Corela

Cognition, représentation, langage

7-2 | 2009

Vol. 7, n° 2

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/corela/197>

DOI: 10.4000/corela.197

ISSN: 1638-573X

Publisher

Cercle linguistique du Centre et de l'Ouest - CerLICO

Electronic reference

Laurence Buson and Jacqueline Billiez, « Stylistic repertoires and strategies of 10/11 year-old primary school children », *Corela* [Online], 7-2 | 2009, Online since 01 December 2009, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/corela/197> ; DOI : 10.4000/corela.197

This text was automatically generated on 30 April 2019.

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Stylistic repertoires and strategies of 10/11 year-old primary school children

Laurence Buson and Jacqueline Billiez

1. Stylistic variation, communicative strategy and identity positioning: why does this speaker express himself/herself in this way, in this particular interaction situation?

- 1 Bell (2001) developed the idea that stylistic choices should not be viewed merely in terms of the “attention paid to speech” (Labov, 1972). For Bell, style is a dynamic phenomenon that is linked both to the audience and to questions of identity: speakers speak in a certain way in order to converge with a present or potential listener, while simultaneously being influenced, either consciously or unconsciously, by their peer and reference groups. Schilling-Estes (2002) adopted an even more radical position, defining the “*Speaker-Design*” approach, according to which style has a symbolic dimension that allows the speaker to adopt a stance with respect to the audience in order to attain specific communicative objectives¹: “Under speaker design approaches, stylistic variation is viewed not as a reactive phenomenon but as a resource in the active creation, presentation, and re-creation of speaker identity” (Schilling-Estes, 2002: 388). Rather than just adapting to the situation or using pre-existing varieties, speakers manipulate the language resources at their disposal, constantly creating new contexts, meanings and communicative modalities (Irvine, 2001).
- 2 Considering stylistic variation from this perspective, one of the questions investigated by the present study is the ability of children and pre-adolescents to manipulate stylistic resources in different situations and to use these resources to adopt stances with respect to other children and/or adults. The educational aspects of this question are crucial as a major objective of the French school system is to teach children to follow communicative

rules and use standard varieties. However, questions of identity are already well-developed by the time children reach primary-school age, and one of the ways in which children express their identity is through the use of non-standard language choices that do not follow conventional rules. These non-standard choices are often opposed and condemned by teachers.

- 3 The present study was based on 60 hours of “ecological” recordings of eight 10/11-year-old children. We neutralized any possible effects of social background and gender by only recording girls from disadvantaged backgrounds². In order to vary the profiles of the girls’ social networks, we chose four girls from a socially mixed school and four girls from a homogenous socially disadvantaged school³. The recordings were made using self-contained, portable recorders that did not in any way restrict the girls’ movements.
- 4 We first carried out a qualitative study of instances of style shift, and then we conducted a quantitative analysis of five discourse markers selected from a separate reference corpus.

2. Stylistic variation and self-presentation⁴: analysis of style shifts

- 5 *Style shift* is clearly illustrated by the following two extracts:

(1) Lilia: (*telling a friend about a past event*) on fait une course* - on court< - d'accord* - tou-tou-tou elle est tombée* - ouais - and moi j(e) te r(e)gardais dans l(e) préau - (*simulates the call of a supervisor*) moi je sais c(e) qui c'est passé* - i(l) m(e) dit (*imitates the tone of an adult talking to a small child*) viens ici petite - qu'est-c(e) qui s'est passé< - j(e) (l)ui ai dit< (*puts on a timid and polite voice to imitate an innocent little girl*) on voulait faire la course sur les pou::tres< - après on a couru::: - and j'ai dit allez* on accélère* on a dit qu'on devait accélérer (*goes back to her usual voice: lower and with faster delivery*) en fait c'était tout à cause de moi hein* - Sarah t(u) es une belue mai (nte)nant dans ta tête*

