

Sophie Prévost & Benjamin Fagard

Lattice laboratory (CNRS, ENS & Université Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle ; PSL & USPC)

## **French *à la rigueur*: a sharp turn**

### Abstract

We examine in this paper the evolution of a French discourse marker, *à la rigueur*, from its original transparent meaning of “rigorously” in late Medieval and Pre-Classical French (15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries) to its modern use as a hedge, equivalent to English “at a pinch”. We present the results of a large corpus study, using data from various databases covering the diachrony of French, with a qualitative and quantitative analysis of several hundred occurrences. This enables us to show that *à la rigueur* can be analyzed as having three main use-types, and that its striking semantic evolution results from a very gradual process of semantic evolution via the phenomenon of invited inference (Traugott & Dasher 2002, Heine 2002).

Keywords: semantic evolution, discourse marker, French, invited inference, corpus study

## **1. Introduction**

Language evolution takes many shapes. Some changes are very slow, others quite sudden. Some are quite expected and unsurprising (at least to a linguist), such as the grammaticalization of the noun “back” to an adposition meaning “behind”, or of “head” to “in front of”, in many languages (see e.g. Heine & Kuteva 2002). Others are, on the contrary, quite *unexpected*. The French adverbial *à la rigueur* is a case in point: though its literal meaning is “strictly, rigorously”, its meaning shifted at some point to something like “at a pinch”, “if necessary”, “maybe”, with concessive overtones, far from the initial, etymological meaning. This radical semantic shift, from a transparent to an opaque meaning, is well documented by dictionaries (e.g. *Trésor de la langue française* (tlf-i), *Le petit Robert* 2003). This kind of ‘sharp turn’, semantically speaking, is not unprecedented: for instance, despite its literal meaning, *à propos* “by the way (lit. *about this*)” is actually a topic-shifter. However, this phenomenon is rare enough to merit further investigation. In this paper, we provide an account of this evolution, based on a large corpus study of close to 2,000 occurrences over roughly ten centuries (10<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries, BFM, DMF and Frantext databases), with a detailed qualitative study of 434 occurrences of *à la rigueur*. We also checked the validity of the results with the help of a purely quantitative corpus study on a different selection of texts (Presto database). Our aim is to describe the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects of this evolution, relying on a methodology used to study other discourse markers (see e.g. Dostie 2004, Hansen 1996, 1998, Waltereit & Detges 2007, Traugott 2007a, 2007b, 2010). Our starting point is the hypothesis that the semantic evolution, and corollary shift from a referential plane to a pragmatic one, is best explained in terms of foregrounding of a subset of semantic features of the construction in given semantic, syntactic and pragmatic contexts. We believe that these contexts – bridging and switching contexts, in Heine’s (2003) terminology or, perhaps more to the point, since this is a pragmatic phenomenon, *critical contexts*, in Diewald’s (2002) terminology – are a key to understanding this evolution, as shown by Hansen (2008) for other French discourse markers. Beyond this specific research question, our study could contribute to a better understanding of the complex phenomenon of semantic change.

The layout of this paper is as follows. In section 2, we describe our methodology, i.e. the details of our corpus (2.1) and our coding scheme (2.2). We then present our results, first, in Section 3, with a synchronic analysis, showing three different use-types of *à la rigueur* in the main corpus. In Section 4, we go on to investigate the diachronic evolution leading from one use-type to the other, first sketching out the global evolution, then providing more detail on the underlying mechanisms. These results are discussed in Section 5, and we conclude in Section 6.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Corpus

Our main corpus includes texts from three databases: Frantext, BFM and DMF. However, our corpus of occurrences is mainly drawn from the Frantext database (16<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> centuries): though earlier texts were included in our corpus, they provided only a small percentage of the occurrences of the adverbial *à la rigueur*, which becomes frequent no sooner than the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Indeed, in Medieval French there are only a few occurrences of *à la rigueur*. Besides, in most of these occurrences, the phrase retains its etymological and transparent, compositional meaning (1). In such occurrences, *rigueur* is often presented as the opposite of *sweetness* (*misericorde* “mercy”, in example 1) or a synonym of *strength*.

1. aussi semble il, tout considéré, que si est il que luy devez faire misericorde, et la preferer *a la rigueur* de justice  
“and it seems, all things considered, that you ought to be merciful, and prefer mercy rather than the rigors of Justice” (J. Juvenal des Ursins, *Exortation faicte au roy*, 1458)

In this period, only three occurrences display a somewhat opaque (i.e. non-compositional) meaning, illustrated by (2).

2. Toutesfois icelluy grant maistre [...] luy pardonna et ne vould point la sentence donnée contre luy estre [*à*] *la rigueur* mise à execution.  
“However this great master [...] forgave him and did not wish for the sentence pronounced against him to be executed in all its rigor” (J. Le Clerc, *Interpolations et variantes de la Chronique scandaleuse*, 1502, p. 277-278)

This use of *à la rigueur* is mentioned by the Middle French dictionary (DMF2015) and defined as follows: “Severely, without sweetening, concession or indulgence” (our translation).

We extracted from our corpus all 1647 occurrences of the sequence *à la rigueur*, then sampled the first 25 occurrences per quarter century, after scrambling the data with the Excel RAND function, to ensure that the extraction was arbitrary. For a few of the 21 quarter-century periods in which the sequence *à la rigueur* is attested (from 1500 to 2015), the total of available occurrences was lower than 25; consequently, there is a total of 434 occurrences in the resulting corpus – not the expected 25\*21, or 525, occurrences.

## 2.2. Coding

All occurrences were coded with a double-blind procedure. Occurrences with conflicting codings were then discussed, and the whole corpus was recoded, with a final agreement of 95%.

In a first phase of manual coding, we distinguished two distinct uses of *à la rigueur*, *adverbial* (i.e. non compositional, see example (2) above) and *compositional* (3):

3. Et vous abandonnant *à la rigueur* des loix, Au mépris de mon sang, je maintiendray mes droits  
“And abandoning you to the rigor of the laws, despite my lineage, I will uphold my rights” (J. de Rotrou, *Vanceslas*, 1648)

In such occurrences, the preposition *à* is typically dependent on the verb (*abandonner quelqu'un à quelque chose* “abandon someone to something”), and the noun *rigueur* is sometimes modified by a complement, here *des loix* “of the laws”. Purely compositional occurrences were left aside for the next phase, and we focused on adverbial uses, in which the sequence *à la rigueur* is less dependent on the verb. We found 120 occurrences of the compositional use, thus leaving us with a corpus of 314 adverbial occurrences, which we further investigated.

