1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the expression of subjectivity in a second language (hereafter L2) by non-native French and Australian English speakers through the specific epistemic expressions *I think*, *je pense* (literally ‘I think’), *je crois* (literally ‘I believe’) and *je trouve* (literally ‘I find’). These expressions will hereafter be referred to as comment clauses, since they can be considered epistemic parentheticals which are clausal in origin and which function as pragmatic markers (Brinton, 2008). As Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, and Finegan (1999) point out, comment clauses are also usually short, loosely connected to the main clause and can appear in a variety of positions (p. 197); all of these features apply to *I think* and its equivalents in this study.

Early on in their studies of French and English as a second (or foreign) language, learners are usually presented with *je pense*, *je crois* and *je trouve* as having the literal meanings of *I think*, *I believe* and *I find*; while this is true in some cases, it does not present a complete picture. These comment clauses are usually introduced to the learner again later as ways of prefacing an opinion.
(with little explanation beyond that). This limited presentation to L2 learners is overly simplistic and eventually quite unhelpful, since in fact, as we shall see, the equivalent of the French comment clauses is usually *I think* in native English speaker interaction, where *I believe* and *I find* are used far less frequently.

Numerous studies have been carried out on such comment clauses in interaction, and the importance of pragmatic competence in one’s second language is also well documented in the literature (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Tateyama, Kasper, Mui, Tay, & Thananart, 1997; Thomas, 1983, inter alia), and yet, as Müller (2005, p. 14) also points out, there are very few interlanguage pragmatics studies which combine these elements by investigating the acquisition of such comment clauses by L2 learners.³

The present study attempts to address this situation by combining a semantic and interactional analysis of these four comment clauses, to illustrate their non-isomorphic nature.⁴ I will argue that the underlying inherent semantic content of each comment clause is distinct, and that disclaiming knowledge of the upcoming proposition is integral to *I think* in Australian English, while this need to distinguish fact from opinion is not part of the core meaning of any of the three French comment clauses.

An earlier study of the discourse of native speakers (NS) of French and Australian English (Mullan, 2007, 2010) found that interactionally all four comment clauses are multifunctional and have three main roles in discourse as follows: organisational (e.g. to mark a boundary in discourse), semantic (to express an opinion/level of certainty) and pragmatic (as a face-saving device).

Using examples from authentic non-native speaker discourse, this chapter will discuss how these semantic and interactional nuances are not always evident to non-native speakers (NNS) in their second language, and what effect this can have in interaction when they use these expressions of subjectivity in their L2. Using Müller’s (2005) comprehensive study of four discourse markers as used by non-native and native (American) English speakers as an example, I set out to answer the following specific questions in relation to my own data (adapted from Müller, 2005, p. 24):

(a) How does the frequency of the comment clauses in the (French and English) non-native speaker discourse compare with the frequency in the native speaker discourse?
(b) Which functions do the comment clauses have in the native speaker discourse?
(c) Which of these functions also occur in the non-native discourse?
(d) How do the frequencies of the functions of the comment clauses compare in native and non-native speaker discourse?

³ Müller refers specifically to discourse markers.
⁴ Cf. also Doro-Mégy (2008) for a contrastive study of *think, believe, croire* and *penser* with a particular focus on the constraints of translating these predicates in literature.