Properties of individual languages: The case of L2 users

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The starting point of this paper is a complex systems perspective on language according to which ”a communal language is emergent as the result of the interaction of the idiolects” (Beckner et al. 2009), see also Ellis 2011). In other words, there is reason to believe that this emergent communal average is different from individual languages, which are also different form each other. In fact, individual languages have been shown to rely on individual grammars (Dabrowska 2012), exhibit characteristic collocations (Mollin 2009), distinct bigram and trigram profiles (Barlow 2013), idiosyncratic lexicogrammatical resources (Hall et al. forthcoming) as well as an overall propensity to relatively more fixed configurations of multi-word units (Author 2014 and forthcoming). In addition to this, users of English as a lingua franca (ELF) or, more generally, second language (L2) users, tend to fall back on approximations, or slightly non-standard variants of multi-word units which nevertheless remain communicatively successful (Mauranen 2012; Carey 2013; see also Author 2014). Thus, it is possible that such approximate variants can also become preferred and fixed in L2 idiolects. As a result, L2 use might exhibit even more divergence between idiolects or wider inter-individual variation than monolingual language use, which is what leads to perceived increased variability at the macro-social level (Mauranen 2012). In this paper my goal is to explore this hypothesis. As my data, I use a corpus of interaction within one exceptionally active blog comprising more than 73,000 comments posted by over 4,000 unique commenters over 7 years, amounting to 7.3 million words in total. I focus on individual lexical patterning of several commenters, both native and non-native speakers, who have contributed from 50 thousand to 1.75 million words of comments, and compare it to the communal average.

Keywords: English as a lingua franca, usage-based grammar, complex systems, second language use, idiolectal variation.