Learning how to negatively assess in L2 French: A longitudinal study of indirect complaints

Klara Skogmyr Marian, University of Neuchâtel

In this talk, I present the results of a longitudinal CA study documenting how speakers of French as a second language (L2) develop their interactional practices for negatively assessing in the context of complaints about non-present third parties or situations. Negative assessments and non-verbal (vocal, embodied) expressions of negative stance are central to complaint activities. Research on first language speakers has shown that participants use negatively valenced first and second assessments (Pomerantz, 1984) for various interactional purposes in complaints, such as to express criticism of a third party, to summarize a complaint story, to convey or receipt affiliation or sympathy (e.g., Couper-Kuhlen, 2012; Drew, 1998; Drew & Holt, 1988; Pomerantz, 1986; Ruusuvuori et al., 2019) or to join a complaint as co-complainant (Rääbis et al., 2019). But what about L2 speakers? How do speakers with limited interactional experience and linguistic resources in a language express negative stance in complaints? And how do their practices for negatively assessing develop over time?

Data consist of video-recordings of small groups of students participating in a ‘conversation circle’ at a university in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. The study concentrates on five focal participants at elementary and upper-intermediate/advanced levels of French and tracks their practices for negatively assessing during three to 19 months. Results show a change over time in the lexico-syntactic formatting of speakers’ negative assessments, with more advanced speakers deploying a larger repertoire of linguistic resources for proffering high-grade first assessments and for upgrading other speakers’ negative assessments than less advanced speakers. This diversification concerns both the grammatical formatting of assessment turns and the use of increasingly more varied assessment adjectives and intensifiers. In addition, while speakers at both elementary and upper-intermediate/advanced level deploy
multisemiotic resources to express negative stance, over time speakers decrease their use of standalone vocalizations and accompanying embodied conduct for producing precise negative assessments and they increasingly rely on linguistic means for adapting their second assessments to first assessments. The longitudinal diversification of linguistic resources for negatively assessing has interactional consequences for the speakers’ participation in complaint activities, particularly in the context of joint complaints. I discuss the findings in terms of the development of an L2 grammar-for-interaction (Pekarek Doehler, 2018) as a core feature of L2 interactional competence (Pekarek Doehler & Pochon-Berger, 2015; Skogmyr Marian & Balaman, 2018) and I address their implications for language learning and teaching.