

«ALORS J' VAIS VOUS RACONTER UNE HISTOIRE ->  
**FEATURES OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE:  
A COMPARISON BETWEEN  
ENGLISH AND FRENCH**

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This article reports on a study examining how individuals in a natural French-speaking group construct a narrative, what features of spoken language they display, and what involvement strategies they use. The criteria developed by Anglo-Saxon linguists to analyse the structure of spoken English and to highlight the social and interactional functions used in spoken discourse are explored in an analysis of eight narratives told by Swiss young people. I assume that most of these criteria originally used to analyse spoken English can also apply to French, though a few differences may be found.

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

This article is an exploration of how individuals in a natural group construct a narrative, what features of spoken language they display, and what involvement strategies they use. The approach is qualitative and ethnographic; the aim is to observe language as it is used by individuals acting in a social setting.

### *Studies on spoken French and on spoken English*

For several centuries, the emphasis in the analysis of French was on written language and on a sort of idealized norm. Only recently has it been recognized that there is a need to study the way people actually use the French language. Thus, in the 1970s French studies in social communication and in sociolinguistics, influenced by the works of Hymes, put the emphasis on the functions of language at the expense of the structure of language (see for example Gadet (1971) and Encrevé (1973)).

<sup>1</sup> Mémoire de licence rédigé sous la direction de Mrs Cheshire, professeure à l'Université de Neuchâtel, mars 1994.

As Blanche-Benveniste (1987) points out, all these approaches display a certain refusal to face the description of spoken French in itself. Similarly, the G.A.R.S. (Groupe Aixois de Recherche en Syntaxe), which has endeavoured to describe the structure of spoken French, claims that before dealing with the social functions of language, a description of the structure of that language is needed, and such a description should be made in its own terms, and not as set against the written norm.

The changes which have occurred in French linguistics first took place in American and British linguistics. Until recently, Anglo-saxon linguists would describe spoken language in negative terms with written language as a reference point; spoken language was said to be inexplicit and full of errors, hesitations, etc. Since, linguists have tried to describe spoken language with its own descriptive units. For instance, Chafe (1986) has developed new concepts suited to the description of spoken English.

Other linguists have focused on the individual strategies displayed by the conversationalists (for example Gumperz (1982)) and aim at establishing a link between form and function in the interactive situation (for example Tannen (1982, 1989)).

This paper will comprise both approaches. The second part of section 3 will discuss the linguistic structure of spoken language while the third part will focus on the social and interactional functions achieved by linguistic devices. The first part is a general presentation of the main characteristics of spoken language as opposed to written language.

#### *Aim of this study*

In the present study, I will attempt to apply to French the criteria developed by linguists such as Chafe and Tannen for English. I have recorded 8 young people as they were telling narratives of personal experiences; the full transcriptions can be found in the appendix of the *mémoire*. Thus, I set about seeing whether the criteria used by linguists to analyse English can apply to the French spoken by these young people. In so doing, I hope to discover which features are common to both French and English (and perhaps to all languages), and which are characteristics of either English or French.

#### **Data**

Because I wanted to observe and analyse un-monitored spoken French, I used the participant observation technique as developed by Labov, viz. a technique in which the researcher must be immersed in the social world observed so that his or her presence does not disturb the informants and cause them to shift away from their natural speech style towards the norm.

My data consists of eight narratives told by four boys and four girls, aged from 15 to 20 except for two of them. They all live in the same village and come from «middle-income» families. This group (to which I belong) gathers regularly on Saturday evenings for a meeting which is part of church activities. I did the recording surreptitiously on a Saturday evening when each of the twelve participants was to share the spiritual experiences of their summer holidays. I then asked each of them for permission to use the data. They all readily accepted, their only fear being of not having uttered correct sentences, which once more proves the impact of the norm in French. I retained 6 narratives that evening and decided a few weeks later to get recordings from two other boys. This time they knew they were being recorded. Although they were shy at the beginning, they gradually forgot the tape recorder and talked more freely.

In my transcription, I did not concentrate on the pronunciation, but I have been attentive to hesitations and pauses as well as to all deletions and assimilations of allegro speech.

#### **Features of spoken language: english and French**

##### *Generalities: main characteristics of spoken language as opposed to written language*

Most sociolinguists of English have analysed features of spoken English as opposed to features of written English, comparing two extremes: formal written language and informal spoken language. Chafe (1986), for example, chose to base his comparison on published academic papers for written language and on dinner table conversation for spoken language. He therefore chose two genres, both typical respectively of written language and of spoken language. Although, as Tannen (1982) argues, there is a danger of considering as characteristic of spoken language and written language features which are in fact dependent upon genre or context and

related register, I will follow Chafe (1986) in singling out the main features distinguishing spoken language and written language in typical genres of both modes. My concern is that one should remember that features typical of spoken language can be found in written language (and vice-versa), and that the border-line is not clear-cut. As my analysis concerns spoken language only, I will leave aside what concerns written language.

