoretical establishment of SLA research. Such as Chomsky’s legacy is clearly evident in groundbreaking SLA work, including Selinker’s (1972) on the notion of interlanguage, and Dulay, Burt, and Krashen’s (1982) model of SL speech processing.

SLA research involves three major fields as interlanguage, internal factors and external factors of L2 learners. Its

fundamental concepts principally include non-native speaker (NNS), learner, and interlanguage, which are prefigured as monolithic elements in SLA. In the past two decades, the influence of sociolinguistic theory on SLA has been increasing. It was believed that social environment affects SLA in every corner. [4] This trend makes researchers turn their attention to the impact of sociocultural factors on SLA gradually. Sociolinguistics focuses on influence of social environment on language use, that is, one's language use would differentiate with changes of social factors (e.g. social class, gender, age, speech style, etc.) or other language factors (e.g. context, register, etc.). Sociolinguistic variation theory further explores the variation phenomena as well as influencing factors in second language use and pays attention to dynamic changes of second language ability. [37] As for sociolinguistic variation theory in SLA research, it is to research the relationship between variables in social environment and interlanguage output, namely, the interdependence between social environment of interlanguage use and L2 learners' cognitive processes. [91]

During the past 50 years, SLA research method has been developing fast and plays a prominent role in promoting SLA research. Previous studies on SLA mostly applied the method of native language research, pedagogy research or other related disciplines research. In the 1970s, Selinker's article "*Interlanguage*" was agreed that universal grammar was not as same as generative grammar. Some important principles like structure dependency principle, subadjacency principle and binding principle were put forward. Moreover, parameters including null-subject parameter, wh-parameter and verb raising parameter were set; from late 1980s to 1990s, more methods were applied in SLA research, namely, linguistic method, psychological method, educational method, sociocultural method and neurological method. With the in-depth research of SLA, its research methods have gradually expanded. Cumming (1994) introduced seven different research methods, including Cohen's (1984) self-oral-report-learning strategy, Connor's (1984) discourse analysis, Tarone's (1985) interlanguage variability analysis, Hornberger's (1987) ethnographic research, Spada's (1990) classroom activity analysis, Auerbach's (1993) participatory action research and Pennycook's (1994) critical education act. Since the beginning of this century, psychological cognitive method and neurocognitive experimental method have been gradually becoming the forefront of second language research.

In summary, second language research has experienced the transformation from theoretical construction to theoretical verification, from description to interpretation, from qualitative method to quantitative method, and from single discipline to cross-discipline.

Since the 1980s, language variation has become a new paradigm in SLA research by describing impact of language and sociocultural factors on second language output to explain the variability of second language. [3] L2 scholars and teachers increasingly agree that second language teaching should enable learners to use the target language in

various social environments [43], and further point out the significance of sociolinguistic perspective over L2 learning and teaching. Variationist sociolinguistics in the past two decades or so has brought its theoretical and methodological apparatus to bear on L2 research, for example, by Bayley (1996), Regan (2004), Preston (1989) and Young (1991). Variationist sociolinguistic method has been applied in SLA research to explore, to be more exactly, learner, interlanguage or variation in invariable contexts such as Adamson (1989), Bayley (1996), and Young (1991). Thus, the specific role of variation in SLA has been addressed [23] and the nature of SLA as a domain of research and the way in which it contributes to the teaching and learning of foreign languages is explored. The research of sociolinguistic variation has provided a range of insights, which are related to use of sociolinguistic variants by learners in different learning contexts.

2. An Overview of Sociolinguistic Variation Theory

Sociolinguistic variation theory can be traced back to the 1960s. [68] Sociolinguists represented by William Labov (1927-) pioneered the research of language variation and made it one of the key fields of sociolinguistics. The research of modern language variation started with Labov's *The Social History of a Sound Change on the L2and of Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts* in 1963, followed by *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* [45] and *Empirical Foundations for a Theory of Language Change*. [84] These classic works are presented as milestones of development of sociolinguistic variation research. The significance of Labov's research to SLA is that it suggests that interlanguage gradually transits from one's native language to target language and turns to a second language in the end. Under the framework of "labovian paradigm" and the "dynamic paradigm", sociolinguists use sociolinguistic method, for instance, sociolinguistic interview and variable rule analysis to explore generation mechanism of interlanguage variation, namely, how interlanguage variation is affected by language internal factors, situational factors and social factors. [48] The variation in L2 learners' language is thus called "interlanguage variation", existing at all levels of language, and forms a cross-research of sociolinguistics and SLA.

