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# French in Auvergne (Centre): a speaker from Clermont-Ferrand

**Damien Chabanal, Jacques Durand and Corinne Ratier**

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## **0. Introduction**

This extract has been chosen to illustrate the variety of French in the Auvergne region, more precisely in Clermont-Ferrand in the Puy de Dôme department, the town where our selected speaker was born and lives. Linguistically, Clermont-Ferrand is part of North Occitan (see Bec 1963: 7-8) but we are not aware of any published work on the variety of contemporary spoken French in this part of France apart from the thumbnail phonological sketch of a Clermont-Ferrand speaker in Walter (1982: 169). Clermont-Ferrand, with a population of over 140 000 inhabitants and its famous Michelin factories, is usually considered as the capital of Massif Central. It is an important university town since there are 37 000 students, according to its Mairie's official website. Indeed, our chosen speaker is a student whose French is at first sight a good example of a levelled variety (see Armstrong and Pooley 2010) but, which on closer inspection of the phonology, still shows a number of regional features.

## **1. Sociolinguistic profile and recording situation**

The speaker we focus on is a young woman MM (PFC code: 63mm1), who was 22 years old at the time of the recording. She was born in Clermont-Ferrand in 1988. She has always lived in the area apart from two years spent in Paris for her studying. During her stay in Paris she did her second year correspondence course in psychology while working at the same time. Back in the Puy de Dôme she joined a school training students for a Diplôme d'État d'Éducateur Spécialisé (DEES).

The recording was made at the very beginning of her first year course and the extract is chosen from an informal conversation between MM and her mother which took place in September 2010 in the family house.

## **2. Content analysis and lexicon**

MM tells her mother about her course which just started the day before the conversation, her teachers and their expectations. The style, outside the precise references to education and psychology, is informal. MM starts by describing her first teacher as *un mec trop bizarre* (l. 1, 'a very strange guy') where the use of the adverb *trop* to mean 'très' is typical of the younger generations in hexagonal French. The teacher's strangeness seems to derive from his appearance (his long hair possibly seen as a sign of marginality in a professional context) but also from his attitude and approach (the way he walks and prods students with repeated questions). Every word used by a student has to be justified as to what lies behind it: *Et chaque mot que tu dis, il te dit : 'Mais tu sous-entends quoi ?'* (l. 7-8). The word *marrant* to characterize the whole experience means 'funny' and like its English equivalent is ambiguous between the sense of 'peculiar' and that of 'mirth provoking'. Although the mother wonders if this teacher is a psychologist, the daughter describes him as an *éduc* which is short for *éducateur* (l. 12), a teacher of children with special needs. The strategy of truncating common words is very frequent in hexagonal French and also illustrated within this extract by *fac* (l. 41) short for *faculté* (= university in this context) and *prof* (used by the mother, l. 52) short for *professeur* (= teacher).

If this teacher's style is somewhat idiosyncratic, he is nevertheless said to be extremely knowledgeable - *il a un sacré niveau* (l. 14, lit. 'he has an incredible level'), where the use of *sacré* as an intensifier is typical of informal speech. This remark allows MM to move on to the course as such and its contents. MM stresses repeatedly how intensive the course is and how much is expected of the students although they have no assignments as such (*on a pas de devoirs en soi*, l. 19).

With a great deal of colloquial expressions, MM explains that she has to get stuck into completing all her index cards (*il faut que je me tape à faire toutes mes fiches*, l. 23-24), read lots of books (*bouquins* familiar for *livres*, l. 37) and attend 'millions' of classes (*une tonne de cours*, l. 31) on educational and psychological matters such as *la séparation* (l. 58, 'divorce') and *l'hospitalisme* (l. 58, 'hospitalism' which can be defined as a type of mental illness which affects children who have been prematurely separated from their mothers and institutionalised).

