The development of L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees : an accommodation-based longitudinal study into the acquisition of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality in English

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As expert intercultural communicators, translators constantly face the challenges of comprehending and producing language that is stylistically appropriate in various communicative contexts. To scale these challenges, they must acquire advanced levels of sociolinguistic competence. Although sociolinguistic competence is considered an essential component of translation competence, to date no study has investigated how sociolinguistic competence, in the form of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality, develops in translation trainees. Using style-based grammaticality judgement tasks, we collected data from 21 Dutch-speaking undergraduate trainees over a three-year period. We asked participants to revise sentences for style and investigated their accommodative competence in L2 English. We looked at participants' ability to accommodate language to social context through style-shifting, mapping how they detected and/or corrected (in)appropriateness in formal contexts. Our results show that trainees' overall accommodative competence initially improves, but subsequently stagnates. In the final year of testing, they barely score 50%. Receptive and productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)appropriateness follow similar developments, with trainees consistently performing better for receptive than for productive sensitivity. Our findings highlight the need to design effective sociolinguistically responsive (foreign-language) instruction in translation training to further develop sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality and to heighten sociolinguistic awareness and the controlled use of stylistic variation.

1. Introduction

This paper focuses on the development of sociolinguistic competence – more specifically the ability to accommodate language through style-shifting – in English as an essential component of translation competence. Our aim is to find out if and how translation trainees develop sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality as their proficiency in English increases during training. Using style-based grammaticality judgement tasks, we investigate trainees' ability to accommodate (i.e., adjust) language to social context

through style-shifting.[1] Translators are expected to be expert at comprehending and producing language that is sociolinguistically appropriate in various communicative contexts. In addition to understanding the meanings of texts to be translated (source texts, STs), they must interpret STs stylistically to produce appropriate translations (target texts, TTs) for the situation at hand. Moreover, they are often required to use tools (e.g., dictionaries, electronic corpora, parallel texts, search engines and translation databases) and decide on the linguistic (in)appropriateness of content contained in or generated by such tools. To make accurate stylistic judgements about language (in)appropriateness, it is imperative that translation trainees develop advanced levels of sociolinguistic competence in all their working languages. Holmes and Wilson (2017) define sociolinguistic competence as '[t]he knowledge which underlies people's ability to use language appropriately' (463). A crucial element of well-developed sociolinguistic competence is verbal accommodative competence (e.g., Giles 2016; Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991), which, in turn, overlaps with style-shifting, defined as the ability to accommodate language to social context (See Section 2).[2]

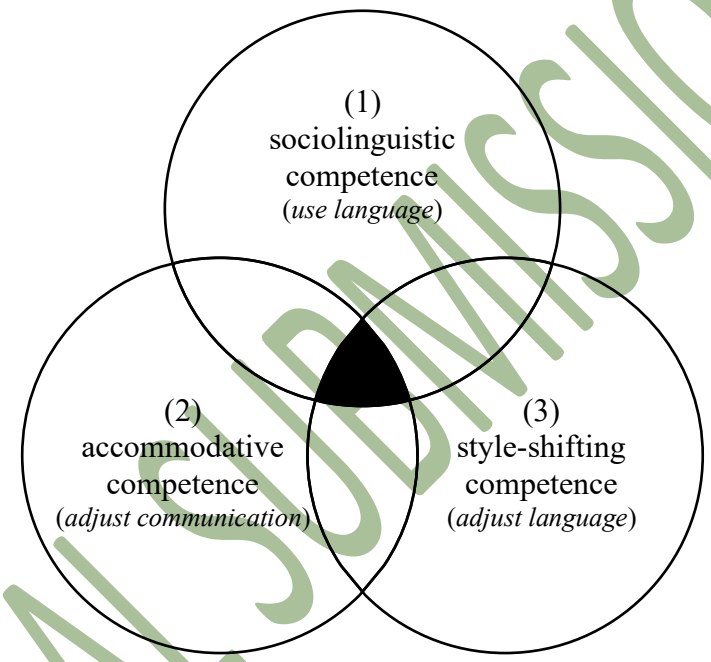
In this paper, we first provide a theoretical basis for our research by contextualising conceptual definitions (sociolinguistic competence, accommodative competence, style-shifting, grammatical (in)formality) relevant to our study (Section 2). We then describe our methodology (Section 3) and present our results (Section 4). Subsequently, we provide a discussion (Section 5) and formulate conclusions (Section 6).

2. Contextualising conceptual definitions: Sociolinguistic competence, accommodative competence, style-shifting and grammatical (in)formality

The deployment of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality in style-based

grammaticality judgement tasks (*with* correction options) requires putting into practice three overlapping competences for appropriate language use in communication: (1) sociolinguistic competence (ability to *use language*), (2) accommodative competence (ability to *adjust communication*) and (3) style-shifting competence (ability to *adjust language*) (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality (highlighted in black) at the intersection of overlapping competences



Sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality is a component of all three competences, which is why we discuss the competences below and link them to grammatical (in)formality. The use of terminology is closely linked to specific research domains. In Section 2.1, we focus on sociolinguistic competence, a common concept in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Translation Studies (TS), which is considered a crucial component of communicative competence and translation competence. In Section 2.2, we extend our discussion of language use to language learners' abilities to adjust

communication and language, which are captured in the concepts of accommodative competence and style-shifting (competence) respectively, with our focus being on verbal accommodation through style-shifting. In Section 2.3, we focus on the concept of grammatical (in)formality as a marker of stylistic variation. Notwithstanding the differences in domain-specific operational definitions, we adopt an interdisciplinary approach. We use the three competences to refer to our focus on sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality.