### Speaking uses the medium of sound and many other communicative channels

The elements found in spoken language are highly context-bound. Consider, for example, the use of deictics such as demonstrative pronouns, place adverbs, time adverbs, etc.

e.g. can you please give me that thing over there<sup>2</sup>

The understanding of such an utterance is dependent upon paralinguistic and non-verbal channels. That is, the uttering of *that thing over there* will be accompanied by a gesture indicating the object of interest (non-verbal channel), and intonation will make it clear that it is not a question but a request (paralinguistic information).

My data shows a few examples of context-bound items, i.e. items interpretable only within a specified context which is known by the interactants. For example when Marianne mentions «our holidays» (Ap.1, 5)<sup>3</sup>, she does not need to specify which holidays she is referring to because the whole group shares the same background and knows that she is talking about their last summer holidays.

Only a few deictics were found in my corpus. This is in fact not surprising since speakers telling of past experiences are not likely to refer to the moment of speaking as much as they would in everyday conversation. The only deictics actually appeared in reproduced dialogues or the reproduction of some interior monologue:

i' d'sait ouais c'est pas avec ça qu' tu veux qu' tu veux vider ces ces tonnes de litres là-d'dans --

<sup>2</sup> When there are no indications to the contrary, the example was invented for the occasion.

<sup>3</sup> The reference system is as follows: Ap.1, 5 is to be read: appendix page 1, line 5.

he said well it's not with **this** (i.e. *the small bucket*) that you are going to that you are going to empty these these thousands of litres **in there** -- (i.e. *in the stable*) (Ap. 16, 26)<sup>4</sup>

### Speaking is performed in face-to-face interaction

This implies that the speaker has to keep the audience's attention and take into consideration any sign coming from that audience. The feed-back is immediate and it forces speakers to constantly readjust what they are saying in order to satisfy the listeners. In such a situation, speakers are under constant pressure to make what they say informative and relevant (for more details, see 3.3).

### Fast pace of spoken language

Both the sound medium and the social interactiveness enforce a rapidity on the production of spoken language. The pace of speech will correspond more or less to the pace of thought, and because of the evanescence of spoken language, the speakers' only way of correcting what they have said is reformulation. Therefore, whatever revising takes place is laid bare before the listeners. This quality of spoken language is revealed through features such as fragmentation, false starts, use of simple vocabulary and many contractions.

All of these features are displayed in my data, especially contractions which are by far the most frequent features encountered. The phonemes most often deleted are [ə], and [l] in the third person pronouns. Other cases of contraction generally appear in very frequent words, as for example *être* often pronounced *êt'*, or *j'avais* sometimes pronounced *j'a'ais*, or also *j'étais* pronounced *j' 'tais*.

<sup>4</sup> The following transcription conventions are used:

:	colon following a vowel, indicates elongated vowel sound
-, --, ---	1, 2, or 3 hyphen(s) show short, medium, and long pauses
( )	double parentheses indicate an uncertain transcription
X, XXX	indicate an unintelligible word or sequence of words
x'	indicates an incomplete word
x'x	shows the elision of a phoneme
CAPS	capital letters show emphatic stress

*Linguistic structure<sup>5</sup>*

In order to analyse spoken language, one needs to develop categories which are relevant for this mode of communication. This is why Chafe introduced new categories such as, for example, the intonation and /or idea unit.

## Intonation unit and/or idea unit

The intonation unit is defined according to prosodic criteria: such a unit is spoken with a single coherent intonation contour, ending in what is perceived as a clause-final intonation. It is preceded or followed by some kind of hesitation. Intonation units are verbal expressions of idea units.

Idea units contain all the information a speaker can handle within a single focus of consciousness. Chafe claims that they express what is held in short-term memory at a particular time. Thus an idea unit is about 5 words long and its mean length is about 2 seconds (including pauses). Chafe claims that this mirrors the pace of thought as it is being expressed in language. He further notes that an idea unit can express only one brand new concept - i.e. one that was not already in the consciousness of the speaker - at a time. As a consequence, speakers need to control the flow of information. They do so by using «sluice gates» (also called «empty language») such as *anyway, let's say, well* which allow them to think about what they are going to say next and also helps to indicate the argument structure. A consequence of this monitoring of information flow can be seen in the disfluencies which are characteristics of spoken language. Below is an example of two typical idea units:

.. Cause it's **beautiful** up there  
but it is .. **pretty high**.

In my corpus, I did not encounter too many difficulties in delimiting intonation units as defined by Chafe. Yet these intonation units were not easily paired with idea units. Most of the time, idea units corresponding to intonation units proved to be much longer than 5 words uttered in 2 seconds; for example:

y a juste deux trois chrétiens qui nous r'gardent pour nous encourager. (Ap. 5, 35)

This was clearly said in a single intonation contour and yet three new ideas are developed: a referent: *two or three christians*, their action: *watch us* and the aim of their action: *to encourage us*.