In a second phase, the remaining 314 occurrences were thus coded for a variety of features. The first feature is **Syntactic position**: we coded occurrences of *à la rigueur* as either **preverbal** (4) or **postverbal** (5). Note that, in the case of complex verbal forms, when the adverbial is placed between the inflected form (e.g. the auxiliary *avoir* ‘have’ or modals such as *devoir* ‘shall’) and the lexical verb, as in (6), we code it as postverbal.

4. En un mot, à l’imitation de l’abbé de B M qui révéla le secret de l’église, je révèle celui de l’humanité, c’est-à-dire, qu’**à la rigueur** *il n’y a point d’honnêtes gens*.  
“In a word, imitating the abbot of B M who revealed the secret of the church, I reveal that of humanity, that is, that [*à la rigueur*: strictly speaking, to be true] there are no honest people” (J.-L. Fougeret de Monbron, *Le Cosmopolite ou le Citoyen du monde*, 1750)<sup>1</sup>
5. Je sais à peu près mille mots, c’est tout ce *qu’il me faut* **à la rigueur**, quoiqu’il y en ait cent mille, je crois, dans les dictionnaires. Seulement je ne serai pas éloquent, mais je me ferai comprendre à merveille et cela me suffit.  
“I know about a thousand words, this is all I need [*à la rigueur*: to be exact, strictly speaking], though there are a hundred thousand words, I believe, in the dictionaries. I will simply not be eloquent, but people will understand me perfectly, and that is enough for me.” (A. Dumas Père, *Le Comte de Monte-Christo*, 1846)
6. Ceste convenance et bonne grace vient de civilité et honnesteté, dont nous cognoissons que rien ne *doit* **à la rigueur** *estre dit* de bonne grace s’il n’est honneste, et l’honesteté se doit mesurer selon noz vertuz cy-dessus déclarées

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<sup>1</sup> For all examples in which *à la rigueur* is used as a discourse marker, we provide a tentative translation, indicating possible glosses. We try to stick to the English equivalents of the French glosses we chose during the coding phase; the result is not always optimal, which explains that we sometimes have to stray from the French gloss.

“This convenience and good grace comes of civility and honesty, and we know that, [*à la rigueur*: to be exact], nothing should be said in good grace if it isn’t honest, and honesty must be measured according to our above-declared virtues” (P. de Vienne, *Le Philosophe de court*, 1548)

The second feature is **Integration**: we coded occurrences as **integrated** (cf. (4-6) above) or **non-integrated**, i.e. either parenthetical (7) or both initial and separated from the rest of the clause by a comma (8)<sup>2</sup> (note that we found no occurrence of final detachment).

7. Ces paroles tendent à signifier quelque vérité ; *mais elles sont, à la rigueur, indignes et impropres*. Ce qu’elles ont de vrai, c’est que l’infini surpasse infiniment le fini[.]  
“These words tend to convey some truth: but they are, [*à la rigueur*: strictly speaking], neither dignified nor fair. What truth they have, is that the infinite infinitely surpasses the finite.” (F. de Fénelon, *Traité de l’existence et des attributs de Dieu*, 1713)
8. Car, un lapin de garenne, nous aussi nous l’aurions apprécié ! **À la rigueur**, un morceau de lapin de garenne, parfumé sûrement aux senteurs de la Provence.  
“Because we too would have loved to have a hare! [*à la rigueur*: at a pinch] a piece of hare, surely with Provence flavoring.” (B. Schreiber, *Un silence d’environ une demi-heure*, 1996)

The third feature is **Verbal Dependency**: we coded the relation of *à la rigueur* to the verb, i.e. **dependent** (9) or **not dependent** (10).

9. Quand l’homme a passé, les monuments de sa vie sont encore plus vains que ceux de sa mort : son mausolée est au moins utile à ses cendres ; mais ses palais gardent-ils quelque chose de ses plaisirs ? Sans doute, *à le prendre à la rigueur*, une petite fosse suffit à tous, et six pieds de terre, comme le disait Mathieu Molé, feront toujours raison du plus grand homme du monde  
“When a man has passed away, the monuments of his life are more vain even than those of his death: his mausoleum is useful at least for his ashes; but does his palace retain something of his pleasures? Probably, [taking things *à la rigueur*: to tell the truth, if truth be told], a small ditch is enough for all of us, and six feet of earth, as Mathieu Molé put it, will always get the better of the greatest man on earth” (F.-R. de Chateaubriand, *Itinéraire de Paris à Jérusalem*, 1822)
10. Tout est grave chez un député, les paroles, les actes, les opinions. Un arrondissement a les yeux fixés sur lui ; *la France* exerce à son égard un droit de contrôle ; *l’Europe*, **à la rigueur**, peut s’en mêler.  
“Everything is given importance in a representative, his words, his actions, his opinions. A whole district has its eyes on him; France has a right to control him; Europe, [*à la rigueur*: at a pinch, even], can get

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<sup>2</sup>Commas in edited texts are always tricky. In our view, in the case of *à la rigueur*, they do provide a clue, indicating that there is a lesser integration. In some cases, they might have been added by the editor, rather than stem from the original versions of the texts. However, editors generally have a good knowledge of the text they edit, and we believe that, even in cases in which the comma is not original, it is not unjustified.

involved.” (L. Reybaud, *Jérôme Paturot à la recherche d’une position sociale*, 1842)

The fourth feature pertains to the **Semantic-pragmatic context**: we coded the presence of a **modal verb** (*pouvoir* “be able to”, *devoir* “be supposed to”, etc.), the use of the **conditional mood** (e.g. *dirait* “would say”) and that of a **conditional clause** (11). Note that these features tend to overlap, especially ‘modal verb’ and ‘conditional mood’ as in (11) and (12), giving rise to a virtualizing context (see Section 5.2.).