(1) Lilia: (*telling a friend about a past event*) we were running* - we were running< - right* - she fell* - yeah - and me I was watching you in the playground - (*simulates the call of a supervisor*) me, I know what happened* - he said to me (*imitates the tone of an adult talking to a small child*) come here, girl - what happened< - I said to him< (*puts on a timid and polite voice to imitate an innocent little girl*) we wanted to run along the beams < - then we ran::: - and I said go on* let's go faster* we were told we should go faster (*goes back to her usual voice: lower and with faster delivery*) so it was all my fault right* - Sarah, you're really dumb.*

(2) Lilia (*politely*): Christian::* j(e) l'allume l'ordinateur<

T⁵: nan /.../ par contre j'aimerais bien voir tes devoirs que tu d(e)vais refaire du cahier rouge

Lilia: ah oui*

T: j(e) crois pas qu(e) ça a été fait /.../ ma soeur est restée "a.i.e.n"< - (*gets angry*) écoute si c'est pour m(e) refaire ça euh c'est pas la peine - repars vite avec ton groupe Lilia pa(r)c(e) que tu fais n'importe quoi*

Lilia: (*contritely and still very politely*) ah oui "t"* -- (*to a friend*) on doit retourner corriger tout ça* XX on doit aller re-recorriger ça --- attends un stylo* (*to a friend*) j(e) peux t'emprunter un stylo j(e) te l(e) rends t(out) à l'heure<

T: c'est du n'importe quoi Lilia*

Lilia: (*as soon as she has gone through the classroom door, she shows her anger and irritation when speaking to her friend*) c'est bon* ferme ta X*/ mais i(l) m(e) saoule tout l(e) temps à moi::* en plus il est tout l(e) temps en train d(e) me dire d(e)vant tout l(e) monde là* ça fait honte* -- (*her friend points out that the microphone is on and*

that the researcher is likely to hear what she says about the teacher) mais j(e) m'en fous la la.* t(oute) façon e(lle) va l'écouter toute seule hein (il n') y aura pas Christian avec elle - alors - pa(r)c(e) que moi j'ai oublié d(e) mett(re) le "t"* pour un "t" i(l) m'a crié d(e)ssus* -- qu'est-c(e) que c'est qu(e) ça*> re[o]garde* - pour un "t" i(l) m'a gueulé d(e)ssus*

(2) Lilia (*politely*): Christian::* Should I turn on the computer<

M: nah /.../ but I'd like to see your homework in the red exercise book you were supposed to do again

Lilia: Ah yes*

M: I didn't think you'd done it /.../ my sister stayed... "a.i.e.n"< - (*gets angry*) listen, if you're just going to do the same thing again don't bother - go back to your group Lilia because you're not taking it seriously*

Lilia: (*contritely and still very politely*) ah yes "t"* -- (*to a friend*) we'll have to go back and put it right* XX we have to go and re-do it --- wait a pen* (*to a friend*) could I borrow a pen I'll give it back to you later<

M: but you're just not taking it seriously Lilia*

Lilia: (*as soon as she has gone through the classroom door, she shows her anger and irritation when speaking to her friend*) Ok* shut it X*/ but he's always on my back::* what's more, he's always telling me off in front of everyone * it's embarrassing* -- (*her friend points out that the microphone is on and that the researcher is likely to hear what she says about the teacher*) but I don't care:* anyway she'll listen to it alone, she won't have Christian with her - so - because I forgot to put the "t"* because of a "t" he shouted at me* -- what's it matter*> look* - because of a "t" he shouted at me*