<sup>5</sup> Most of the points in this section are taken from Chafe (1985, 1986, 1990).

The following example illustrates how the informant got into trouble trying to handle too much information at a time:

- 12 d'un côté j' su' l'moment c'est ma'  
on the one hand I at the time it's fun'  
13 a a' avec le r'cul disons ((que j' les apprécie)) MIEUX que:  
w' w' with the passing of time let's say that I appreciate them more than:  
(Ap. 3,12-13)

Such hesitations and troubles in the developing of ideas are quite frequent in my data. One reason may be that some individuals seem to have more difficulties than others in handling information. There may yet be another important reason: it has been observed that the speech of people talking about very personal matters is filled with hesitations (see Coates (1987). This, no doubt, is the case for the narratives under analysis here, where the emotional stake is very high.

All things considered, my data confirms that speakers express themselves in intonation units. Most of the time however, idea units prove to contain more than 5 words and more than one idea per unit. I claim that when the speakers' ideas are clear, although they develop one idea after the other, they are able to gather several ideas in the same intonation unit. Thus my informants seem capable of producing more information out of their short-term memory than Chafe considers feasible. This would suggest therefore that he has underrated the human brain's capacities. It is true though that a long idea unit is likely to display hesitations and disfluencies to a greater extent than a short one. On the whole, my data suggests a modification in the definition of the idea unit, inasmuch as it normally contains from about 5 to 20 words, and generally expresses from 1 to about 4 ideas.

## The light-subject constraint

Idea units are usually composed of a topic and its comment with the topic being assumed by the speaker to be already known by the hearer. This shows that the speaker constantly creates his or her own version of the addressee's mental processes: he or she has to be aware of what others already know or do not know yet, before putting his or her thoughts into words. The following example from my data is evidence of the light-subject constraint:

- 5 A: j'ai été euh camper avec des amis --  
I went er camping with some friends --  
6 S: ouais  
7 A: euh -- on s'est un peu décidé comme ça hein --  
er -- we made up our mind just like that you know -- (Ap. 13,5-7)

Alain introduces the topic *me and my friends* before giving any information about it. Once the topic has been introduced to the hearers, it is pronominalized and weakly stressed: *on*. This constraint is very well represented in my corpus and shows that speakers have in mind what the audience knows or does not yet know, and organize their speech accordingly.

### Clause structure and clause connectivity

The structure of idea units usually takes the form of subject + verb + one or more complements, see for example:

on est parti à la Grotte aux Fées  
we left for la Grotte aux Fées (Ap. 13,26)

Keeping the structure simple allows the speaker to concentrate on the meaning rather than on the form of what they are saying. We also find in the clause structure of spoken language grammatical devices which are not allowed in written language but are accepted in spoken language. One of the examples provided by Chafe concerns singular verb agreement with a plural noun, e.g.:

There's so **many things** that could be done with those. (Chafe 1985:115)

Such examples are abundant in my data. See for instance:

et pis c'est vrai qu'y a eu pas mal de **monde** qui **sont** v'nus à la dernière minute -  
and it's true that there were quite a **few people** (sg. in French) who **came** (pl. in French) at the last moment - (Ap. 7,25)

Plural verb agreement with a singular noun would not be accepted in the written norm, but here, because meaning is more important than form, one can consider that *monde* comprizes many people and hence accept a plural verb.

Most of the connective tissue in spoken language is implied. As Ochs (1979) remarks, arguments and predicates are generally linked by means of their position rather than through syntactic means. Chafe (1985) observes that ideas are typically strung together in a chain, with little subordination. One important characteristic of spoken language is fragmentation; i.e. we mainly find independent clauses and clause fragments, e.g.:

I came home  
I was really exhausted (Chafe 1985: 111)

Moreover, Berruto (1985) discovered in spoken Italian some of the features defined by Chafe such as fragmentation, false starts, simple vocabulary use

and so on. In addition, he also found other features, more typical of Romance languages than of English. Berruto identified four factors considered to be at the origin of the different features that structure spoken language:

#### a) *Egocentricity*

Speakers elaborate a grammar which creates empathy and emotions, and which is centred on themselves. One such example is the structure *moi, je* which is very frequent in Italian and in French, but which does not seem to exist in English, at least not in this guise. I have found such an example in the plural in my data:

nous, on apprend nos pièces («we», we learn our plays) (Ap. 8,13)

#### b) *Simplification*

In Romance languages, simplification has an impact on the connective tissue insofar as a speaker will prefer to use analytic forms, as for example: *de qui, à qui, que*, rather than synthetic forms, such as: *duquel, auquel, dont*. This can even lead to grammatical constructions condemned by the norm, as for instance:

tu te souviens de ce **que** je t'ai parlé hier (do you remember what I told you yesterday)

where the indirect pronoun *dont* is required.