11. Le duc est amoureux, par conséquent il est aveugle. **A la rigueur** *il pourrait vous croire innocente et victime d’un odieux laquais, si je ne lui apportais que des indices*. Heureusement, j’ai un dossier...  
“The duke is in love, consequently he is blind. [*à la rigueur*: possibly, at a pinch] he could believe you innocent and the victim of a vicious lackey, if I brought him only clues. Fortunately, I have a whole file...” (P.-A. Ponson du Terrail, *Rocamboles, les drames de Paris*, t. 2, 1859)
12. L’histoire naturelle *devrait, à la rigueur, employer les mêmes procédés* que les sciences générales, et elle les emploie réellement toutes les fois que les objets qu’elle étudie sont assez simples pour le lui permettre.  
“Natural history should, [*à la rigueur*: to be exact], apply the same methods as general sciences, and it really does so whenever the objects of its study are simple enough for that to be possible” (G. Cuvier, *Le Règne animal : Introduction*, 1817)
13. De-là la difficulté de les traduire : elle est telle qu’avec du talent il seroit plus aisé de les surpasser souvent, que de les égaler toujours. **A la rigueur** *on pourroit même dire* qu’il est impossible d’en donner de bonnes traductions : car les raisons qui prouvent que deux langues ne sauroient avoir le même caractère, prouvent que les mêmes pensées peuvent rarement être rendues dans l’une et dans l’autre avec les mêmes beautés.  
“This explains why it is so hard to translate them: so hard indeed, that with talent it would be easier to surpass them often, than to equal them always. [*à la rigueur*: to be exact] one could even say that it is impossible to provide good translations: because the reasons which prove that two languages could not have the same character, prove that the same thoughts can rarely be rendered in one and the other with the same beauty.” (E. Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*, 1746)

The fifth feature is the **Contextual meaning**: we glossed each occurrence of the adverbial, and later grouped these glosses in three use-types, as follows:

- i. harshly
  - *avec sévérité* “harshly, severely”
  - *sans indulgence* “with no regard for circumstances”
- ii. exactly
  - *avec exactitude* “exactly, precisely, accurately”
  - *strictement* “strictly”
  - *au sens strict* “strictly speaking”
- iii. at a pinch
  - *à la limite* “at a pinch, for want of a better option”
  - *en cas de nécessité* “if necessary”
  - *éventuellement* “maybe, if need be, at a pinch”

These glosses, illustrated in Section 3, were defined on the basis of a first qualitative study of a selection of occurrences. They can be (tentatively) translated as indicated above; however, one should bear in mind that the proposed equivalents do not have exactly the same range of uses as the French glosses.

Finally, we also took into account all available indications on the texts from which the occurrences originated. This naturally includes the date – we divided the corpus into quarter centuries, e.g. 1501-1525, 1526-1550 –, but also the author (name, gender), and, more importantly, the text type. This has its importance, as suggested by studies on discourse traditions (cf. Koch 1997), which point to a possible emergence of linguistic change in specific contexts (Traugott & Dasher 2002). Context should thus be understood not only as a morpho-syntactic context (as in grammaticalization theory), but also as a specific *discourse tradition*. As a first approximation, we therefore distinguished *literary texts* (i.e. novels, poetry and plays), *specialized texts* (i.e. history, mathematics, etc.) and *essays*, relying on the metadata available in the databases.

### 3. Results: Syntactic and semantic features of *à la rigueur*

Applying our coding scheme enabled us to identify three distinct uses of *à la rigueur*. Each use-type is linked not only to a set of glosses, as already mentioned, but also, prototypically, to specific contexts and syntactic features. In this section, we describe in turn and in detail each one of these use-types, highlighting their specificities. Note that while most individual occurrences correspond to one specific use, others were ambiguous: in such cases, we acknowledge their ambiguity and tag them with all corresponding readings.

#### 3.1 *A la rigueur*, use-type 1: ‘(to treat) harshly’

One main use we identified is one in which the sequence can be translated by *harshly* or *severely* (gloss (i)), and generally bears on action verbs, in contexts such as [*traiter (quelqu’un) à la rigueur* “treat (someone) harshly”]<sup>3</sup>, illustrated in (14).

14. Or avez vous plaine science, Puissance, auctorité, vigueur : Pour tant, ma dame Experience, *Punissez les à la rigueur*  
“Now you have full science, power, authority and vigor: Therefore, my lady Experience, punish them [*à la rigueur*: severely]” (N. de La Chesnaye, *La Condamnation de Banquet*, 1508)

In such uses, *à la rigueur* is frequently associated with verbs linked to human social relations such as *traiter* “treat”, *punir* “punish”, *examiner* “examine”, *exécuter* “execute”, *exiger* “demand”. *Traiter*, *punir* and *examiner* in particular are strongly linked to this meaning: together, they make up 60% of all occurrences for this use-type. These verbs depict *someone handling someone else*, which is quite consistent with the typical context of these uses, i.e. the legal context of judgment or punishment (cf. (14)), sometimes taken metaphorically.

#### *Syntactic features of this first use-type*

In these uses, *à la rigueur* appears mainly in postverbal position (14). In such cases, it is used as a sentence-internal adverbial, and syntactically dependent<sup>4</sup> on the verb, i.e. integrated, as in

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<sup>3</sup> Of course, we cannot completely exclude the possibility that our association of *punir à la rigueur* with the idea of *harshness* be (partly?) anachronic (see Wierzbicka 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Though not as strictly as may be an argument, for instance a direct object.

the construction [Verb Direct-Object *à la rigueur*]. Preverbal uses are exceptional (3 cases), and found in specific contexts, such as rhymed verse in (15). Even then, the adverbial is similarly dependent on the verb:

15. Pauvre, couvert d'écume, et privé de retraite / **a la rigueur** ainsi pour  
salaire me traite.

“[a man I saved when he was] Poor, covered in foam, and deprived of  
retreat, treats me [*à la rigueur*: harshly], and this is all the salary I get”  
(A. Hardy, *Didon se sacrifiant*, 1624)

Such uses result from the possibility to place objects and other arguments in a preverbal position – however, such constructions become ever rarer, and are quite exceptional by the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> c. (Fournier 1998: 92 sq.).