Throughout the conversation, MM stresses the high level achieved by their teachers. During the afternoon session, the students had a woman (*une fille*, lit. ‘a girl’, l. 39) who is *super sympa* (l. 39, lit. *super friendly*) and who was initially a teacher of children with special needs but then went to University and became a *formatrice* (an educationalist involved in the training of future teachers). This woman is described as a *militante*, a term used to describe activists involved in political or civil rights movements. In this context, it is likely that the description applies to a person involved in the feminist movement but to establish the precise reference of the phrase one would have to know more about the ‘political’ or ‘ideological’ outlook of the speaker.

Many of the lexical choices are tightly integrated into the grammar used by MM and would deserve more comments than is possible here. The relaxed register used by MM is often typical of her generation but many of the lexical and grammatical features are typical of colloquial speech. Although they are often branded ‘très familier’, and even ‘populaire’ or ‘vulgaire’, it is well known that all speakers use such words or constructions in informal everyday conversation. Two obvious examples are the use of *vachement* (l. 57) to mean ‘beaucoup’ or ‘très’, a well-established feature of informal French, and the frequent use of *machin* (l. 32, 41, 66), a vague noun which like English ‘thingummy’ or ‘thingamabob’ allows the speaker to refer to something or someone when you cannot remember or cannot be bothered to find the proper word or name for them. The vagueness of the referent is emphasized by *et tout* meaning ‘and all’ (l. 32, 41). On the other hand, in *l’hospitalisme machin* (l. 66), *machin* appears to be used as a modifier with vague reference (‘any type of hospitalism’). The use of *se taper* is particularly interesting in this extract.

In colloquial usage, *se taper* is usually followed by a complement noun phrase and means ‘to get landed with’ (e.g. *je me suis tapé toute la vaisselle* = ‘I got landed with (doing) all the dishes’). Here, however, the verb is followed by a verb phrase introduced by *à*: *se taper à faire toutes les fiches* = ‘to get landed with completing all the index cards’. All these examples illustrate the difficulty of defining registers in a rigid way. However we deal with this question, it is essential not to look at all the features of spoken French present in the extracts selected in this volume from a prescriptive point of view. Rather than seeing them as illustrating a vulgar level of speech full of mistakes, we must learn to see them as typical of spoken interaction between people who know each other well (see Blanche-Benveniste 2000: 35-63).

### 3. Syntactic and discursive features

As emphasized above, this extract provides a striking illustration of informal speech. For lack of space, we will not deal with features such as hesitations (there are 28 ‘*eah*’ in the extract), repetitions, reformulations, unfinished sentences or self-corrections which are typical of spontaneous spoken interaction (see Rossi-Gensane, 2010, Ch. 6). Among features worth examining, we will start with some comments on (i) *ne* in negative structures, (ii) the use of personal pronouns, (iii) the use of tenses and moods, and then move on to some general observations regarding the structure of this extract.

i) In one interpretation, *ne* is systematically omitted from all negative sentences in this extract: cf. *Non il est pas psychologue* (l. 10-11), *tu peux pas lire b/ dix bouquins* (l. 37), *vous les lisez pas tous* (l. 45), *Si tu veux c’est pas ça* (l. 51). But it should be remembered that when the pronoun *on* is used immediately a vowel initial word (e.g. *on a rien*), it is impossible according to most authorities to know whether the speaker used *ne* or not: *on n’a rien* or *on a rien*. In the relevant examples in this extract (cf. *on a pas de devoirs en soi, on a rien de, <LM: Ouais.) on a rien à préparer* (l. 19-20)), we have deliberately chosen not to include *ne* in our transcriptions in line with the other clear examples where *ne* was indeed systematically absent. It can’t however be excluded that the speaker intended a *ne* which is not audible!