- 6 The above extracts demonstrate that Lilia (11 years old) is capable of skillfully switching between styles to alternately placate adults and avoid losing face in front of her classmates. In the first extract, she shows that she can adopt the intonation, voice and slow delivery of a good little girl in order to avoid an argument, and then she shows that she is aware of the deception because she relates the event in reported speech. Thus, she uses variations in style intentionally in order to achieve communicative objectives (in this case, mollify an adult).
- 7 Extract 2 contains another example of a style shift. As soon as Lilia was out of the classroom door her discourse changed completely. In the classroom, whether her interlocutor was the teacher or a friend, she felt in the wrong and therefore adopted a meek and acquiescent demeanor. For example, she used the formal version of yes ("oui"), rather than the informal and more common version ("ouais"). In addition, when she asked one of her peers for a pen, she was very polite: the word "emprunter" (borrow) is quite formal and the fact that she made an effort to use it shows she was trying to sweet talk the listener. However, as soon as she was out of sight and out of earshot of the teacher she started using coarser language and her way of talking became more informal.
- 8 Thus, qualitative analyses of spontaneous discourse show that children use style as both a strategic resource in interactions, and as a way to show different faces and reveal (or conceal) different aspects of their personalities, depending on their communicative intentions. However, this raises a number of questions, such as: What are the factors that facilitate the development of these communicative skills. Are all children capable of manipulating styles at will? Do all children have similarly broad and varied stylistic repertoires?
- 9 In order to provide an initial response to these questions, we carried out quantitative analyses of the discourse markers noted for the eight girls in our sample.

3. The use of different styles with different social networks: social mixing as a factor in developing the stylistic palette? The particular case of discourse markers "hein" and "oh"

- 10 We focused our quantitative analyses on discourse markers because of their perceptive salience and because they are often omitted from sociolinguistic studies involving children and adolescents. As Andersen (2001: 1-2) pointed out:

In studies of adolescent language, it is first of all 'traditional' sociolinguistic variables, belonging to the domains of phonetics/phonology, morphology and syntax, that have been subjected to analysis. In addition, previous investigations have commonly dealt with lexical variation, including the importance of slang in adolescent speech./.../ To a much lesser extent, age-specific variation has been approached from the point of view of pragmatic features, including the communication of speaker attitude, conversational politeness, the organization of discourse and so on.

- 11 In addition, studies based on controlled improvisations in different languages show that children are sensitive to the social significations of discourse markers. Slosberg Andersen *et al.* (1999: 1340) observed differentiated uses of discourse markers as a function of the social status of the characters in role plays, most notably in young French speakers⁶: "Children [as young as four or five] come to use sociolinguistic variables not only to reflect their social identity and their view of the situation at hand, but also to manipulate or restructure existing social relationships."

- 12 In the present study, discourse markers are defined as utterances that are attached to the preceding segment without a pause or melodic disconnection; however, they have no semantic value and have an essentially phatic and demarcative function.

- 13 For example, the closing *là* (there) has no deictic value; it simply stresses the segment to which it is attached. In the following utterance, Dahlia (11 years old) punctuates her discourse with a desemantized *(pu)tain* (fuck) at the beginning and a *là* at the end:

Dahlia: *(pu)tain r(e)gar(de) j(e) dois parler là: (shit it's my turn to speak, yeah)*

- 14 Nevertheless, a discourse marker is not intrinsically a mark of formality or informality. Some punctuation markers can indicate affection, whereas others may indicate a relaxed way of speaking⁷. Therefore, we identified discourse markers that could be considered informal in a corpus collated from a group of "reference" children. Our choice of discourse markers to analyze was also based on the ease with which they could be processed automatically. For example, as the word *là* mentioned above can be both a spatial deictic and a phatic marker, in some transcriptions it may be difficult to identify occurrences when it is used solely as a discourse marker⁸. In our reference corpus⁹, we counted five discourse markers: *bah*, *ben*, *hein*, *oh* and *eh*. In contrast with the other discourse markers, we found large differences between the number of occurrences of *hein* and *oh* in formal and informal situations (2 occurrences of *hein* and 0 occurrences of *oh* in formal situations, compared with 31 occurrences of *hein* and 18 occurrences of *oh* in informal situations). The following extracts illustrate the use of these markers:

Abir: *oh mais comment j(e) vais faire elle m'a mis l(e) machin:* (oh but how am I going to do it; she gave me the thing, there:*)*

Abir: ouais mais j'ai pas touché l(e) fil hein* (*yeah but I didn't touch the cable huh**)