Thus, in this first use-type, the adverbial is always dependent on the verb.

### *Text types*

Most texts in which we found this use of *à la rigueur* are not literary: generally, the text is historical, argumentative, religious or philosophical. This is not surprising, given the semantics of the head noun *rigueur* “rigor”. In fact, the use of lexicometric tools on Presto, a Classical French corpus, provides a further argument. They show the specificity of *rigueur* in one genre, *treatises*, which we take here as a first approximation towards the identification of a specific discourse tradition in which *à la rigueur* emerges. In this genre, *rigueur* appears to be closely linked to verbs and nouns which pertain to the domain of *application* of rigor. These include verbs such as *exercer* “exert”, *traiter* “treat with”, *user* “display”, *modérer* “limit”, *éprouver* “feel”, *souffrir* “suffer”, *plaindre* “lament” and nouns such as *discipline* “discipline”, *jugement* “judgment”, *justice* “justice”, *logique* “logic”, *mesure* “measure”, *précision* “precision”, *supplice* “torture”, *tourment* “torment”.

### **3.2 A la rigueur, use-type 2: ‘exactly’**

In another use-type, the best translation is *exactly* or *accurately*; it appears in a greater variety of contexts, including *to take something strictly*, *to observe precisely*.

We found a number of occurrences for which the most appropriate gloss was either *avec exactitude* “exactly”, *strictement* “strictly” or *au sens strict* “strictly speaking”. In most cases, the gloss *avec sévérité* “severely” does not seem appropriate, as in (16).

16. Distinction fort ancienne, mais qui était restée précaire, et assez floue –  
n’ayant guère de sens que comme principe de classification à l’intérieur  
de l’internement. Au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle, on redécouvre cette distinction, et  
*on la prend à la rigueur*. Entre « pauvre valide » et « pauvre malade »,  
la différence n’est pas seulement de degré dans la misère, mais de  
nature chez le misérable.

“[This] distinction was very old, but had remained fragile, and quite  
fuzzy – it had no meaning except as a principle of classification within  
the institution of internment. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the distinction was  
rediscovered, and taken [*à la rigueur*: in a strict sense, \*severely].  
Between “poor valid” and “poor sick”, the difference is not only one of  
degree in poverty, but of nature in the poor.” (M. Foucault, *Folie et  
déraison : Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique*, 1961)

The adverbial, in these uses, is very frequently associated with the verb *prendre* “take”, along with a few other verbs, for instance *considérer* “consider”, *observer* “observe”, *exécuter* “execute”.

As far as syntactic role and position are concerned, *à la rigueur* is then a sentence-internal adverbial, most often postverbal, and dependent on the verb though, just as in use-type 1, it is not a true argument of the verb. It is still integrated, contrary to sentence adverbials, and occupies the typical position of verbal adverbials, from Classical French onwards. Most often, the construction type is [VERB + DIRECT OBJECT + *à la rigueur*] (or [DIRECT OBJECT<sub>PRO</sub> + VERB + *à la rigueur*], as in (16)). Only few occurrences of this use-type are parenthetical (see (7) above).

The adverbial thus typically bears on the relation of the verb with one of its arguments: verb-object, verb-attribute or (in passive constructions) subject-verb, as in use-type 1.

### 3.3 *A la rigueur*, use-type 3: a hedging Discourse Marker

In use-type 3, the adverbial is harder to translate, and perhaps best rendered by *at a pinch*. It tends to bear on the sentence as a whole: it is a sentence adverbial, with a much broader scope, as noted in general in the emergence of discourse markers. In these contexts, it seems to be quite far from its initial uses. It can no longer be glossed as ‘strictement’ or ‘au sens strict’ “strictly (speaking)”. Typical glosses for occurrences of this use-type are *à la limite* “at a pinch”, *en cas de nécessité* “if necessary” and *éventuellement* “maybe”, as in examples (17-20).

17. Ces deux filles, il se met tout de suite à les adorer. Que devenir pourtant ? il est ruiné. Il sort des camps, il sort des cachots, il est fait, lui, aux privations ; **la pauvreté, à la rigueur, il la supporterait pour lui-même**, mais il n’en veut pas pour ses enfants.  
 “These two girls, he starts to adore them right away. But what is to become of him? He is without a penny. He just came out of the camps, of the cell, he for one is used to be deprived of everything; poverty, [*à la rigueur*: if necessary], he could tolerate for himself, but he will not accept if for his children.” (V. Hugo, *Mille francs de récompense*, 1866)
18. La grande pièce servait d’atelier à Jonas pendant la journée, de pièce commune le soir et à l’heure des repas. **On pouvait d’ailleurs, à la rigueur, manger dans la cuisine**, pourvu que Jonas, ou Louise, voulût bien se tenir debout.  
 “The big room was used as a workshop by Jonas during the day, as a living room evenings and at mealtimes. It was also possible, [*à la rigueur*: if necessary], to eat in the kitchen, provided that Jonas, or Louise, accepted to eat standing up.” (A. Camus, *L’Exil et le royaume*, 1957)
19. Cette observation qui parut d’abord intéressante ne satisfaisait personne. **Cela expliquait à la rigueur la direction suivie par l’instrument** et même la force avec laquelle il avait été projeté.  
 “This observation, which at first seemed interesting, satisfied no one. This explained [*à la rigueur*: at a pinch] the direction in which the instrument had gone and even the strength with which it had been thrown” (A. Dhôtel, *Le Village pathétique*, 1943)
20. C’était la préoccupation de quelques chefs vaillants et prudents, tels que Wimpfen, mais point écoutés. **A la rigueur**, disaient les gens de l’entourage impérial, **on était toujours sûr de pouvoir gagner**



**Mézières**, et, en mettant tout au pis, la frontière belge. Mais fallait-il prévoir de si extrêmes éventualités ?

“This was the preoccupation of some valiant and careful leaders, such as Wimpfen, but they were not heard. [*à la rigueur*: at a pinch], said people from the imperial entourage, we were sure at least of our capacity to go to *Mézières* and, in the worst case, the frontier with Belgium. But should such an extreme scenario be taken into account?” (V. Hugo, *Histoire d’un crime : Déposition d’un témoin*, 1883)<sup>5</sup>

In this use-type, *à la rigueur* typically appears in the context of a modal verb such as *pouvoir* (18, 20, 21), and/or with a verb in the conditional (17, 21): such virtualizing contexts tend to become the rule. The adverbial tends to be postverbal, but it is, more importantly, often non-integrated. At any rate, it is generally either not strongly dependent on the verb, or clearly not dependent, as in (21).