(ii) Unsurprisingly MM refers to herself as *je* (reinforced by *moi*, l. 60), and mother and daughter use *tu* to refer to each other. It will be noticed that in reported speech (which there is a great deal of in the extract), the teacher appears to use *tu* (or the oblique form *toi*) to address the student which is not universal in higher education in France: e.g. *Alors pour toi qu’est-ce que veut dire éducateur* (l. 3-4), *Oui mais tu sous-entends quoi par accompagner ?* (l. 6-7). The use of ‘*tu*’ by a teacher when speaking to students probably depends on factors such as age, ‘political’ or ‘ideological’ stance, outlook on life and the type of higher education establishment one is dealing with. The reader will notice that many of the *tu* forms used by MM are ‘generic’ in value, often interpretable as *on* or *nous* but occasionally vaguer in reference: e.g. *Et chaque mot que tu dis* (l. 7). It would appear that this ‘generic’ use of *tu* is currently replacing *vous* in hexagonal French (e.g. *Et chaque mot que vous dites* would have been possible). The pronoun *on* is also very frequent and can either be replaced by *nous* or has a generic value in line with its etymology (= *homme*).

(iii) As in many other extracts in this book, the tenses used are the indicative present, the imperfect, the ‘passé composé’. Note that there are no futures but that MM uses *aller* + *Vinf*: e.g. *je vais continuer à lire mes fiches régulièrement* (l. 63). The subjunctive, whose death has frequently but rather imprudently been predicted for spoken French, is well-attested. It is systematically triggered by the impersonal verb *falloir*: e.g. *le problème c’est qu’il faut que ça soit des notions qui soient acquises, c’est-à-dire qu’on f/faut qu’on les apprenne ces notions* (l. 20-23). The absence of dummy subject *il* is in fact quite frequent before *faut*: cf. *c’est-à-dire qu’on f/faut qu’on les apprenne ces notions* (l. 22-23), *Ah mais ce livre il est indispensable* <LM: (XXXX)> ***faut absolument*** que vous lisiez (l. 35-36), *les notions principales que tu vois en cours* <LM: Voilà.> ***faut que*** tu les aies acquises (l. 55-56), *nous faut qu’on sache ce que c’est l’hospitalisme* (l. 66-67). In *faut que tu les aies acquises* (l. 56), the reader should note the agreement form *acquises* (feminine plural) triggered by a direct object complement if it precedes the auxiliary verb *avoir* (here *les* which stands for *les notions principales*). This type of agreement is getting rarer and rarer in speech, even among cultivated speakers (see Rouayrenc 2010: 150).

This shows that registers are not watertight modules and that characteristics of colloquial speech can coexist with more formal features.

At a more general level, word-order and sentence-structure also seem to be in line with the conversational register. Most of the utterances are statements but the few questions used either by the speaker or her mother deserve some brief comments. The question (*Alors pour toi,*) *qu’est-ce que veut dire éducateur?* (l. 3-4) corresponds to the more formal written form *que veut dire éducateur?*. It shows the spread of *Qu’est-ce-que* into QU-questions. The QU-element stays *in situ* in the other reported speech question: *Oui mais tu sous-entends quoi par accompagner?* (l. 6-7), instead of the normative form *Oui mais qu’est-ce que tu sous-entends par accompagner?*. As for the YES-NO question used by the mother (*Et tu as des devoirs?*, l. 17-18), it uses the declarative order rather than an inverted form (*Et as-tu des devoirs?*) as is generally the case in hexagonal spoken French.

Many of the statements are built around a nucleus made up of a pronoun-subject + verb + optional complement (*il arrive vers toi; il s’avance, tu parles*, etc.) with possible internal expansions (other pronouns, negation, etc.). But it must be remembered that these basic predicational nuclei (e.g. *je le sais*, l. 59) are announced by thematically salient phrases which can themselves be placed after discursive markers, as illustrated by an utterance like: *Donc moi déjà, tout ce que j’ai, toute la séparation, l’hospitalisme tout ça je le sais* (l. 56-59).