2.1. Sociolinguistic competence

Studies on sociolinguistic competence in TS are few in number. However, the importance of sociolinguistic competence has not gone unnoticed in the translation competence models that have emerged since the 1990s and 2000s. A number of models, which were developed to define the profile of the professional translator and to improve translation training, do indeed include knowledge of social conventions (e.g., Beeby Lonsdale 1996; Bell 1991; Cao 1996). For example, in 2009, the EMT (European Master's in Translation) expert group explicitly included a sociolinguistic dimension in its first model of translation competence and defined it as '[k]nowing how to recognise function and meaning in language variation (social, geographical, historical, stylistic)' and '[k]nowing how to produce a register appropriate to a given situation' (6). The updated model (EMT Expert Group, 2017) recognises five main areas of competence: (1) language and culture, (2) translation, (3) technology, (4) personal and interpersonal and (5) service provision. In this constellation of main areas, the first area (language and culture) is defined as 'transcultural and sociolinguistic awareness and communicative skills' (6). Similarly, the PACTE (Process of Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation) research group has included direct and indirect references to a

sociolinguistic component in the different updates of its competence model (e.g., PACTE 2003, 2018). In a compendium published by the research group, sociolinguistic knowledge, which is a component of the bilingual sub-competence, is defined as 'knowledge of the socio-linguistic conventions needed to carry out language acts that are acceptable in a given context' (Hurtado Albir 2017, 39). Göpferich (2009) includes communicative competence (as understood by Hymes 1966, see below) in at least two languages as one of the six competences in her translation competence model. Drawing on PACTE's bilingual sub-competence, Göpferich explains that communicative competence 'comprises lexical, grammatical and pragmatic knowledge about genre and situation-specific conventions in the respective cultures' (20–21). The three models of translation competence above (EMT, PACTE, Göpferich) are similar in that they define translation competence in terms of theoretical constructs and present overviews of sub-competences, including a (socio)linguistic competence. However, since such construct models define constructs *underlying* performance, detailed performance-based descriptions of the various sub-competences are usually beyond their scope. In other words, they recognise sociolinguistic competence as an integral component of translation competence, but granular distinctions of sociolinguistic competence are generally not present. By contrast, granularity is generally present in performance models, which define competence in behavioural or functional terms.[3]

Since translation trainees are essentially specialised L2 learners en route to becoming expert intercultural communicators, one approach to investigating the development of sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees is from an SLA perspective. In SLA, sociolinguistic competence is discussed as a component of communicative competence (e.g., Geeslin 2014). The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) defines communicative language competences as

'those [competences] which empower a person to act using specifically linguistic means' (Council of Europe 2001, 9). In 1966, Hymes coined the term *communicative competence* in response to Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence (an idealised conception of language, that is, knowing *what*) and linguistic performance (actual language use, that is, knowing *how*). Hymes (1972) criticised Chomsky's distinction, stating that it was too simplistic since it did not include sociolinguistic factors to explain language use. This criticism stresses the importance of looking not only at what is grammatically (in)correct, but also at what is socially (in)appropriate or as Hymes (1972) puts it, '[t]here are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless' (278). Post-Hymes, others continued investigating communicative competence in SLA (e.g., Bachman 1990; Canale and Swain 1980). Geeslin (2014) explains that language instruction should teach L2 learners not only standard language, but also how to use language in the same way as native speakers do. In other words, L2 learners have to 'develop the tools to respond appropriately to the social (interactional) situations in which they find themselves' and, in doing so, they will be 'able to demonstrate precisely the linguistic variation that native speakers use to respond to differing situations' (Geeslin 2014, 237). Similarly, Sax (2003) highlights that the explicit discussion of variation should be included in foreign language classrooms. This means that knowing a language is not only knowing its grammar rules and having a broad vocabulary; it is also knowing how to adjust (i.e., accommodate) communication and language to various social contexts.

2.2. Accommodative competence and style-shifting

The ideas that the same content can be expressed in different ways and that language users vary their language as they move from one social context to another are well-

established in the field of (Applied) Linguistics. In the 1980s, Giles introduced Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), which has developed into a detailed framework to capture the intricacies of accommodation and explain how language users vary language in accordance with social context (e.g., Giles, 2016; Giles, Coupland and Coupland 1991). Since the 1960s, Labov's concept of 'attention paid to speech' had been the most dominant model to explain style-shifting (Labov 1966, 2006).[4] However, Giles did not believe that language had such an egocentric nature. Rather, language should be interpreted as social interaction between interlocutors (Meyerhoff 2007). Accordingly, Giles adopted an *inter*personal, rather than an *intra*personal, approach to communicative performance, and focused on the speaker, the addressee and the dynamics between them as the main contributing factors to style-shifting (Geeslin 2014).