- 15 Consequently, we focused on these two discourse markers in our stylistic analysis of the recordings of the eight pre-adolescents. We formulated two hypotheses. 1) Children use *hein* and *oh* more frequently when speaking to peers (generally informal situations) than when speaking to adults (generally formal situations), as children are capable of modifying the way they speak depending on their audience. 2) The differences between the occurrences of *hein* and *oh* when speaking to adults and when speaking to other children will be greater in socially mixed schools, as children who regularly interact with other children from different social backgrounds will have larger stylistic repertoires than children from socially homogenous backgrounds.
- 16 Figure 1 summarizes the main results of this analysis. The values are the numbers of occurrences of *hein* and of *oh* divided by the total number of words for each type of situation (speaking to an adult or speaking to a child) and multiplied by 1000.

Figure 1 : Relationship between the occurrences of discourse markers in formal and informal situations according to the social profile of the school

- 17 For children from both types of school, there were substantial differences in the frequencies with which *hein* and *oh* were used when speaking to adults and when speaking to peers. Nevertheless, this difference was only statistically significant for the socially mixed school¹⁰. It appears that when addressing adults, pre-adolescents within homogenous disadvantaged social networks use more discourse markers than pre-adolescents who attend socially mixed schools (11.39 vs 6.42), whereas the way they address peers is quite similar (16.63 vs 19.42).

Conclusion

- 18 It therefore seems possible to confirm the hypothesis that the type of social network within the school context has an influence upon stylistic usages. Children from the same social background but with different socialisation networks appear to have contrasting linguistic practices. The stylistic repertoires, evaluated through the production of two informal discourse markers, seem to be wider in socially mixed schools, this amplitude extending essentially towards the standard pole of the continuum. There are less informal markers when children address adults in the mixed school whereas the way children address peers is quite similar in both contexts.
- 19 The interpretation of these results is complex. It has already been demonstrated with adults that segregation in social relationships tends to reinforce local norms. Several studies show a correlation between the level of integration within the local community and non-standard usages (Cheshire, 1982; Milroy, 1987 [1980], 2002). Concerning children, this dimension has yet to be explored on a large scale.
- 20 Children from the mixed school of our sample have interactions with many peers from various social backgrounds whereas children from the disadvantaged school interact daily with a smaller group of children from the same social background. The mixed configuration may induce a global widening of all children's repertoires as well as a stronger familiarity with all the varieties on the stylistic continuum. Taking into account complex inter-individual variables, like the stylistic positioning of leaders or the social climate of the school, it is probable that the convergence of usages will differ. Depending on schools and their local "chemistry", social diversity can shift stylistic usages toward more or less standard practices. The mixed school that we studied provides a good example of a non-conflictual context where various stylistic combinations and shifts can take place without the overbearing interference of identity tensions.
- 21 Actually, pre-adolescents from socially homogenous disadvantaged schools have a more conflictual view of institutions, which may be expressed, at least in part, by a less unconditional respect for standards of politeness and other communicative conventions imposed by adults. These ghettoized schools tend to crystallize a number of social malaises linked to poverty, the lack of social mobility and the stigmatization of the people who live in the area. These are all factors that may cause some children to develop a fixation with a specific identity and to adopt non-conciliatory attitudes towards school and its representatives, who are sometimes seen as applying the institution's rules too rigidly, as promoting the prescriptive norm overzealously and as trying to suppress certain familiar and vernacular usages. Other analyses of children's discourses that we have conducted (Buson & Billiez, in press) tend to support this latter hypothesis, as they indicate that the conflict between the *we-code* and the *they-code* is stronger in homogenous socially-disadvantaged schools.
- 22 However, more detailed qualitative analyses are needed to determine which of the possible hypotheses best account for the results of the present study. As Fagyal and Stewart (2008: 2300) observed, the complexity of stylistic variation can only be understood by combining qualitative and quantitative methods. Statistical analyses reveal recurring phenomena and the contrasted use of certain sociolinguistic markers as a function of communicative macro-contexts, whereas analyses of interactions can be used to nuance general trends and to provide a more subtle understanding of

phenomena. Stylistic usages vary according to the situation and its degree of formality, but sometimes they are also a reflection of complex identity factors and communicative strategies that can only be explained through microanalyses.