#### c) *Absence of planning*

This refers to the lack of anticipation characteristic of the hic et nunc nature of spoken language. One consequence of this is fragmentation; indeed, there are many cases of independent clauses in my data:

- 10 iz étaient X mon père et ma mère euh:  
they were X my father and my mother er:
- 17 iz ont pas pu bien dormir cette nuit hein  
they couldn't sleep well that night you know
- 18 i's demandaient où on avait passé  
they were wondering where we'd gone (Ap. 14,10,17,18)

Instances of idea units linked only by (*et*) *pis* which, by the way, fulfills the same multi-roles as *and* in English, are also frequent; see for example:

- 19 **pis** qu'hésitaient  
and who were hesitating
- 20 **pis** qui s' disaient  
and who were telling themselves (Ap. 7,19-20)

The following example consisting in the juxtaposition of noun phrases illustrates how fragmentation and ellipsis are at work in spoken language:

- 21 à la Côte -  
 22 au Temple -  
 23 l'évangélisation (Ap. 5, 21-23)

Here, the implicit information would be something like: *it took place in la Côte, more precisely at church, and that evening was an evangelisation meeting*. This shows how much the audience needs to rely on context and non-verbal signs to supply any lacking information.

Features which are most typical of the lack of planning take the form of unfinished clauses. My data contains many such examples:

- 10 alors euh bon - j' savais plus quoi faire j' co'  
 then er well - I didn't know what to do anymore I was beg'  
 11 pour finir il est arrivé  
 in the end he (i.e. the boss) came (Ap. 16,10-11)

d) «Perceptivity» (*la percettività*)

This last factor concerns all the devices used by speakers to make their speech intelligible and easily decoded by hearers. The frequent use of the patterns *il y a ... (que)* (i.e. *there is/are ... that/which/who*) and *c'est ... que* (i.e. *it is ... that/which/who*) enables speakers to divide up their speech and also to put emphasis on the topic. See for instance:

- 21 c'est euh: la soirée finale qu' on a fait à la Côte -  
 it's er: the last meeting that we had in la Côte -

Before concluding, I will give one more characteristic of the structure of spoken language, namely the scarce use of passives. Indeed, speakers prefer to use active clauses. In my data, I have found only one example of a passive:

j'étais soutenue par eux (Ap. 10,20),

probably the exception which proves the rule.

As Berruto states, all the grammatical devices present in spoken language force speakers to use fewer forms more often and to combine them in an analytic rather than in a synthetic way. Possibly the reason why Chafe does not mention this phenomenon is that English being a more analytic language than French or Italian, the difference between writing and speaking, with respect to this feature, is not so clear-cut. One may wonder then if French is not on the way to becoming a more analytic language, a change which would start in the discourse of speakers and which might be prevented by the norm in their writing.

## Narratives

Because my data consists of spoken narratives, a few words will be said on the structure of such narratives. Some of the notions briefly introduced here will be resumed in the next section.

Labov (1972b) has provided a much referred to framework for analysing narratives. For the purpose of my research, I will only draw attention to three elements in his framework (for more information see Labov (1972b)). The first, *orientation*, provides the background for the story and answers the questions *who, when, what, where ?*. The second, *complicating action*, consists of the actual facts that took place and answers the question *then what happened ?* According to Labov, the complicating action is always present in a narrative. The last element, *evaluation*, is «the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative, its *raison d'être*: why it was told and what the narrator is getting at» (Labov 1972b: 366).

Six of the narratives I collected clearly focus not on the events themselves, but on the emotions they raised. Thus, the element considered by Labov to be crucial for narratives seems to be missing altogether, i.e. the complicating action. This phenomenon can be accounted for if we consider the atypical nature of these narratives. They were to be an account of the participant's spiritual experiences of the summer holidays, and to recall what they had learned through various happenings. This explains the significant number of evaluative statements found in these stories. In fact, these narratives consist mainly of orientation and evaluation. Narrators usually set the scene and then go straight into saying what they felt about it.

### *Involvement strategies<sup>6</sup> or evaluation*

This section is aimed at developing what has been stated above concerning the evaluation strand. Involvement strategies just as evaluative devices are used to underline the interest and the relevance of what is being told. The focus is here on the speakers' ways of using language to achieve interactional goals. Such goals can only be attained if the participants share the same discourse strategies. Indeed this common ground allows them to decipher signs coming from others and thus to correctly infer the meanings conveyed.

<sup>6</sup> In accordance with Tannen (1989), I will use the term «strategy» in the following sense: a systematic way of using language.

To start with, let us consider several ways of defining involvement strategies.

### External versus internal evaluation (Labov (1972b))

In external evaluation, the narrator steps outside the narrative events and tells the listener what the point of the story is. According to Tannen, external evaluation consists in convincing the audience by intellectual argumentation that the point of the story is relevant. Because listeners are told what to think about the story, there is little room for them to have their own interpretation of the facts. It is thus less involving than internal evaluation, where the speakers lead the hearers to think like them by the use of linguistic techniques. For Tannen this type of evaluation consists in moving the audience by relying on their participation in inferring meaning.