Not only do accommodation and style(-shifting) play crucial roles in the fields of communication and SLA, they are also crucial in TS. Translators and translation trainees must develop advanced levels of accommodative competence, because in addition to understanding the ST and finding meaningful and appropriate TT options, they have to be able to interpret two different cultural backgrounds and accommodate language production accordingly. Boase-Beier (2018) explains that awareness of style is important in translation training since it can help (future) translators to better understand STs and ST authors' choices. Indeed, 'style is central to the way we construct and interpret texts' (Boase-Beier 2020, 1). Boase-Beier (2020) highlights that the effects of style on (the study of) translation can be considered in at least three ways: (1) when the translator reads the ST, the reading and understanding of the ST will be influenced by how the translator views the style of that text, (2) when the translator creates the TT, the style of the TT will be affected by the translator's choices (style as choice) and (3) the

style of the TT will be influenced by how the reader reads and interprets the style of the TT. Consequently, translators have to develop high levels of receptive and productive sensitivity to stylistic (in)appropriateness to achieve stylistically successful translations.

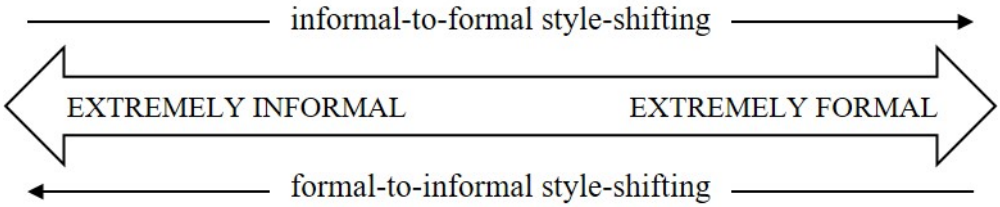
2.3. Grammatical (in)formality as a marker of stylistic variation

Our focus is on one particular component of stylistic variation: linguistic (in)formality. More specifically, we focus on grammatical (in)formality, which can be considered one of three subcomponents of linguistic (in)formality: grammatical, lexical and phonological (in)formality (Ureel 2014, 2015).[5] Pinker (2014) explains 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' (201). Not only writers, but users of any written, spoken or signed language are better equipped when they can fall back on different linguistic options, which Crystal (2004) illustrates using a wardrobe analogy: 'With clothing, a diverse wardrobe enables us to dress to suit the occasion; and so it is with language. The more linguistic choice we command, the more we find ourselves able to act appropriately as we move from one social occasion to another' (9). Pinker (2014) and Crystal (2004) highlight three discrete features that are crucial to understanding and operationalising linguistic (in)formality: choice, appropriateness and context. First, they agree that language users have at their disposal various ways of expressing the same ideas. Depending on their levels of proficiency, language users can often choose – based on style-related considerations – from various options. Second, choice is important because (proficient) language users must be able to communicate ideas appropriately. What is linguistically appropriate in one context may be inappropriate in another context. Third, language users have to be flexible, because

they must change their language to suit the social context. Informal situations may call for an informal style (e.g., *The man you talked to was John*) and formal situations for a formal style (e.g., *The man to whom you talked was John*). The two examples of pronoun use in the previous sentence show how Pinker's and Crystal's focal areas of choice, appropriateness and context interact on a grammatical level. Such stylistic choices are made at various levels of discourse and proficient language users not only have to make those choices at various levels, but they also have to orchestrate (i.e., pattern) those choices in larger stretches of discourse.

Differences in language use related to (in)formality are often visualised on a continuum. For instance, Joos (1967) believed that the use of English could not be judged using a right–wrong dichotomy. Consequently, he developed a model of five styles (i.e., levels of formality), ranging from most informal to most formal. Similarly, Labov (1966, 2006) interpreted style-shifting as moving along an (in)formality scale. Using an informal–formal continuum, we can visually represent how language users style-shift depending on the context (Figure 2).[6] Adopting a continuum, we can operationalise sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality as the degree to which translation trainees are able to deploy sociolinguistic rules to vary (i.e., accommodate or adjust through style-shifting) language along this continuum.

Figure 2. Style-shifting on the linguistic (in)formality continuum



Despite the burgeoning research into L2 sociolinguistics, the development of sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in L2 learners has received limited attention to date. Although studies into (in)formality discuss important elements related to linguistic (in)formality, they are limited in three respects. First, some (early) studies have discussed formality in English (e.g., Joos 1967; Labov 1966, 2006), but their focus has traditionally been on L1 English. Second, some studies have examined sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality in L2 speakers of English, but much of this research has been confined to English as a lingua franca (ELF) contexts. For instance, Durham (2011, 2014) has investigated the acquisition of sociolinguistic competence in Switzerland, where English has a lingua franca status. She found that many Swiss L2 speakers of English struggle with acquiring sociolinguistic competence and do not attain the same stylistic range as L1 speakers of English. Consequently, she believes that ELF can take on different forms, depending on the context in which it is used. Third, some of the L2 researchers investigating L2 sociolinguistic competence in educational and/or academic contexts have focused on linguistic (in)formality, but their focus has generally been on L2 French and not L2 English. For example, Etienne and Sax (2009) looked at how introductory and intermediate French college textbooks address sociolinguistic competence and focused on textbook information about linguistic (in)formality for specific target features (e.g., the different uses of *on* and *nous*). They demonstrated that general textbooks typically avoid explicit references to stylistic variation and that a number of textbooks even misrepresent authentic uses of French. Van Compernolle and Williams (2009, 2013) examined learners' patterns of stylistic variation and the effects of instruction on learners' sociolinguistic sensitivity. They highlighted that the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence would greatly benefit from explicit instruction and that stylistic and sociolinguistic features should be addressed as early as possible in L2