Sociolinguistics takes variation as an inherent characteristic of language and makes it the core research problem of sociolinguistics. Variation theory was applied to SLA research in the 1980s. It mainly focuses on the influence of social environmental factors on L2 learners' interlanguage development, including the identity and roles of two counterparts of communication, the topics and tasks of communication, and the grammatical forms used in communication situations. Variation theory holds that variability is a basic attribute of language. The occurrence of these variations is, firstly, due to the structure system of language, and then, it is inseparable from interaction between

language and social environment. The form of language variation is constrained by language and many other social factors. Thus, it is commonly admitted that variation research and the progress of society are interdependent. As in practice, variation theory has been applied in many fields such as education, law and employment. It is theoretically significant and valuable to analyze language variation of different speech communities at different levels, including phonological, lexical, morphological, syntactic and discourse. To research causes of language variation from perspectives as language's internal environment, social factors and cognitive factors through variationist sociolinguistic method is an innovative way to explore the essence of language.

Generally speaking, L2 research has been experiencing three stages: no transfer from one's native language (Platzack, 1996; Epstein et al., 1996; Meisel, 1997); full transfer from one's native language (Schwartz et al., 1994; Clahsen et al., 1996) and partial transfer from one's native language (Vainikka et al., 1996; Eubank, 1993/1994, Eubank et al., 1997) Consequently, language variation occurs not only when one is using his/her native language, but also in the process of one's SLA. [19]

3. Variationist Sociolinguistic Method in SLA Research

Although the research of the acquisition of sociolinguistic variation has only been consolidated as a new wave of research within SLA research during just over the last decade, linguistic variation had nonetheless been and continues to be an important issue that SLA research has grappled with. The process of applying variationist sociolinguistic method in SLA is not smooth at the beginning stage. The early studies of language variation and SLA failed to cooperate with each other very well. Preston (1996) attributed this failure to three main factors: in the first place, the dominant position of formalism research in SLA; secondly, decreasing attention paid by sociolinguistics to "socially sensitive pragmatics"; thirdly, misunderstanding of basic concepts and research method of variation linguistics from SLA researchers. For example, Prof. Ellis, an expert in the field of SLA, has misunderstood the basic concepts of variation linguistics. According to Preston's point of view, Ellis' definition of "variable rule" (Ellis, 1985) is, as a matter of fact, the definition of "context sensitive categorical rule". One of Ellis' most famous experiments is to observe how an 11-year-old child uses two different negative rules "no + V" and "not + V" to express the same imperative meaning with the same environment (place, language and discourse). He insists that these two rules belong to the category of free variation because they have the same meaning seemingly. The changes when children use them are unsystematic and random, which denies the systematicity of interlanguage variation. On the contrary, other scholars point out that features of second language are presented as being systemic, variable and dynamic. Long (1990) set out the agreed core findings

constituting the least a second language theory needs to explain. These include: Interlanguages exhibit systematicity and variability... Interlanguage systematicity, including adherence to regular developmental sequences and systematic production of non-target like forms never modeled in the input indicates a strong cognitive contribution on the learner's part. Still, fossilization, overgeneralization and language transfer are also taken on as features of second language. [71, 38] Additionally, a wide range of studies over many years since Labov's pioneering work in the 1960s shows that variation is systematic and not random as had been previously supposed. [53] Factually, current SLA theory is no more a static representational system than is L2 interlanguage. Both are states of being in evolving dynamic systems.

Among various methods mentioned in the introduction, the most prominent feature of language variation method is to introduce quantitative research method into language research. It pays special attention to the relationship between language variables and social variables as well as the collection and analysis of natural corpus in practice, so as to put forward a new way to promote language research in both synchronic and diachronic way.