A connective like *donc* (or *alors*) can be argued to provide a temporal or causal frame to the reporting of events but other discourse markers such as *tu vois* (l. 1), *tu sais* (l. 9), *si tu veux* (l. 51, 52) show how the speaker involves the addressee (her mother) by maintaining the channel of communication and allowing her, at least in theory, to disagree with what is being said. Many modern specialists emphasize that these discourse markers are essential to the co-construction of discourse.

#### 4. Phonetic and phonological features

The pronunciation of our speaker (MM) is interesting in that its segmental system (in particular, its oral vowel system, see 4.1) is typical of southern varieties of French; on the other hand, as far as schwa is concerned the features which we have identified (see 4.2) are typical of northern varieties of French.

##### 4.1 Vowel system

Let us focus first of all on the oral vowels but leave aside the high vowels /i, y, u/ as there are no striking differences between the system used by MM and that of most other varieties of hexagonal French. On the other hand, the non-high vowels deserve our attention. First of all, like typical southern French speakers MM has only one /a/ phoneme. She does not distinguish a front and a back vowel even in the reading aloud of minimal pairs such as *patte* vs. *pâte* in the word list. Secondly, the mid-vowels are reducible to three phonemes which we will represent here as /E/, /Ø/ and /O/. The capital letters for the underlying phonemes are assumed to range over two values in each case [e, o, ø] in open syllables and [ɛ, œ, ɔ] in closed syllables. This is generally referred to as the ‘loi de position’ (see Ch. 13 and Coquillon & Durand 2010). It will be noticed for instance that all *-ais*, *-ait* endings which are mid-low [ɛ] in some northern varieties are pronounced with an [e]: e.g. *Mais il/tu sais c’est marrant comme il fait alors il, il marchait comme ça* (l. 10), *disait* (l. 28), *était* (l. 42). The full distribution of the mid-high vs. mid-low allophones of /E/, /Ø/ and /O/ is not attested in this extract but the reader can verify that the ‘loi de position’ is respected in the word-list and the reading aloud of the text. Thus, *chaude* and *chose* in the text are both pronounced with an [ɔ].

The nasal vowels used by MM do not have a typical southern realization (i.e. oral or slightly nasalised vowel followed by a nasal appendix). Nevertheless, unlike modern speakers of Parisian French, she appears to make an opposition between / $\tilde{e}$ / and / $\tilde{\text{œ}}$ /: compare the pronunciation of *un* in the first line of this extract with that of *bien*: *j'ai eu euh, un mec trop bizarre mais pff bien tu vois*. It also seems to us that this true of the word-list and the text: compare *brun* with *brin* which are differentiated although not in a minimal pair-context triggering a more artificial pronunciation. If we are correct, this speaker has four nasal vowels: / $\tilde{e}$ ,  $\tilde{\text{œ}}$ ,  $\tilde{\text{ɑ}}$ ,  $\tilde{\text{ɔ}}$ /.

#### 4.2 Schwa

As far as schwa is concerned, the patterns of deletion are aligned on those typical in northern varieties of French. Starting with polysyllabic words, the word-final position corresponds to an absence of schwa: e.g. *je vais quand mêm(e) fair(e) mes fich(e)s* (l. 61). In word-internal position, unless there is a preceding complex cluster, schwa is deleted: e.g. *malheureus(e)ment* (l. 24), *feuill(e)tez* (l. 46), *vach(e)ment* (l. 57), *régulière(e)ment* (l. 63). Within word-initial syllables, the deletion of schwa exhibits variability. A consonant-cluster at the end of the preceding word blocks schwa-deletion: *on a pas d(e) devoir* (l. 19), *je vais jus(te) relire mon cours* (l. 60). A vowel-final preceding word seems to favour deletion, particularly with some frequent lexical items: *les ch(e)veux* (l. 2), *la s(e)maine* (l. 25). However, note the presence of schwa in *est repartie en fac* (l. 41). There are two few examples in this conversation to extract a full generalization.