21. Oh ! ne croyez pas cela ! si les cinquante mille francs m’appartenaient, ça pourrait s’arranger **à la rigueur**. Mais le Bricolin sait mieux compter que vous !

“Oh! Don’t believe that! If those fifty thousand Francs were mine, this could [*à la rigueur*: at a pinch] all be sorted out. But Bricolin can count, and better than you!” (G. Sand, *Le Meunier d’Angibault*, 1845)

Another specificity of this use-type is the presence of what seem to be sets of alternatives, as in (22-24) – and some of these alternatives may remain implicit. In such contexts, *à la rigueur* marks an element of the set as being on the border of acceptability. In all three examples (22-24), one element seems acceptable or even desirable (respectively *une Alsacienne*, *au fond de l’autel* and *reprendre le collier*), another one clearly excluded or unacceptable (respectively *une Galitzianerin*, (*nulle part*) *ailleurs* and *Vichy ou Baden-Baden*), while *à la rigueur* seems to indicate that a third element of the set would have been marginally acceptable (respectively *une Lorraine*, *dans les musées* and *une semaine au Mesnil*).

22. Les sœurs de Bernard regrettèrent qu’au lieu d’épouser *une Alsacienne* ou **à la rigueur** *une Lorraine*, leur frère ait choisi *une Galitzianerin*.

“Bernard’s sisters regretted that, instead of marrying a woman from Alsace or [*à la rigueur*: possibly, at a pinch] Lorraine, their brother would choose a Galitzianerin.” (S. Weil, *Chez les Weil : André et Simone*, 2009)

23. Les Vierges, tu vois, je les laisse dans leur niche, *quelque part au fond de l’autel*. **A la rigueur** *dans les musées*. Mais *nulle part ailleurs*, non, nulle part !

“The Virgins, you see I leave them in their niche, somewhere back of the altar. [*à la rigueur*: possibly] in museums. But nowhere else, no, nowhere!” (M. Bénabou, *Ecrire sur Tamara*, 2002)

24. [Elle] bouillait d’impatience de *reprendre le collier*, disait-elle[.] Ce Dr Pluton était une buse. Un médecin pour perruches des beaux quartiers. Ne lui conseillait-il pas les eaux ? *Vichy ou Baden-Baden ! Une semaine au Mesnil*, **à la rigueur**, voilà ce dont elle avait besoin.

“She could not wait to start working again, she said. This Doctor Pluton was an ass. A doctor for silly birds from rich neighborhoods. Wasn’t he

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<sup>5</sup> In this example, the syntactic position of *à la rigueur* seems to indicate that it bears syntactically on *on était toujours sûr*, though semantically it clearly bears on *pouvoir gagner Mézières*.

telling her to go for a cure in thermal waters? Vichy or Baden-Baden! A week in Le Mesnil, [*à la rigueur*: possibly, at a pinch], here’s what she needed.” (A. Garat, *Dans la main du diable*, 2006)

Two features we observed are linked to the fact that the adverbial is no longer dependent on the verb. The first is that, as in these examples, the adverbial can bear on nouns and adjectives. The second is that it can appear as a pro-sentence (25).

25. Allez, lady Falkland est perdue. – si elle est innocente, il faudra bien qu’on l’acquitte, faute de preuves. – **à la rigueur**. Mais elle sortira du procès déshonorée, et c’est pis qu’une condamnation.

“Come now, lady Falkland is lost. – if she is innocent, she will have to be acquitted, for lack of evidence. – [*à la rigueur*: possibly]. But she will come out of the trial dishonored, and this is worse than a sentence.” (C. Ferrère, *L’Homme qui assassina*, 1907)

In this use-type, the original meaning is completely lost; what remains is the idea of something that is on the very margin of acceptability – in some cases, explicitly the least regrettable of a series of possible (bad) choices.

### 3.4 Main differences between use-types

Table 1 sums up the differences we uncovered between use-types, as far as possible glosses, contexts and syntax are concerned. Whereas the main difference between use-types (1) and (2) is their semantics, and the constructions (or context) they appear in, use-type (3) shows a greater divergence. In this use-type, *à la rigueur* not only has a different meaning – and appears in different contexts –, but it also appears in any syntactic position, and is not integrated.

**Table 1: Three main use-types of *à la rigueur* in our corpus**

Use-type	translation	glosses	context	position	integration	relative frequency <sup>6</sup>
(1)	<i>Harshly</i>	‘avec sévérité’, ‘sans indulgence’	human relations verbs	mainly postverbal	integrated	1.3
(2)	<i>Exactly</i>	‘avec exactitude’, ‘strictement’ ‘au sens strict’	similar verbs + new constructions ( <i>prendre, être</i> + adjective, <i>observer/examiner,</i> <i>exécuter/pratiquer</i> )	mainly postverbal	(more or less) integrated	1.2
(3)	<i>At a pinch</i>	‘à la limite’, ‘en cas de nécessité’, ‘éventuellement’	any verb type	any position	non integrated	2.6

Another important feature is that use-type (1), as mentioned in Section 3.1, appears in a specific genre, *treatises*, while use-types (2) and (3) are found in a greater variety of text types. This progressive extension in context types mirrors that found for verb types and is typical of many linguistic changes.

<sup>6</sup> Per million words.

#### 4. Diachronic analysis: emergence of sentence-adverbial and discourse marker uses

The goal of our paper is to better account for the development of use-type 3. In order to do this, we must of course factor in another dimension, namely time. Once this is done, the development of the adverbial becomes quite clear. It can be described as follows: *à la rigueur* first went from an adverbial use, dependent on the verb and with transparent semantics (use-type 1, example (26)) to a different adverbial use, slightly less transparent (use-type 2, example (27)) – in both use-types, however, it remains sentence-internal. It then evolved further to an opaque sentence adverbial, bearing on the utterance as a whole and displaying greater autonomy with respect to the verb (use-type 3, example (28)).