The narratives elicited for this study show cases both of external and internal evaluation. However, one may wonder that narratives 1 to 6 which involve so much of the personality of the speakers should entail so many instances of external evaluative statements, statements considered to be the least involving of all. The most common evaluative utterances encountered have the following structures: a) *c'était + adjective* (e.g. *c'était génial*, *c'était super*, *c'était pas facile*, etc.) and b) *je/on + emotional verb* (*aimer*, *avoir peur*, etc.); they display how the speaker steps out of the narrative to provide an interpretation of the events:

*c'est c'est c'est génial ---*

*it's it's it's great ---* (Ap. 2, 32)

*j'ai bien aimé les études*

*I really enjoyed the studies* (Ap. 5,12)

These narratives, interspersed with so many external evaluative comments, make us aware of the highly involving and moving quality of the experience undergone by the narrators, but they do not always move us into going through the same feelings ourselves. Most interesting is the fact that evaluative comments in these six narratives are the stories themselves; the audience gets the impression that the feelings accompanying the various events described are more important than the events themselves. This is not the case with narratives 7 and 8 where evaluative statements have the function ascribed to them by Labov, viz they underline the reportable character of the events, and their function is auxiliary in the narrative. See the following comment on a situation:

*pis ça: ça puait partout XXX --*

*and it it was smelly everywhere XXX --* (Ap. 16,21)

The rest of this chapter discusses internal evaluation.

### Involvement signs as distinguished by Chafe

Chafe (1985, 1986) distinguishes three types of involvement ensuing from the face-to-face nature of interaction:

#### a) *Involvement of the speaker with himself, i.e. ego involvement*

This is seen for example in the use of first-person pronouns and the use of phrases like *I mean, as I say, etc.* Such involvement is characteristic of the highly personal narratives under analysis in my data. First-person pronouns such as *je, on, moi, nous* are very frequent. We also find cases of ego involvement referring to the speaker's mental processes, as for example:

*j' sais pas trop quoi dire*

*I don't know what to say really* (Ap. 11, 8)

#### b) *Involvement of the speaker with the hearer*

Expressions used in this kind of involvement (e.g. *you know*) aim at keeping the hearers involved, obliging them thus to give some kind of instant feedback.

We may reasonably expect to find fewer instances of such involvement in my corpus than we would in a usual everyday conversation. Indeed, here the narrators spoke in turns, and when speaking, they concentrated more on the development of their own narrative and less on how it was being received. In any case, for the first 6 narratives, it was not possible for the speaker to solicit or take account of any feedback coming from the audience, an audience made up of eleven persons.

#### c) *Involvement of the speaker with the subject matter*

This consists in speakers using devices such as exaggerations, exclamations, expressive vocabulary, direct quotations and so on in order to impress the audience with the importance of what they are saying.

I have found numerous instances of such involvement in my data. Exaggeration for example appears with the frequent use of the adverb *vraiment* (*really*) whose function is simply to stress the importance of what follows. Other similar adverbs are *tellement*, *complètement*, *carrément*, and *très*. Apart from adverbs, narrators use emphatic stress, such as *moi*, see the following example:

en tout cas MOI personnellement j'avais: très très peur - (Ap. 9,15)

If on the one hand, narrators endeavour to reinforce the relevance of their words, on the other hand, they are careful to keep to the truth, and therefore do not jibe at downplaying their statements when necessary. This activity mainly takes the form of signs of reliability such as:

**ou comme ça** «or so» (Ap. 8,8)

**dans un sens** «on the one hand» (Ap. 6,29)

**un (p'tit) peu** «a little» (Ap. 3,17; 6,31,32; 7,10; 17,30)

From these observations, we can conclude that French speakers use the same involvement strategies as English speakers do.

### High involvement versus high considerateness

When she introduced this opposition, Tannen was inspired by Goffman (1959)'s notions of positive and negative face. He considers that conversations are mainly ruled by the necessity for participants to save face and avoid conflict. There are two kinds of face:

- positive face refers to the need for individuals to be approved of;
- negative face refers to their need not to be imposed on.

Thus, high involvement is achieved when participants place more emphasis on serving the need for positive face, that is, honouring the others' need for involvement. High considerateness, in contrast, occurs when the emphasis is on the need for negative face, that is, honouring the others' need for independence. Therefore high considerateness is not an involving strategy but rather a strategy creating detachment. Tannen has found that speakers using high involvement strategies would often do so by telling stories of personal experiences and by including accounts of their feelings in response to events recounted. They serve the others' positive face in the sense that, by exposing themselves to their judgement, they show that they trust the listeners and therefore approve of them.

