In this talk, I examine aspects of the upper limits of second language acquisition by adult learners of French who have attained near-native proficiency. Specifically, I examine interactions between syntactic form and discourse-pragmatic function in interrogatives, using data from spontaneous informal conversations. The French interrogative system presents an ideal testing ground for near-native abilities because of its extensive inventory of syntactic forms, wide range of discourse-pragmatic functions, and complexity of form-function interactions. In addition, interrogative choices vary according to socio-stylistic factors. Previous research has revealed numerous difficulties in the acquisition of interrogatives by less advanced learners of French, including overgeneralization of certain forms, avoidance of stylistically informal variants, and overly simplistic form-function correspondences. In this study, I investigate to what degree near-native interrogative use reflects native norms, with respect to both formal and discourse-functional properties. The results show that the near-natives conform to native usage across a range of measures, including overall production of interrogatives, stylistically appropriate rates of production of various syntactic forms, and awareness of subtle pragmatic constraints. At the same time, however, fine-grained differences in discourse structure emerge between the near-natives and natives. On the whole, the findings indicate that complex and often subtle form-function interactions do not preclude nativelike acquisition of French interrogatives. The results extend previous findings on near-native proficiency in French and have pedagogical implications for the teaching of French interrogatives, especially for advanced classroom learners.

Wednesday, January 23rd
5:00 pm
Humanities 1, room 520