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APPENDIXES

Transcription conventions used in this article :

		Examples
*	exclamatory tone	oui*
<	interrogative tone	tu es sûr<
()	omission of phonemes	j(e) sais pas
XX	inaudible syllables	il est à XX
:	lengthening of phonemes	Christian::
-	pause	ça fait honte – mais
(<i>italics</i>)	transcriber's comment	(to a friend)

NOTES

1. It was established in the 1960s (Gumperz, 1964) that the speaker in multi-lingual situations is active and that he/she consciously uses his/her language resources as a verbal strategy.
2. Five of the girls were from migrant families (Italy, North Africa, Armenia).
3. Two schools were selected on the basis of their social profiles. One school contained relatively equal proportions of children from different social backgrounds, whereas 80% of the children at the other school were from disadvantaged backgrounds.
4. The notion of "self-presentation" is borrowed from Coupland (2001: 197): "Style, and in particular dialect style, can therefore be construed as a special case of the presentation of self, within particular relational contexts—articulating relational goals and identity goals".
5. The teacher is called Christian. He is labeled T (for teacher) in the transcripts.
6. The study involved children aged between 4 and 10 years. The subjects were Anglophone American children, Francophone children from Lyon and Hispanophone American children of Mexican origin.
7. It should be noted that certain definitions of pragmatic markers only include informal discourse markers. For example, Andersen (2001) considers pragmatic markers to be stylistically stigmatized elements that are evaluated negatively by locutors.
8. The recordings of the eight children contained around 60,000 words. Approximately 10,000 words were from interactions with adults and 50,000 words were from interactions with other children. This 1:5 ratio is very similar to the mean for the interactions for our full corpus.
9. The reference corpus contained almost 3000 words from a formal situation (presentation of the program for a theatre production in front of a class of kindergarten children) and a similar number of words from an informal situation (between peers during a nature-discovery class), obtained from ecological recordings made of 6 children (3 girls and 3 boys) aged 10/11 years.
10. A chi² test showed a significant p for the mixed school (see figure).

ABSTRACTS

Once considered an essentially reactive phenomenon, stylistic variation is now viewed as a distinct verbal strategy. Recent sociolinguistic research has regarded style as a favored means of self-presentation that is closely linked to the speaker's identity representations and the way in which they reconfigure these over time or according to specific interactions. The present study is based on a corpus of 60 hours of "ecological" recordings of 8-year-old French-speaking girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Our objective was to build a better understanding of the link between style and identity by combining a qualitative study of examples of "style shift" with a quantitative analysis of the use of two discourse markers with different types of interlocutor.

Après avoir été longtemps perçue comme un phénomène essentiellement réactif, la variation stylistique est aujourd'hui envisagée comme une stratégie verbale à part entière. Les approches récentes sur le style en sociolinguistique l'abordent comme une ressource privilégiée pour la présentation de soi, en lien étroit avec les représentations, et reconfigurations identitaires chez le locuteur, que ce soit sur des affiliations de long terme ou dans des contextes d'interaction spécifiques. Notre analyse se fonde sur un corpus d'une soixantaine d'heures d'enregistrements écologiques effectués auprès de 8 filles francophones toutes issues de milieux défavorisés. L'analyse combine un traitement quantitatif et qualitatif : une étude qualitative des moments de "rupture stylistique", et un traitement quantitatif au niveau pragmatique (emploi différencié de deux marqueurs du discours en fonction de l'interlocuteur). Cette présentation vise une mise en perspective de méthodologies complémentaires pour une meilleure compréhension du lien entre style et identité.

INDEX

Keywords: sociolinguistic, stylistic variation, identity, peer network, discourse markers

Mots-clés: variation stylistique, identité, réseau de pairs, marqueurs discursifs

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