education. In Sax (2003) and Rehner, Mougeon and Nadasdi (2003), the advanced L2 speakers of French were native speakers of English, who did not attain the same stylistic range as native speakers of French and experienced more difficulties accommodating to informal than to formal contexts.

As far as (in)formality in L2 English is concerned, the studies are less numerous. Gilquin and Paquot (2008) 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' (41). This phenomenon of register unawareness aligns with the developments of increasing digital communication and language informalisation. Today, English serves as the most widespread means of international and intercultural communication worldwide. The omnipresence of Anglo-Saxon popular culture and technology have led to new modes of communication (e.g., digital communication) and to the informalisation of the English language, where writing and informality are often melded (McCulloch 2019). For example, Boland and Queen (2016) explain that the language used on social media can be characterised by writing that does not always abide by standard conventions. Because of these interacting factors (register unawareness, increasing digital communication, language informalisation), we believe that, for many EFL learners of English in the western world, there is a (pedagogically challenging) input bias since the amount of informal input that EFL learners are exposed to *outside* of instructional settings far outweighs the amount of formal input that they receive in instructional settings.

Based on the literature review above and our own experiences with teaching L2 English, translation and revision, we hypothesise that translation trainees, as L2 learners of English, experience difficulties in detecting and correcting instances of inappropriate

informal English in academic contexts. Consequently, we formulated the following main research question: How does sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality, as a marker of accommodative competence, develop in translation trainees during translation training? To answer our research question, we formulated two sub-questions: (1) How does translation trainees' *overall* sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality develop in (monolingual) style-based grammaticality judgement tasks over three years of undergraduate translation training? and (2) Are there developmental similarities and/or differences between *receptive* and *productive* sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

Using a one-group pretest–posttest design, we collected quantitative data using online style-based grammaticality judgement tasks.[7] We adopted a longitudinal approach to investigating the development of accommodative competence in translation trainees as they progressed through undergraduate translation training (bachelor's programme). We collected our data at one-year intervals over three academic years: Year 1 (BA1): 2016–2017, Year 2 (BA2): 2017–2018 and Year 3 (BA3): 2018–2019.

3.2. Participants

Our participants were 21 translation trainees (15 females, 6 males), studying Applied Linguistics at the University of Antwerp (Belgium). In 2016–2017, the trainees' average age was 18.7 years (*SD* = 1.4) and the age range was 17–23 years. 18 participants were Belgian, three of whom had dual nationality (Belgian combined with Australian, Moroccan or Norwegian). Two participants were Dutch and one participant was Chinese. All participants indicated that Dutch was their L1, with three indicating being

bilingual (1 Dutch–Berber, 2 Dutch–Chinese) and one indicating being trilingual (Dutch–French–Norwegian).

3.3. Apparatus and materials

The participants completed online style-based grammaticality judgement tasks on the university's Qualtrics platform in a designated on-campus computer room. The judgement tasks consisted of 50 decontextualised sentences, for which students had to determine whether the sentences were appropriate or not in formal written academic English and whether stylistic revision was required. We also gave participants the option to correct inappropriate items. Sensitivity to appropriateness was tested in 10 sentences and sensitivity to inappropriateness in 40 sentences (20 grammatical inappropriateness, 20 lexical inappropriateness). The results reported on below exclude the 20 lexical items.

The 30 sentences addressing sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality consisted of 10 appropriate and 20 inappropriate sentences in formal written academic English.[8] Each inappropriate sentence included one item that made it inappropriate in the formal context specified. The inappropriate items were constructed using references to items of grammatical (in)formality in existing EFL grammar books. Item inclusion was based on item frequency in EFL grammar books (Ureel 2014, 2015) and item treatment in the translation trainees' BA programme. This resulted in 20 grammatical items with formality-related variation (i.e., formal–informal variability). Since we specified that the sentences had to be appropriate in formal written academic English, informal language features were deemed inappropriate. The average sentence length was 25 words (*SD* = 0.9, range: 24–26), with 143 characters per sentence (*SD* = 11.9, range: 109–165). We constructed the sentences using authentic academic texts as a source of inspiration.