3.1. Variation Research of Interlanguage

Language variation is closely related to SLA and foreign language learning. In the process of learning a second language, L2 learners always subconsciously compare the language they are learning and the language they have learned and transfer from one to the other. The concept of "interlanguage" proposed by Selinker (1972) illustrates that the language and content produced in this process are related to language variation. *Interlanguage* refers to a transitional language system formed by L2 learners in the process of learning between their native language and the target language. It is a natural language, a continuum starting from a native language to a target language. It is neither native language nor the target language, but a dynamic language system with its own mechanism and gradually closer to the correct form of the target language as learning proceeds. Interlanguage is the "approximate system" of learners. It contains the characteristics of the learners' native language and target language, yet cannot be fully explained by them. By linguistic variation, we understand the learner's variable use of two or more second language forms to express the same functional value. If L2 learners do not use or underuse the appropriate form in context, that means such that there is a form-function mismatch in their interlanguage. [54] Thus, exploring the internal principles and underlying reasons of interlanguage is of great significance to SLA and foreign language teaching.

In SLA, interlanguage is regarded as a variant, and variability is a key feature of interlanguage development. [80] It might be affected by factors as language, social environment, the speaker's personality and other contexts. Consequently, the research of interlanguage variation has become the main content of the research of SLA variation.

The research of interlanguage variation began in the 1970s. Many previous studies showed that some phonological, morphological and syntactic features of interlanguage are constrained by linguistic and socio-cultural factors. [87, 78, 12] Today, much attention has been paid to the research of interlanguage variation and explored it from various perspectives by Chinese and foreign researchers. In the middle and late 1990s to the year of 2005, interlanguage research focused on the damage of intermediary sentence method. To be more specific, it was about the relationship between second language inflectional morphology acquisition and syntactic knowledge acquisition [64, 74] including “global impairment” [55, 56], “local impairment” [5, 6], “failed functional features hypothesis”. [81] The research of this period offered implications and applications in L2 testing and teaching. In the following decades, researchers devoted to exploring the ultimate state of second language. For instance, some scholars were concerned about “interface hypothesis” [76, 75] including internal interface and external interface. But this type of research was not domain-wide but variable-dependent. [76, 75]

The research of interlanguage variation by foreign scholars can be divided into two categories: the research of individual L2 learners and the research of group interlanguage corpus. The former is mainly a follow-up research to find some characteristics of the acquisition process in different phases and verify some results of the group research [34, 35, 70] The latter studies the group performance of language learners and reflects the general impact of social and cultural mechanisms on language learning and SLA. [8] The previous research results include: L2 learners’ accuracy may vary according to different classroom tasks [79], L2 learners’ tendency of mastering the typical order of English lexical and syntactic rules [42], the degree of native language influence on SLA [27], the role of comprehensible input in language acquisition [44, 21], L2 learners’ attention to the effectiveness of language forms [83], the effectiveness of explicit error correction when changing language behaviors [46], and the way of learners usually express in the target language environment. [16]

The above research results of interlanguage variation have direct implications to English teaching. In the case of English, as a lingua franca, a vast number of non-native speakers routinely interact with other non-native speakers. There are some notable exceptions such as Adamson’s (1989), Bayley’s (1996) respective work. For instance, Bayley (1996) focused on t/d deletion among Chinese adult learners. According to his survey, higher levels of deletion among those speakers were proved high degrees of social integration whereas speakers with lower degrees of integration.

The research of interlanguage variation in China started with the introduction of foreign interlanguage variation studies. Wu Bo (1997) elaborated the relationship between dynamic paradigm theory and interlanguage variation research, and confirmed that dynamic paradigm had great potential in describing and explaining interlanguage variation. Song Mengli, and Wang Qiang (1998), Dai Manchun (1999)

and Wang Lunan (2000) introduced the theory of interlanguage variation from different angles. Some scholars pioneered the research on variation in a specific field, e.g. Cai Jinting (2004) explored variation research in the field of tense/aspect acquisition, while other scholars did empirical research on interlanguage variation in syntax (Liu Shaolong, 1998; Yu Shanzhi, 2005; Li Yu, 2014), vocabulary (Xu Daming, 2008; Guo Hongjie et al., 2012), form (Cai Jinting et al., 2005; Yang Yanfeng, 2010; Guo Hongjie et al., 2010; Hu min, 2011; Yang Jie et al., 2012), phonetics (Mei Li, 2005; Yan Yan, 2010; Guo Hongjie et al., 2010; Chen Chen, 2011) and other aspects. In terms of theoretical innovation, Cai Jintang and Zhu Lixia (2004) proposed the interlanguage variation model as a theoretical framework for the research of interlanguage variation, and further studied the influence of language factors on Chinese college students’ use of the general past tense in English interlanguage within this framework.