26. Au contraire, ceux que le roi treuvoit avoir leurs provinces dépeuplées, et en friche, *les punissoit à la rigueur*, et les démettoit de leurs charges, pour les donner à d'autres.

“On the contrary, if the king thought some left their province deserted and barren, he punished them [*à la rigueur*: harshly], and relieved them of their functions, giving them to others” (O. De Serres, *Le Théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs*, t. 2, 1603)

27. Je sais à peu près mille mots, c'est tout ce qu'il me faut *à la rigueur*, quoiqu'il y en ait cent mille, je crois, dans les dictionnaires.

“I know about a thousand words, [*à la rigueur*: to be exact, strictly speaking] that's all I need, although there are a hundred thousand ones, I believe, in dictionaries” (A. Dumas Père, *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo*, 1846)

28. [= example (18)] La grande pièce servait d'atelier à Jonas pendant la journée, de pièce commune le soir et à l'heure des repas. On pouvait d'ailleurs, *à la rigueur*, manger dans la cuisine, pourvu que Jonas, ou Louise, voulût bien se tenir debout.

“The big room was used as a workshop by Jonas during the day, as a living room evenings and at mealtimes. It was also possible, [*à la rigueur*: if necessary], to eat in the kitchen, provided that Jonas, or Louise, accepted to eat standing up”. (A. Camus, *L'Exil et le royaume*, 1957)

The emergence of sentence-level uses is not trivial: it makes the way for the shift from adverbial uses to discourse marker uses. Adverbials can bear on the verb or on other constituents (e.g. *run quickly*, *strike very hard*): they are then sentence-internal adverbials. They can also bear on the sentence as a whole, as in *My uncle called yesterday*: they are then called *sentence adverbials*. Sentence adverbials can bear on the utterance, but they can also be used as speech act (i.e. discourse-level) markers, as in *Actually/Frankly/Honestly, you shouldn't have come*. In this case, we call them *discourse markers* (DMs). We thus include DMs in the broader category of sentence adverbials, the difference being that they are *discourse-level* sentence adverbials.

In this section, we describe in detail these transitions. We first sketch out the global evolution (4.1), then provide more detail on the mechanisms underlying the change from one use-type to the next (4.2), with a close look at semantic-pragmatic features.

#### 4.1. Steps in the evolution of *à la rigueur*

The first use-type, *à la rigueur* “[to treat someone] harshly, with no regard for circumstances”, is clearly the most frequent one for at least one century and a half; its frequency drops during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and the last occurrence in our corpus is at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. We found the first clear instances of the second use-type, *à la rigueur* “[to do something] exactly, accurately”, at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> c.; it is relatively frequent from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> c., and the last clear instance we found in our corpus dates back only to 1967. The third use-type is the last one to appear, with a few occurrences in the 18<sup>th</sup> c.; it becomes frequent only in the 20<sup>th</sup> c., and seems to be the only one remaining in the last texts of our corpus.

The shift appears quite clearly in our coding, as can be seen in Table 2, which shows a gradual shift from use-type 1 to use-type 2 and on to use-type 3, with some overlap, different use-types being found at each period, as is often the case in semantic evolutions, and in linguistic changes in general, the coexistence for some time of variants, corresponding to different meanings in the case under study, being the rule. As shown in Table 2, most clear occurrences of use-type 1 are found in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> c. (88,7 %), most occurrences of use-type 2 in the 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> (87,1 %), and almost all occurrences of use-type 3 in the 19<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> c. (99 %). The diachronic sequence is thus quite clear.

**Table 2: Evolution of *à la rigueur*, from use-type 1 to use-type 3**

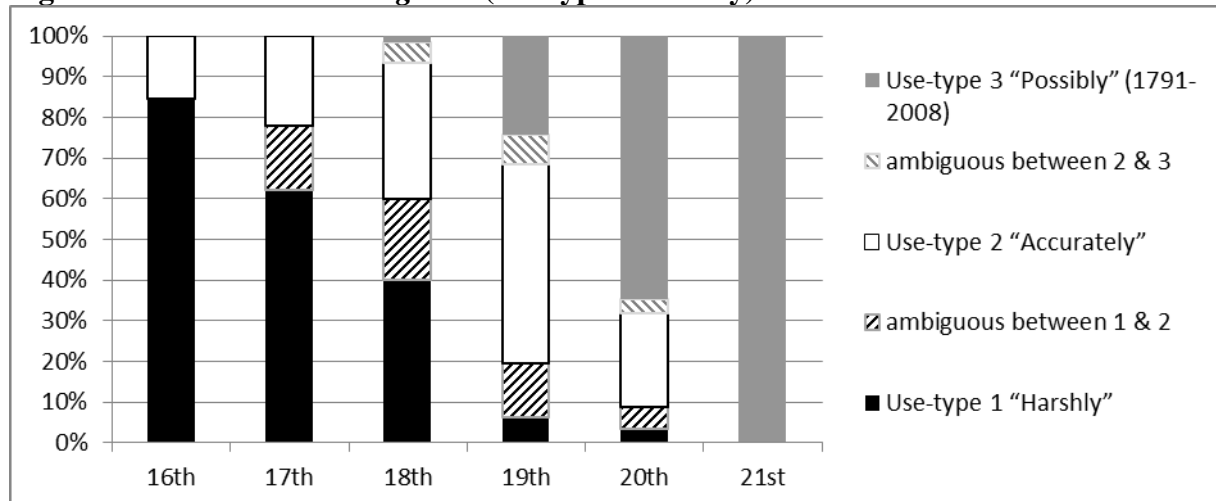
Century	16 <sup>th</sup>	17 <sup>th</sup>	18 <sup>th</sup>	19 <sup>th</sup>	20 <sup>th</sup>	21 <sup>st</sup>	Number of occurrences
Use-type 1 “Harshly” (1508-1824)	11 (15,5%)	28 (39,4%)	24 (33,8%)	5 (7%)	3 (4,2%)	0 (0%)	71 (100%)
<i>ambiguous between 1 &amp; 2</i>	0 (0%)	7 (20%)	12 (34,3%)	11 (31,4%)	5 (14,3%)	0 (0%)	35 (100%)
Use-type 2 “Exactly” (1601-1967)	2 (2,2%)	10 (10,8%)	20 (21,5%)	40 (43%)	21 (22,6%)	0 (0%)	93 (100%)
<i>ambiguous between 2 &amp; 3</i>	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (25%)	6 (50%)	3 (25%)	0 (0%)	12 (100%)
Use-type 3 “At a pinch” (1791- 2008)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (1%)	20 (19,4%)	59 (57,3%)	23 (22,3%)	103 (100%)