The narratives of my corpus, and especially narratives 1 to 6, are examples of high involvement, inasmuch as the speakers opened their hearts to each other and did not mind talking about very personal matters. This is clearly a sign of the mutual trust prevailing among the participants. They can therefore be referred to as speakers whose conversational style is characterized by high involvement. Although it does not appear in my transcripts, there was one case of high considerateness: among the twelve young people, there was a Swiss German girl visiting the group that evening. Inevitably her turn to talk came and here is what happened:

*Swiss German girl:* j' n' sais pas encore très bien le français  
I cannot speak French very well yet

*Ch.:* (kindly) on t'oblige pas d' dire quelqu' chose hein  
you do not have to say something you know

By saying this, Christian was honouring her need not to be imposed on, and giving her the right not to say anything; in other words, he was attending to her negative face.

### Sound and sense in discourse

Saussure demonstrated that «language connects the universe of sound and the universe of meaning» (1959:106). The inseparability of these aspects will clearly be seen in involvement strategies, such as repetition, constructed dialogue, and imagery and details (all discussed below). Speakers rely indeed on these two aspects to involve their audience.

#### a) *Sound and rhythm*

The musical aspect of language is important in terms of involvement. In face-to-face interaction, we can observe rhythmic synchrony, i.e. a speaker who wishes to underline a word may well accompany it with a hand gesture; similarly, when cultural backgrounds are shared, synchrony can be observed among the conversationalists as they harmonize their movements. In my corpus, the fact that none of the narrators would allow the transitory period between two stories to last more than half a minute shows a case of rhythmic pattern observed by all.

#### b) *Meaning through mutual participation in sensemaking*

Involvement is created here through audience participation in sensemaking. As already said, the aspect of shared context and background is extremely important: in a «homogeneous» group, speakers can convey the most meaning in the fewest words, that is, they know that the hearers have all the elements needed to work out the meaning themselves.

One such example in my data is the reference to the play «Le Puzzle» (Ap. 4, 22) whose content everyone was assumed to know. This, however, was not the case for me; because I could not supply the missing information concerning the play, I felt that on this point, I did not share the whole extent of the group's background. In short, when speakers make the understanding of their words dependent upon shared context, they can produce two opposite reactions on the part of the audience; the first is that of feeling included in the group because one understands the implied



meaning, and the second is that of feeling excluded from the group because one is supposed to know but does not know.

In short, Tannen sees involvement strategies as «speakers' ways of shaping what they are talking ... about» (1989:28). In Labov's framework, these strategies are evaluative; they present the subject of discourse in such a way as to shape how the hearer will view it.

We will now examine some involvement strategies as defined by Tannen (1989).

### Repetition

According to Tannen, repetition is at the heart of how discourse is created. It is pervasive, functional and often automatic in spoken language and serves many purposes:

#### *Production and comprehension*

Repetition helps production and comprehension simply because repeating an item gives the speaker time to decide what to say next; it also provides less dense discourse which facilitates comprehension. See for example:

comme ça: j'arrivais bien: j'arrivais bien tout X euh: tout faire liquide -  
so I could easily I could easily make er: make everything liquid - (Ap. 15,9)

Tannen mentions two stylistic figures of speech in spoken language: anadiplosis (repetition of an end at the next beginning), and chiasmus (a figure of speech in which two segments contain the same two parts with their order reversed). Both cases appear in my data:

#### Anadiplosis:

31 moi j'ai senti qu'i' s' 'tait passé quelque chose **en nous** -  
32 **en nous**: euh: face à l'unité du: du groupe (Ap.4, 31-32)

#### Chiasmus with more or less accurate repetition:

16 pour finir il a pris **une immense barre** pis: -  
17 **il a passé au moins dix minutes** euh --  
18 vraiment qu' c'était une gr' grosse alerte -  
19 **il a passé au moins dix minutes** à déboucher ça --  
20 et pis **avec une longue barre** il a réussi à: broyer ce:  
(Ap. 17, 16-20)

Lines 16 and 17 first mention the rod and then the duration of the work; line 18 is an in-between evaluative comment, and finally lines 19 and 20 repeat the content of lines 16-17 but in reversed order.

Repetition and reversal provide aesthetic satisfaction. The rhythm and the symmetry of such utterances make them easy to understand and remember. It is interesting to notice in these examples, as Tannen points out, that strategies usually thought to belong to written poetry appear in spoken narratives as well, in a natural and very effective way.

#### *Connection*

In spoken language the connective tissue tends to be implied, so that repetition of words or sentences is used to show how new utterances are linked to earlier discourse and how ideas presented in discourse are related to each other. For example:

1 qu' j'avais l'impression d'être dans l' Royaume de Dieu -  
2 tellement c'était c'était beau\_  
3 c' c'était beau comme on pou'ait: euh  
4 rien qu' voir dans l' Groupe  
5 **comme on pou'ait** s'aimer les uns les autres

Anne, the narrator in this excerpt, carries on developing her ideas, by repeating the previous idea (i.e. *beau* on line 3 and *pouvait* on line 5) before introducing the new one (i.e. *pouvait* on line 3 and *aimer* on line 5).