The above studies on interlanguage variation, covering from theory to practice, from qualitative to quantitative, from overall to specific, employ various research methods to research interlanguage variation and provide theoretical support and practical enlightenment for classroom teaching and learning of SLA.

3.2. Application of Variationist Sociolinguistic Method in Interlanguage Research

Quantitative analysis is mostly applied in variation theory to explore the relationship between sociocultural factors and language use to reveal the variability of interlanguage. Language variation theory not only studies the variation phenomenon at a certain stage in the development process of interlanguage, but also pays attention to the variation mechanism of interlanguage variation over time. Meanwhile, it recognizes social attributes of language learners and pays attention to individual differences of language learners. Due to its broad research horizon, variationist sociolinguistic method is applied widely in interlanguage research. Since the 1990s, many scholars have carried out a variety of studies on interlanguage by variationist sociolinguistic method. Regan (1996), with the method of longitudinal tracking, studied the development process of L2 learners’ social language ability; Preston’s sociolinguistic model (2002) integrated factors as language, social culture and time into psychological mechanism of language acquisition, so as to explain the variation of interlanguage; Rehner et al. (2003) through quantitative analysis studied the relationship between L2 learners’ social characteristics (e.g. age, gender, social class, etc.) and their L2 use.

There was a general tendency in early interlanguage studies which attempted to find the one recurring factor from contextual factors to solve the problem of learners’ interlanguage variation. These single factors, such as “speech adaptation” of Beebe [7], “topic concern” of Tarone [79] and “planned and unplanned discourse output” of Ellis [22], all presented a certain extent of influence. However, interlanguage variation is not the result of a single factor. It is

affected by a diversity of contextual factors, including the internal factors of language as well as external factors like the learner's age, gender and speech style, etc.. These factors do not work alone, but are closely related to each other. Therefore, multifactor research is expected to be the main tendency of interlanguage variation research. So, which of the above factors is the real reason for the variation? Are there any other factors that have not been studied? Will these factors have different effects on different groups of learners?

To analyze the function of several factors at the same time, the "variable rule analysis" in the research of sociolinguistic variation theory might be the most appropriate quantitative analysis method. This method is developed on the basis of "variable rules". It is a multiple regression analysis method commonly used in the research of sociolinguistic language variation for the purpose of analyzing naturalistic speech data. It is suitable for the choice of different language forms influenced alternately by diverse environmental factors, including language structure factors and internal social environmental factors. [20] Though maximum probability estimation method, the variable rule analysis method can select the truly relevant factors from dozens of groups of environmental factors and confirm their values. These values can be used to explain the influence of various factors related to situation and context on the speaker's choice of language form. More than that, it enables researchers to estimate the relative intensity of various independent linguistic and social factors in any speech activity. At present, two widely used computer programs put in use are VARBRUL and GOLDVARB. These two computer programs are providing a new way of SLA research. Such studies have turned to computational analysis of this variation through the application of the VARBRUL and GOLDVARB computer programs. Take VARBRUL as an example, it captures the relative effect of a range of contextual factors on the speaker's choice of a particular variant, such that a constraint order can be established concerning those constraints which most favor use of a particular variant as opposed to those that do so to a relatively lesser extent. [54]

3.3. Contributions of Variationist Sociolinguistic Method to SLA Research

The combination of variation theory and SLA provides a new perspective to the development of SLA research. Specifically, the variationist sociolinguistic method provides a precise way to research the impact of native language transfer. As long as the speaker's native language is included in the statistical model of language variation, it can test the influence of the speaker's native language by a series of variables. Moreover, sociolinguists' detailed analysis of variant forms in speech communities around the world provides a more realistic perspective than traditional methods for of SLA research, which can explain how the target language works more effectively. Is SLA a process of repeated reorganization? Is it progressive along a multidimensional continuum? Variationist sociolinguistic method can be used to explore the above questions through

testing. It advocates comparing learners' native language variation patterns with target language variation patterns to evaluate acquisition. This comparison is helpful to research how speakers use their language resources in social situations in order to understand SLA and sociolinguistics better. The investigation of a range of sociolinguistic variables across various learning contexts provides significant insights into the SLA of sociolinguistic variation.