Subsequently, we integrated our selected items into the sentences. Three examples of inappropriate sentences that we constructed for the judgement tasks were the following:

(1) *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.* [contracted verb form, inappropriate: *can't* vs appropriate: *cannot*]

(2) *Various European studies have shown that mothers that breastfeed their children show significantly more feelings of guilt when they return to work after maternity leave.* [relative pronoun, inappropriate: *mothers that* vs appropriate: *mothers who*]

(3) *Since the 1990's, constitutions of countries such as Ecuador and Mexico have included various provisions about intercultural education and the linguistic rights of ethnic minorities.* [plural form, inappropriate: *1990's* vs appropriate: *1990s*]

The construction of the stylistically inappropriate sentences included 20 unique grammatical topics such as the passive voice (*be*-passive vs *get*-passive, conjunction use (omission vs non-omission of *that*-subordinator), noun countability (*fewer* vs *less*, *amount* vs *number*) and the topics provided in the example sentences above. The reliability of our data-collection instrument was acceptable during the three years of testing: BA1 (α = .75), BA2 (α = .81) and BA3 (α = .84).

3.4. Procedure

To highlight the level of formality required in the judgement tasks, we used specific wording to describe the (social) context (i.e., 'formal written academic English', Figure 3), which we kept consistent throughout the tasks. Demographic questions (asked before the grammaticality judgement tasks) were shown in the same order for every participant. By contrast, the order of the 30 sentences (20 grammatically inappropriate and 10 grammatically appropriate) was randomised to minimise order effects such as

fatigue, habituation and fixed response sets. Participants were informed that only one change per sentence was allowed and that some sentences required no changes. We did not provide any information about the ratio of appropriate and inappropriate sentences.

To quantify accommodative competence, we made a distinction between receptive and productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality and defined quantification criteria. For every instance of accurate detection or correction, we awarded 2 points. For partial detection or correction, we awarded 1 point. For no detection or wrong detection or correction, we awarded 0 points. Appropriate items required only detection, so the maximum score possible for the 10 appropriate items was 20 (10x2). Inappropriate items required detection *and* correction so the maximum score possible for the 20 sentences was 80 (20x2 for detection + 20x2 for correction). The sum of both scores (i.e., 100) was our measure of overall accommodative competence on the grammaticality judgement tasks.

Figure 3. Style-based grammaticality judgement task: Standard question–answer format

Is the sentence below acceptable in formal written academic English?

In conventionally printed discourse such as books, journal articles and columns, writers have less options for conveying the emphasis so easily achieved in speech.

I think ...

- ○ the sentence is acceptable in formal written English and no change is necessary.
- ○ the sentence is not acceptable in formal written 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 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 more formal alternative to that part (please copy the problematic part into the text box without making a change).
- ○ the sentence is not acceptable in formal written English. I think a (more) formal alternative to the sentence in formal written English is the following (please copy the problematic part into the text box and change it to your more formal alternative).

4. Results

We will first present overall results (Layer 1), followed by more detailed results (Layers 2 and 3). The three layers reflect our tripartite, style-based approach to operationalising accommodative competence. The numbers in subscript reflect the maximum score possible for the variable under investigation. For example, for overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality, we use the abbreviation $SG(I)F_{\_100}$, which stands for Sensitivity to Grammatical (In)Formality. For this variable, participants were able to achieve a maximum score of 100 points. The three layers are as follows:

- Layer 1: overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality ($SG(I)F_{\_100}$),
- Layer 2: overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for (a) appropriate ($SG(I)F_{a\_20}$) vs (b) inappropriate items ($SG(I)F_{i\_80}$) and
- Layer 3: (a) receptive ($rSG(I)F_{i\_40}$) vs (b) productive ($pSG(I)F_{i\_40}$) sensitivity to

grammatical (in)formality for inappropriate items.

Statistical significance was set at the .05 level. For post hoc tests, Bonferroni corrections were used wherever necessary to reduce the chance of committing Type I errors. Effect sizes are reported using partial eta squared (η^2_p) for ANOVAs and eta squared (η^2) for T-tests.[9] Table 1 provides the descriptive results for all three layers.

Table 1. Results style-based grammaticality judgement tasks

Layer		Year	*M*	*SD*	$CI_{95\%}$		Min	Max
					LL	*UL*		
$SG(I)F_{\_100}$	1	BA1	34.4	10.7	29.5	39.3	17	55
		BA2	44.8	13.2	38.8	50.8	18	64
		BA3	49.5	14.0	43.1	55.9	25	74
$SG(I)F_{a\_20}$	2a	BA1	11.0	2.7	9.8	12.3	6	16
		BA2	10.3	4.4	8.3	12.3	2	20
		BA3	11.4	4.5	9.4	13.5	2	18
$SG(I)F_{i\_80}$	2b	BA1	23.3	9.9	18.8	27.8	8	43
		BA2	34.5	12.6	28.8	40.3	8	54
		BA3	38.1	13.7	31.8	44.3	14	62
$rSG(I)F_{i\_40}$	3a	BA1	15.5	4.9	13.3	17.7	8	25
		BA2	20.7	5.7	18.1	23.8	8	30
		BA3	22.2	6.2	19.4	25.1	12	33
$pSG(I)F_{i\_40}$	3b	BA1	7.8	5.7	5.2	10.4	0	20
		BA2	13.8	7.3	10.5	17.1	0	24
		BA3	15.8	8.0	12.2	19.4	2	30

Note 1. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation, $CI_{95\%}$ = 95% confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit
Note 2. SG(I)F = sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality, a = appropriate, i = inappropriate, r = receptive, p = productive

Throughout the three years of testing, we observed one dominant pattern of development, which affected almost all variables: an initial increase in translation trainees' accommodative competence from BA1 to BA2, followed by stagnation in BA3. Below, we add nuances to this dominant pattern.