Furthermore, repetition can also be the expression of the speakers' attitude towards what they are saying. The best illustrations of this phenomenon come from Philippe's narrative:

1 et pis ça montait ça montait ça montait - (Ap. 15,1)  
29 il a passé presque - tout son après-midi à faire ça:  
30 à tout l' temps évacuer évacuer évacuer --  
31 pf pis l'eau montait toujours  
32 l'eau montait toujours (Ap. 16, 29.30)

The function of repetition here is to convey the repetitive and continuous aspect of the action. The strategy is highly effective since the audience clearly gets the impression that the rising of the water was beyond control, and that even man's perseverance could not prevent the catastrophe.

#### *Interaction*

On this level, repetition accomplishes social goals or simply manages the business of conversation, that is, it can be a way of getting or keeping the floor, showing listenership, persuading someone, and so on. Following is a case in my corpus where the narrator repeats a statement after the intervention of one of the listener:

6 S.: le: le premier jour on a'ait tellement peur -  
7 enfin l' premier jour on a été à Yvonand --

- 8 Ch.: on a'ait tellement peur ah  
 9 S.: euh: on a été à Yvonand (Ap. 9,6-9)

Once again this is a very neat example of symmetry with each item repeated twice. As for the interactional aspect, we can see that Christian desires to underline the aspect of fear in what Sylvie has just said; moreover, the tone of his voice suggests that he finds such a statement astonishing or even funny; his strategy for expressing implicitly what he thinks about Sylvie's words is clearly part of internal evaluation. As for Sylvie, she carries on, and in doing so repeats her last utterance as if to make sure everyone remembers it in spite of Christian's interruption.

Repetition thus achieves a sense of coherence and ensemble by creating a rhythmic pattern, a pattern which will be familiar to the audience. Repetition of pronouns and discourse markers especially gives talk a character of familiarity; see for example Philippe's narrative in which we find nine occurrences of *justement* (*precisely*) and occurrences of *vraiment* (*really*), not to mention the use of *pis* appearing forty-one times in this narrative. All these items help build up the structure of the discourse. Furthermore, repetition is concerned with mutual participation in sensemaking, inasmuch as the audience is left to interpret the meaning of the repetition, and this creates interpersonal involvement.

Last but not least, narratives themselves are an instance of repetition, namely they are the repetition of a past experience. As Tannen (1989) claims, re-experiencing something is a source of pleasure as well as a way of learning more from it. My hypothesis is that, while the hearers were discovering the narratives for the first time, the speakers were re-discovering their experiences in the very process of narration, and I would even go further in suggesting that they may well be discovering things that they had not been aware of at the time of the experience. The logical conclusion to this is that there is no such thing as plain repetition; on the contrary, repetition always implies some kind of addition.

### Constructed dialogue in story telling

Good narrators make their story alive by taking up different voices for different actors, and different gestures for the actions. The listeners are not told about characters but they hear and see these characters act. Because the audience must interpret the story (portrayed as a drama), they get highly involved. The strategy is so effective that narrators will use it even

when no such dialogue occurred in the actual events. This is the reason why Tannen uses the term «constructed dialogue».

Here is an example of constructed dialogue concerning the imaginary words or thoughts of other persons:

- 18 j'avais l'impression d' voir les gens qu' étaient là avec leur billet -  
 19 pis qu' hésitaient  
 20 pis qui s' disaient  
 21 qu'est-c' que j' fais  
 22 j'y vais euh:  
 23 qu'est-c' qu' y a à la télé c' soir (Ap. 7, 18-23)

Pierre is reconstructing the scene that took place before his eyes as he was imagining the villagers' hesitations. Giving these persons a voice is much more effective than reporting in indirect speech what they might have thought. Pierre's way of presenting what happened allows us to experience their hesitations from within, and to thus feel much more involved.

### Imagery and details

Tannen (1989: 135) proposes to «explore how details create images, images create scenes, and scenes spark emotion, making possible both understanding and involvement». The creation of a scene composed of people in relation to each other, doing things that are relevant allows both the speaker and the audience to identify with the characters and with the events:

- 14 et pis - pendant c': pendant ce: pendant l' moment d' prière qu'on a eu  
 justement quand y a  
 15 euh: vers huit heures moins cinq comme ça  
 16 y avait pas beaucoup d' monde -  
 17 j'ai r'ssentit la même chose qu' Marianne quand on priait -  
 18 j'avais l'impression d' voir les gens qu' étaient là avec leur billet -  
 19 pis qu' hésitaient  
 20 pis qui s' disaient  
 21 qu'est-c' que j' fais  
 22 j'y vais euh:  
 23 qu'est-c' qu' y a à la télé c' soir  
 24 le billet le magazine de télé -  
 25 et pis c'est vrai qu' y a eu pas mal de monde qui sont v'nus à la dernière  
 minute -  
 26 pis: de de sentir les choses comme ça -  
 27 c'était c'était impressionnant -- (Ap. 7,14-27)