Moving to monosyllables, this speaker seems to delete schwas as a matter of routine. There are however some blocking contexts. The maintenance of a schwa may be triggered by discourse planning factors: e.g. hesitation (*remplies de, de dates*) or a position at the end of an unfinished sentence (*vous essayez de.* (l. 46)). Emphasis can also favour retention despite a vowel on the left (e.g. *mais ce livre* l. 35).

A consonant at the end of the preceding word may appear to block deletion (cf. *une bibliographie donc de tous les livres*, l. 43), which would traditionally be described in terms of Grammont's famous 'loi des trois consonnes' (i.e. avoid deleting a schwa if this results in a cluster of three consonants or more ([kdt] in the above example). But note that the nature of



the consonant is highly relevant. Whereas ‘donc’ ends in a plosive [k], a final [ʁ] does not have the same effect and schwas are absent in the following examples despite the creation of clusters of three consonants: *prévoir l(e) soir* ([ʁls], l. 26), *histoir(e) d(e) l’éducation* ([ʁdl], l. 31), *sur l(e) sujet* ([ʁls], l. 44). In the same way, if a monosyllable is at the beginning of a rhythmic group the schwa may be maintained (*que les notions principales*, l. 50) but note the presence here of a plosive [k]. By contrast, in common clitics beginning with a fricative such as *je* or *ce*, deletion seems to be automatic (*C(e) matin* (l. 1), *J(e) sais pas comment* (l. 48)).

### 4.3 Liaison

There are few contexts in the selected extract allowing for an extensive study of liaison. Categorical liaisons as defined in the PFC project (see Ch. 28) are realized. Here the examples are reduced to liaison between a clitic and the following item (e.g. *on [n]a* (l. 14), *elle nous [z]a données* (l. 43)), Det + N (*un [n]éduc*, l. 12) and the set phrase *tout-à-fait* [tutafe] (l. 11). There are a few contexts which are considered as variable in the recent literature and in all such cases liaison is not realized: e.g. *c’est // un éduc* (l. 12), *c’est // impressionnant* (l. 49). The reading aloud of the PFC text is therefore useful for a better understanding of this speaker’s system and of the possible role of register. Interestingly, the higher register normally triggered by reading aloud is only detectable in the behaviour of the form *est* of the verb *être*: *est [t]en grand émoi*, *est [t]en revanche*. In all other variable contexts, liaison is absent: e.g. plural noun + adjective (e.g. *circuits // habituels*), *avoir* + past participle (*ont // eu*), verb + complement (*préparent // une journée chaude*), and so forth. MM provides a good example of the fact that adjective + noun is no longer an obligatory context of liaison: she realized *grand émoi* without liaison but *grand honneur*, a more frequent combination, with liaison.

This discrepancy has been much discussed in the PFC literature (e.g. Durand & Lyche 2008, and Ch. 28). Overall, it can be said that MM realizes variable liaisons in a sparing manner and limits herself to the frequent but restricted categorical contexts described in Ch. 28.

#### 4.4 Other features

The behaviour of the consonants in this extract does not require specific comments in an overview such as this one. On the other hand, the reader should note quite a lot of reductions and simplifications typical of fast informal speech. Thus, in the string *si tu veux*, the vowel /i/ is dropped ([styvø]). The personal pronoun *je* can be reduced to [ʃ] through loss of the schwa and devoicing of the [ʒ] by assimilation to a following voiceless consonant (a [t] in the following example): *faut que je trouve* [fokʃtʁuv] (l. 48). This example also illustrates the fact that deletions of schwas can produce sequences of three consonants. Note that this [ʃ] can absorb a following [s] as in *je suis* [ʃqi] (l.11), *je sais pas* [ʃepa] (l. 48). Finally, the pronunciation of *expliquer* as [ɛsplike] in *sans les réexpliquer* (l. 65) is often considered as a feature of southern French but it is well attested in other northern varieties of French.

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