Layer 1: Overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality. We start our analyses by investigating the results for the entire set of 30 style-based grammaticality judgement tasks. We observed that translation trainees' overall accommodative competence, in the form of overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality (Layer 1, $SG(I)F_{\_100}$), improved from BA1 to BA2, but subsequently stagnated in BA3, with test scores barely reaching 50% ($F(2,40) = 23.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .545$, large effect). The results in Table 1 suggest that translation trainees begin their translation training with some – albeit limited – sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality in BA1 ($M = 34.4$). Subsequently, they do acquire additional sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality and are better equipped in BA2 ($M = 44.8$) and BA3 ($M = 49.5$), than they are in BA1, to conduct more accurate and effective style-shifting. Post-hoc analyses suggest that translation trainees are able to maintain their increased sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality throughout BA2 and carry it over to BA3. However, further development in BA3 (beyond the 50% test-score threshold) appears unsuccessful.

Layer 2a: Overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for *appropriate* items. For Layer 2, we investigated overall sensitivity for appropriate and for inappropriate items separately. At first glance, accommodative competence in the form of 'detection-and-correction' ability seems to focus on *inappropriate* items. However, accommodative competence may also include the ability to consciously *not* correct anything in the case of *appropriate* items. This can be considered an integral component of the accommodative competence that translation trainees must develop as expert language learners. Translation trainees' accommodative competence, in the form of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for *appropriate* items (Layer 2a, $SG(I)F_{a\_20}$), did not differ across the three years, $F(2,40) = 0.63$, $p = .537$ (ns). The levels of accommodative competence did not display any significant development. Translation

trainees begin their translation training with some sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for appropriate items in BA1 (M = 11.0). However, this sensitivity remains largely unchanged in BA2 (M = 10.3) and BA3 (M = 11.4). We noticed that test scores for accommodative competence for appropriate items on average reached (only just) 50%, without any significant development between BA1, BA2 and BA3. An interesting finding here is the ample room for improvement – in BA1, BA2 and BA3 – that translation trainees have at their disposal to develop higher levels of accommodative competence for appropriate items as they progress through their training.

Layer 2b: Overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for *inappropriate* items. By contrast, the levels of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for *inappropriate* items did differ across BA1, BA2 and BA3, $F(2,40) = 27.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .577$ (large effect). Here, we observed the same pattern that we observed for overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality (see Layer 1). Translation trainees' overall accommodative competence for inappropriate items (Layer 2, $SG(I)F_{i\_80}$) improved from BA1 to BA2, but subsequently stagnated in BA3, with test scores barely reaching 50%. The results suggest that translation trainees begin their translation training with extremely limited sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for inappropriate items in BA1 (M = 23.3). Subsequently, they do indeed acquire additional sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for inappropriate items and are better equipped in BA2 (M = 34.5) and BA3 (M = 38.1) than they are in BA1. Once again, post-hoc analyses show that trainees are able to maintain their improved sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality throughout BA2 and carry it over to BA3. However, further development in BA3 (beyond the 50% test-score threshold) is once again unsuccessful.

Layers 3a/3b: Receptive and productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for inappropriate items. Because the developments for Layers 3a and 3b are similar, we will discuss them together. Continuing our analysis for Layer 2b (*inappropriate* items), we looked at the translation trainees' sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for inappropriate items by distinguishing between *receptive* and *productive* sensitivity. In other words, how does trainees' ability to *detect* and *correct* inappropriate items develop throughout their training? For both types of sensitivity, we observed a developmental pattern that we observed in earlier analyses. Translation trainees' accommodative competence, in the form of *receptive* sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality (Layer 3a, $rSG(I)F_{i\_40}$), improved from BA1 to BA2, but stagnated in BA3, with test scores reaching just above 50%, $F(2,40) = 18.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .487$ (large effect). The results show that trainees begin their translation training with some receptive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for inappropriate items in BA1 ($M = 15.5$). As they progress through their training, they acquire additional receptive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality and are better equipped in BA2 ($M = 20.7$) and BA3 ($M = 22.2$) than they are in BA1. In other words, their ability to *detect* style-based grammatical inappropriateness becomes more fine-tuned. Post-hoc analyses show that trainees are once again able to maintain their increased (receptive) sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality throughout BA2 and carry it over to BA3. However, further development in BA3 (beyond the 50% test-score threshold) appears troublesome. We observed a similar developmental pattern for trainees' *productive* sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality (Layer 3b, $pSG(I)F_{i\_40}$), which significantly improves from BA1 to BA2, but stagnates in BA3, with test scores remaining well below 50%, $F(2,40) = 30.42$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .603$ (large effect). Translation trainees begin their training with an extremely low level of productive sensitivity to grammatical

(in)formality in BA1 (M = 7.8). As they progress, they acquire some additional productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality and are *relatively* better equipped in BA2 (M = 13.8) and BA3 (M = 15.8) than they are in BA1. In other words, their ability to *correct* style-based grammatical inappropriateness becomes somewhat more refined, but this refinement appears extremely limited. Post-hoc analyses suggest that trainees are once again able to maintain their limited increased (productive) sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality throughout BA2 and carry it over to BA3.