*Lines 18-24 translated:* I felt I could see the villagers standing there with their tickets / and they were hesitating / and they were saying to themselves / what shall I do / shall I go there er: / what's on TV tonight / **the ticket the TV programme.**

The use of details in this extract confirms Tannen's idea; indeed, words such as *tickets* and *TV program* create images in the minds of the hearers who can view the hesitations of the villagers in the form of an invitation on the one hand, and of a TV program on the other hand. Once the picture is set in the minds of the audience, Pierre provides them with the sound as he reproduces the villagers' thoughts in the form of a monologue. At this point, a scene has been born in the listeners' minds, a scene that they are not likely to forget, since they have been involved in its very construction.

To end this section, I will join Tannen in saying that, in conversational discourse, people seek to convince audiences and to move them. Emotion and cognition are therefore inseparable, so that what is real is what is experienced and felt. That is the reason why it is so crucial to trigger the imagination of the audience. It is there that meaning is made, it is there that a scene can be born in the mind of the audience, and it is in that scene that interpersonal involvement occurs.

### Conclusion

I began this study by singling out the main characteristics of spoken language as opposed to written language. As we may expect, features implicating the various communicative channels of spoken language are very likely to be found in all languages. Context-bound items and deictics are characteristic of spoken language insofar as they contribute to establishing a link between the language and the situation of which it is a part. The reason I have not found so many such items in my data is not dependent upon differences between spoken French and spoken English, but upon differences between the very nature of the spoken French analysed here — narratives of personal experience —, and the spoken English analysed by the majority of researchers in this field. Indeed, as we can see from my data, narrating a past experience greatly diminishes the need to refer to the moment of speaking.

I then pointed out that spoken language being performed in face-to-face interaction, it generally implies the use of involvement strategies which do not normally appear in written language as the need for writers to take into consideration reactions coming from the audience is not so important. On analysing my data, these characteristics of spoken language proved to have similar effects on spoken French as on spoken English.

A closer look at the features characterizing the structure of spoken language as defined by Chafe (1985, 1986) has led to a most interesting

finding: idea units in spoken French prove to be unlike those in spoken English; they can be much longer (up to 20 words) and they can contain up to 4 new concepts ! This may question Chafe's affirmation that «... recent research has shown [idea units] to be fundamental units of spoken language» (Chafe 1985:121) as well as his affirmation that the brain cannot handle so much information in a single focus of consciousness. Apart from that, this study has shown that French speakers express themselves in intonation units, i.e. units spoken in single intonation contours. Moreover, elements such as sluice gates and disfluencies frequently appear and thereby confirm that handling information flow when speaking is no simple matter.

Concerning clause structure and clause connectivity, we generally find simple clause structures with more coordination than subordination in both spoken English and spoken French. Moreover, characteristics such as fragmentation, the use of *and* (French *et* or *et pis*) as an all-purpose conjunction, left-dislocation and other grammatical devices not allowed in written language seem to be features of spoken language in general. Looking at the article written by Berruto (1985), we have seen that some features of spoken language are typical of Romance languages; that is the use of the *moi, je* structure and the preference given to analytic forms at the expense of synthetic forms. The reason why this latter aspect does not appear in spoken English is that English is already an analytic language.

The next point of my study concerned involvement strategies, and almost all strategies described by Chafe (1985, 1986) and Tannen (1982, 1989) appear in my data. When they do not or when they do only to a small degree, a reasonable explanation can generally be provided; for example, the scarcity of signs of involvement with the audience can be attributed to the nature of the interaction, i.e. an audience of 11 people listening to one speaker. As for Labov (1972b)'s description of the structure of narratives, although some elements of his framework do appear in French stories, their content and position can vary; indeed, we have seen that narratives 1 to 6, for instance, are constituted mainly of orientation and of evaluative comments. Once more, this is due to the nature of the narratives which, in this case, are accounts of spiritual experiences, a subject triggering many expressions of feeling. Moreover, of all the involvement strategies under analysis in this study, that of repetition has proved to be the most productive, including strategies as specific as anadiplosis and chiasmus. The great amount of such

strategies found in my corpus confirms Tannen's view that involvement strategies are not adding something to communication, but constitute communication; feeling is indeed as important as understanding in oral communication.

In closing, I would like to draw attention to the most striking element in my findings, viz the discovery that very long idea units exist in spoken French. The other differences between French and English concerning the structure of language can be attributed to the fact that French is a Romance language and has its own characteristics. Moreover, I would say that both languages share similar involvement strategies, a finding which suggests that Westerners have a similar way of using language to achieve linguistic goals.

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