In the remainder of this section, we describe in greater detail this diachronic shift from a dependent, semantically transparent adverbial (use-type 1) to a free (more or less integrated)

adverbial (use-type 2) and on to an opaque and syntactically free discourse marker (use-type 3).

Interestingly, the shift from one use-type to the next is very gradual, as illustrated in Table 2 above and in Figure 1 below: next to clear instances in which all clues point consistently to one and only one interpretation, we found quite a few in which two readings are possible. Typically, in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> c., a growing number of occurrences are ambiguous between the first and second use-types; in the 19<sup>th</sup> c., between the second and third use-types.

**Figure 1: Evolution of *à la rigueur* (use-type \* century)**



In the next section, we highlight the important role of ambiguity in the transitions from one use-type to the next, and focus on these transitional phenomena.

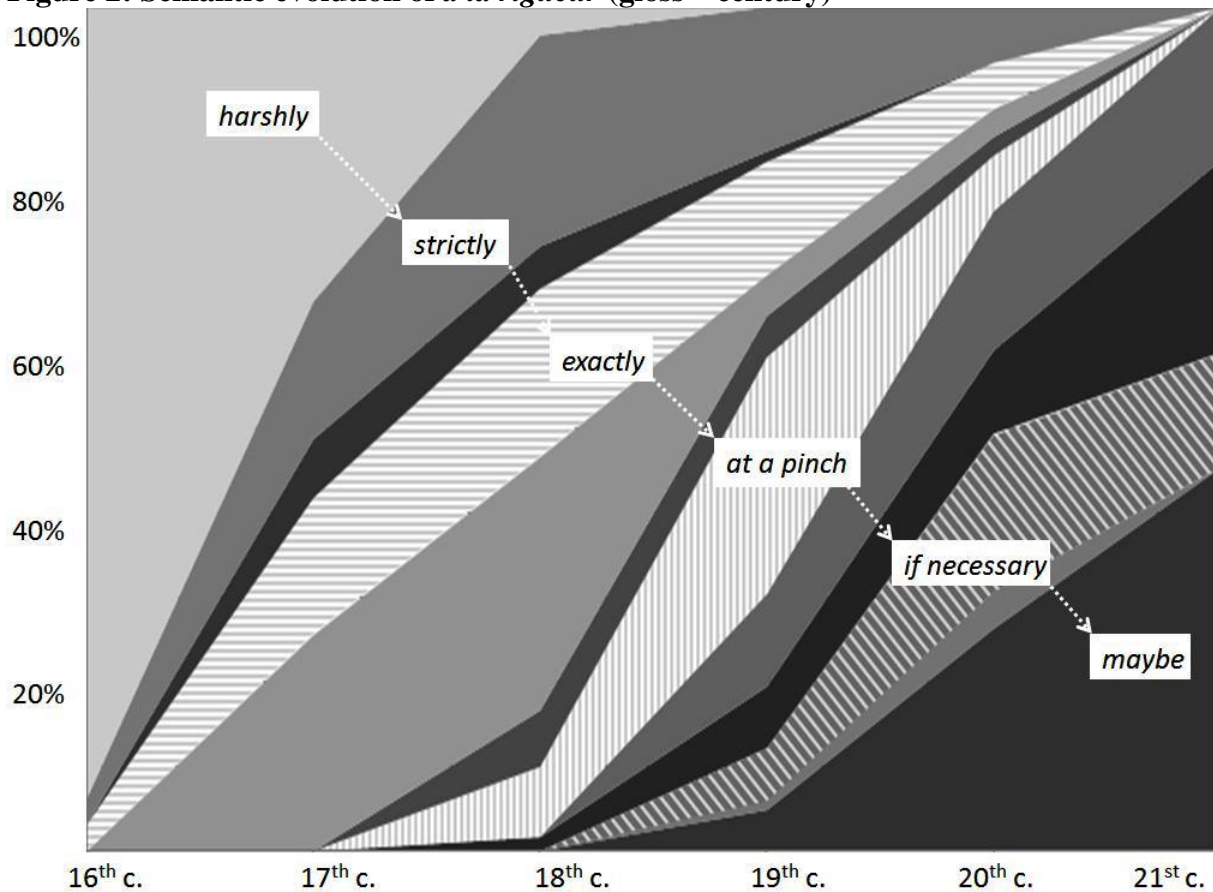
#### 4.2. Transitions: from one use-type to the next

We believe that semantic shift generally results from *invited inferencing*, involving production effects (Traugott & Dasher 2002) as well as context-induced reinterpretation (Heine 2002). This means that the meaning of a word or construction develops by extension, through the foregrounding of background semantic features in specific contexts. Our coding scheme makes it possible to follow the ‘step-by-step’ evolution of *à la rigueur*, because it highlights all possible meanings of the adverbial in a given context. It shows that even when *à la rigueur* has a given meaning, other meanings are potentially present. If in a specific context a secondary meaning becomes (contextually) more salient, the initial meaning is backgrounded; if the context and corollary backgrounding effect is repeated, the secondary meaning eventually takes over and the initial meaning fades out. The process can repeat itself, from original to secondary and on to tertiary meaning, which is what happens in the case of *à la rigueur*.

A semantic shift results from new contexts, but it also makes it possible to use the word or construction in yet other contexts: semantic reinterpretation – which may go hand in hand with syntactic reanalysis – is thus followed by extension, i.e. it spreads to an increasing number of contexts, including some which do not license the original reading (*actualization*, in the words of Timberlake 1977). In turn, these new contexts bring along new inferences. This analysis is compatible with Heine’s schema of language change in general, and grammaticalization in particular, as something which is not catastrophic but rather proceeds along a cline, with foregrounding and backgrounding effects: [A > Ab > aB > B].