Although the developmental patterns between receptive and productive sensitivity above are similar, we observed one consistent difference: trainees consistently perform significantly better on detecting than on correcting inappropriate items throughout their three years of training. In other words, trainees consistently perform better for receptive (rec) than for productive (pro) sensitivity to linguistic inappropriateness: BA1 = 15.5_{rec} vs 7.8_{pro} (SD = 3.9, $t(20) = 9.12$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $\eta^2 = 0.81$, large effect), BA2 = 20.7_{rec} vs 13.8_{pro} (SD = 3.6, $t(20) = 8.68$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $\eta^2 = 0.79$, large effect), BA3 = 22.2_{rec} vs 15.8_{pro} (SD = 4.1, $t(20) = 7.24$, $p < .001$ (two-tailed), $\eta^2 = 0.72$, large effect) .

5. Discussion

Our goal was to investigate the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees. By investigating how accommodative competence in L2 English develops during undergraduate translation training, we were able to track trainees' ability to accommodate language to social context through style-shifting. More specifically, we were able to map how translation trainees detect and/or correct grammatical (in)appropriateness in L2 English in formal contexts. Our results provide convincing evidence that developing sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality in L2 English is challenging in various respects.

For our first research question (*How does translation trainees' sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality develop in (monolingual) style-based grammaticality judgement tasks over three years of undergraduate translation training?*), we found consistent results pointing to significant – albeit limited – initial improvement in accommodative competence and subsequent stagnation around the 50% test-score threshold. This is a trend that we observed at various levels of analysis (overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality, overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality *for inappropriate items*, and *receptive and productive* sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality *for inappropriate items*). By contrast, for overall sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality for *appropriate* items, we noticed no significant improvement and results consistently reaching (only just) the 50% test-score threshold during training. Although both trends are different, they do have something in common: they reveal that translation trainees experience style-based grammaticality judgement tasks as challenging and have considerable room left to improve their performance to surpass the 50% test-score threshold and to work towards developing higher levels of successful accommodation.

For our second research question (*Are there developmental similarities and/or differences between receptive and productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality?*), we found that receptive and productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality develop in similar ways. They both showed significant (limited) initial improvement followed by stagnation. However, we observed one fundamental difference between receptive and productive sensitivity: trainees consistently performed significantly better for receptive than for productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality. At best, we could have found an equilibrium between detecting and correcting linguistic (in)appropriateness, but this was far from the case in our data. This finding is important

since it shows that (1) accommodation, when required, is only completely successful when successful receptive sensitivity (i.e., detection potential) and successful productive sensitivity (i.e., correction potential) align, which was not the case for our results, and (2) translation trainees find detecting stylistic (in)appropriateness challenging, but correcting stylistic (in)appropriateness even more challenging. This phenomenon may require special attention in translation training so that trainees are better equipped at achieving a balance between detection and correction.

The overall message from studies into the development of L2 sociolinguistic competence is that there are challenges inherent in developing sensitivity to language variation. Our study supports this finding. Looking at research into L2 sociolinguistics, we notice that other scholars have also found that L2 learners' sensitivity to sociolinguistic features of the target language (TL) develops as proficiency increases and learners experience more exposure to (relevant) input. For instance, Sax (2003) has argued that American L2 learners of French start to use more informal forms in informal situations as they continue their language studies, particularly if they have spent time in French-speaking countries. Likewise, Dewaele (2002) and Gudmestad (2012) have shown that when L2 learners become more proficient in their TL, their sensitivity to stylistic appropriateness in that TL also develops. In this respect, study-abroad programmes have proven to be conducive to developing L2 sociolinguistic competence for the languages under investigation (for an overview, see Regan, Howard and Lemée, 2009).

Our results also show that L2 learners struggle with features of stylistic (in)appropriateness in L2 English. Our findings are consistent with findings from previous research. For example, Gilquin and Paquot (2008) studied EFL learners and found evidence to suggest that register unawareness plays an important role in

developing L2 sociolinguistic competence. Analysing corpus data, they found that participants tend to use features that are more typical of (informal) speech than of (formal) academic prose. Gilquin and Paquot (2008) highlight at least four factors (influence of speech, L1 transfer, teaching-induced factors, developmental factors) and possible interaction between those factors as the cause(s) of register unawareness.