Variation theory considers a wider range of linguistic and social factors from the perspective of sociolinguistics, and delivers a more comprehensive and detailed research method for SLA, which is of great significance to explore personalized teaching. It shows the variability of language by comparing its dynamic process, and further reveals the systematic attribute of language. It is a useful attempt to apply the quantitative paradigm of sociolinguistics to SLA variation research.

What's more, there have been methodological advances that make research on variation more detailed and comprehensive and, therefore, more likely to impact disciplines outside language variation [9, 28], leading teaching and learning of foreign languages taking into the political and societal context consideration, but not taking language itself alone. Variationist sociolinguistic method contributes to explore how different types of educational input may impact differentially on SLA. Such an experimental method is exemplified in Lyster's (1994) research. It was illustrated that the impact of teaching sociolinguistic norms through explicit methods in the classroom, leads to very positive sociolinguistic outcomes for the learner.

4. Implications

The transformation from native language to target language is dynamic and complex, which is affected by factors like internal factors of language, situational factors and social factors. The research results of interlanguage variation deliver enormous impact on English classroom teaching, including revealing the problems, internal mechanism and learning paths in the process of foreign language learning. Students might go through a complex and relatively long acquisition process in order to master English well. The pedagogical materials are required to adequately incorporate such sociolinguistic variation so as to give rise to genuine classroom interaction. To be more specific, the language rules that students seem to have learned in class may not be correctly used or really learned in the natural environment. And genuine opportunities for use of informal variants may be restricted for both teachers and learners alike. Because in more natural and casual occasions, the communicative function of language goes first, and simultaneously, language rules become second. Consequently, the interference from one's native language increases, resulting in a large number of interlanguage variations, which need long-term learning and application to adapt and change; Teachers are advised to observe and

analyze various variations (interlanguage) in students' learning and their use of English according to different environments, and offer different requirements for students according to different occasions to guide their learning. In particular, it is necessary to create various environments for students to learn and use English, and allow students to take time in progressing from their native language to target language.

In addition, there is a wide impact on foreign language learning by sociocultural factors, which would affect phonology, morphology and syntax in interlanguage. In foreign language teaching, teachers are expected to pay attention to the variation of language at different levels, including pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and discourse to help students transfer positively from their native language in the process of foreign language learning. Students' accuracy may vary according to different classroom tasks. Therefore, teachers are supposed to guide students to standardize their use of foreign languages in different topics and different types of tasks.

5. Conclusion

This research expounds the research on SLA from the perspective of variation theory of sociolinguistics, reviews the variation research of interlanguage in China and abroad, and further deliberates application of variationist sociolinguistic method in interlanguage research. Although the quantitative research method in variation theory provides a new perspective for the research of SLA, it is necessary to see that it is not the only effective method to research interlanguage variation. In order to analyze learners' interlanguage accurately and describe learners' performance systematically, it sometimes needs to be supplemented by other methods, such as oral report and participant ethnography. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will help obtain more reliable research results. Furthermore, the phenomenon of variation might not only stay at the levels of pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax, but also the character system can be studied as a phenomenon of variation. Will learners imitate the writing habits of native speakers? Or will learners create new text forms by influence of their native language in the process of target language acquisition? These are questions also worth exploring. Finally, although the findings of interlanguage variation have implications to classroom teaching, teachers need to be cautious when these findings are applied in classroom SLA. All in all, as a burgeoning area of SLA research, future studies within the SLA wave of sociolinguistic research promise to be as rich as past studies and bring fruitful insights to SLA.

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Authors' Contributions

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