Studies have also highlighted differences between native and non-native speakers of languages. For example, Sax (2003) explains that, despite the observed positive development, L2 learners' probabilistic range (i.e., the difference between the use of a particular variant in an informal situation and in a formal situation) remains much narrower than the native speakers' range. In addition, native speakers are better at accommodating to the interlocutor than learners (Sax 2003). Although such findings appear to suggest a 'sociolinguistic advantage' for native speakers (of French), research has shown that native speakers (e.g., of English) also struggle with certain forms of sociolinguistic variation (e.g., academic language). Clark (2013) 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' (125). This also seems to be the case for many L2 learners of English, who experience an input bias, which tends to favour informal English over formal English. In this respect, increased digital communication and language informalisation may add to register unawareness in both native and non-native speakers of English. However, additional (experimental) research is required to confirm or disprove these assumptions.

The research presented in this paper provides a unique insight into the development of accommodative competence in translation trainees. However, we would like to address three limitations. First, we collected our data using a specific data-

collection tool (style-based grammaticality judgement tasks) focused on specific items in a specific context. Our tasks targeted issues related to the interplay between style and grammar at the subsentential/sentential level. However, translation practice generally expects from translators that they are able to deploy L2 sociolinguistic competence in more complex (socio)linguistic realities. Consequently, increasing complexity to the judgement tasks in authentic ways is a line of investigation worthy of exploration to discover whether our results are generalisable to other contexts. Second, our focus was on analysing quantitative data. As rich as quantitative data are, we are unable to address specific questions using only such data. Qualitative data would undoubtedly nuance the multifaceted development of L2 sociolinguistic competence. Third, our focus was on successful accommodation. Our dataset included many instances of unsuccessful accommodation, where participants accommodated by suggesting unnecessary and often inappropriate style-shifting. We did not reward or penalise instances of unsuccessful accommodation although, for reasons unknown to us, our participants did consider them instances of accurate accommodation. To form a fuller picture of participants' beliefs about accommodation, language (in)appropriateness and style-shifting, we must also investigate unsuccessful accommodation, with a view to generating findings about incomplete or inaccurate (linguistic) knowledge representation and suggesting pedagogical recommendations to address knowledge representation.

6. Conclusion

Although sociolinguistic competence is considered a crucial component of translation competence, our study has shown that developing L2 sociolinguistic competence in translation trainees poses challenges. Operationalising sociolinguistic competence as accommodative competence, more specifically the ability to style-shift, we documented

the challenges that translation trainees experience in detecting and correcting linguistic (in)appropriateness in formal contexts. We observed that the development of accommodative competence does indeed initially increase, but quickly stagnates around the 50% test-score threshold, leaving ample room for improvement. We also observed that receptive and productive sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality follow similar developments, with trainees consistently performing better for receptive than for productive sensitivity. Not only do our results reveal interesting developmental patterns, they also raise pedagogical questions and highlight the need to design more effective sociolinguistically responsive (foreign-language) instruction in translation training. The increased integration of social practice into the translation curriculum, through the active engagement of translation trainees with L2 sociolinguistics in foreign-language classrooms and translation classrooms, is crucial to developing sensitivity to linguistic (in)formality and heightening sociolinguistic awareness. In turn, better-developed sociolinguistic awareness and the controlled use of variation will allow translation trainees to focus on detecting/correcting stylistic mismatches and on achieving the appropriate orchestration of stylistic language features in language discourse.

Declaration of interest statement

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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1 The concept of style has a longstanding history in various fields (e.g., rhetoric, semiotics, sociolinguistics and stylistics). We narrowly define style from a variationist–sociolinguistic perspective as the (in)formality-based correlation between extralinguistic factors (socio-demographic and/or contextual variables) with grammatical elements at the subsentential/sentential level.

2 Research into accommodation has investigated verbal and nonverbal communication adjustment in interaction. We use the concept of accommodation to focus on *verbal* accommodation in the form of style-based grammar adjustments resulting from L2 English learners' deployment of sensitivity to grammatical (in)formality.

3 A widely used performance model for language proficiency is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001. Instead of using references to competences, CEFR scales use functional language to refer to what learners 'can do' in communicative contexts.

4 Labov's (1966) work in variationist sociolinguistics investigated how speakers paid attention to speech. The focus on speech was typical of much research in this initial period of sociolinguistic inquiry. Contemporary sociolinguistic research also addresses other forms of communication (e.g., digital communication and writing).

5 Examples of stylistic variation in lexical (in)formality are *kid–child–infant* and in phonological (in)formality are *singin'–singing*.

6 Our (in)formality continuum is *not* a rating scale. Any scale used for rating/measuring language users' perceptions of linguistic (in)formality must be empirically grounded and well-anchored.

7 The study we report on here is part of a larger project, in which we collected quantitative and qualitative data about grammatical and lexical (in)formality.

8 The sentences were kept the same throughout the three years of testing. Such a test–retest approach to data collection has advantages and disadvantages. Some might address the use of the same sentences as a threat to internal validity. This is a valid point, especially in short-term testing. However, by allowing for ample time between testing (12 months in our study), collecting data as part of a larger test (50 items) and randomising sentences for every participant during testing, we minimised this threat to internal validity. In so doing, we were able to use the same data-collection tool and the same items, which provided a valid and reliable data set for our comparisons.

9 We checked general and test-specific assumptions underlying the selected tests and found no violations.