If we look at our data focusing now not on use-types but on glosses, we find a good illustration of this theoretical account of language change. For instance, the typical gloss associated with *à la rigueur* in the first occurrences (diachronically) is *with severity*. A few of these early occurrences can also be glossed as *strictly*. This is not a huge semantic shift; on the contrary, it is quite easy to imagine contexts in which being severe is to be strict. But it prepares another shift: once *strictly* is the most appropriate gloss, it draws along another idea, that of *accuracy*. As can be seen in Figure 2, this gradual semantic extension from one gloss to the next is found at all diachronic stages in our corpus. This step-by-step evolution is thus not an artefact of our coding in use-types. The evolution of the possible glosses for each occurrence shows how smooth the transition is from one foregrounded notion to the next: from *harshly* (light grey) to *strictly* (grey), *exactly* (horizontal stripes), *at a pinch* (vertical stripes), *if necessary* (diagonal stripes) and finally *maybe* (dark grey) – with intermediate steps in which various glosses are possible, and no one gloss is clearly foregrounded.

**Figure 2: Semantic evolution of *à la rigueur* (gloss \* century)**



In the remainder of this section, we illustrate this phenomenon with specific examples. For instance, some occurrences can be glossed both as *avec sévérité* “severely, harshly” and *avec exactitude* “exactly”, from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In all such uses, the semantic feature of *accuracy* is always present, but that of *severity* or *harshness* cannot be excluded. Though it has been backgrounded, it remains retrievable, as illustrated by examples (29-30).

29. ... et vous n’avez qu’une pierre, là ! ... elle montrait son cœur. – vous avez fait votre devoir, dit Charles ; mais, moi, magistrat, je ne sais pas si *je l’eusse suivi à la rigueur*...

“... and the only thing you have here is a stone! ... she was pointing at his heart. – You have done your duty, said Charles; but I, magistrate, do not know whether I would have accomplished it [*à la rigueur*: strictly, <sup>(?)</sup>severely]...” (H. de Balzac, *Annette et le criminel*, 1824)

30. La toute-puissance des français s'étend d'un bout du monde à l'autre. M De Custine est maître de l'Allemagne, et je crains bien que le décret sur les émigrés *ne soit exécuté à la rigueur* à Saint-Domingue.  
“The might of the French extends from one end of the world to the other. M. De Custine is the master of Germany, and I fear that the decree on emigrants will be applied [*à la rigueur*: strictly, harshly] in Saint-Domingue.” (G. de Staël, *Lettres inédites à Louis de Narbonne*, 1794)

Once the notion of *severity* has been backgrounded, it can be left out entirely, as in (31). This explains that in some occurrences *à la rigueur* can be glossed only as “exactly, strictly (speaking)” (31 occurrences in our corpus). These occurrences are slightly more recent, the first one in our corpus dating back to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (1755).

31. Observations sur les tems. *Le présent n'est à la rigueur que le moment où l'on parle.*  
“Observations on tense. The present [i.e. present tense] is [*à la rigueur*: strictly speaking] only the moment in which one speaks.” (E. Bonnot de Condillac, *Cours d'étude pour l'instruction du Prince de Parme*, vol. 1, *Grammaire*, 1775)

Another good illustration is the transition from *accuracy* to *possibility*, i.e. occurrences in which the adverbial can be glossed as *exactly* (*precisely*, *accurately*) and *possibly*. The meaning shift can be understood as an invited inference in modal contexts: in such contexts, the semantic feature of possibility is not carried by *à la rigueur* itself, but triggered by the presence of a neighboring modal and/or conditional. Example (32) provides a good illustration:

32. le résumé habituel ne saurait être long désormais ; trois phrases, **à la rigueur**, pourraient suffire : tourments au comble. Réclusion absolue. Destruction infaillible.  
“Thus, the usual summary should not be long; three sentences, [*à la rigueur*: exactly, possibly], could suffice: torments at their acme. Absolute reclusion. Unescapable destruction. ” (E. Comte de Las Cases, *Le mémorial de Sainte Hélène*, 1823)

Indeed, this use-type is the one most clearly linked with modals and verbs in the conditional (see Section 5.2. for a discussion). In 49 occurrences, the lexical verb forms part of a construction [MODAL + INFINITIVE], with the verb *pouvoir* “be able” in almost all cases (45 out of 49). A connected feature is the increasing frequency of virtualizing contexts (conditional or hypothesis) in utterances containing *à la rigueur*, with 57 occurrences. This type of context seems more frequent than it was when *à la rigueur* could be glossed only as “to be exact”. As in (33), the gloss “if necessary” is then actually favored over the gloss “to be exact” – which remains possible – by the presence of the modal, here in the conditional.

33. [= example (13)] De-là la difficulté de les traduire : elle est telle qu'avec du talent il seroit plus aisé de les surpasser souvent, que de les éгалer toujours. **A la rigueur on pourroit même dire** qu'il est impossible d'en donner de bonnes traductions : car les raisons qui prouvent que deux langues ne sauroient avoir le même caractère, prouvent que les mêmes pensées peuvent rarement être rendues dans l'une et dans l'autre avec les mêmes beautés.

“This explains why it is so hard to translate them: so hard indeed, that with talent it would be easier often to surpass them, than to always equal them. [*à la rigueur*: if necessary, to be exact] one could even say that it is impossible to provide good translations: because the reasons which prove that two languages could not have the same character, prove that the same thoughts can rarely be rendered in one and the other with the same beauty.” (E. Bonnot de Condillac, *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines*, 1746)

34 such occurrences, as in (34), admit both “to be exact” and “at a pinch” or “if necessary” as glosses – with a time span of roughly two centuries, from 1746 to 1954.

34. Ce bâtiment avait pour tube intestinal un long corridor sur lequel s’ouvraient, à droite et à gauche, des espèces de compartiments de dimensions variées, **à la rigueur** logeables et plutôt semblables à des échoppes qu’à des cellules. Ces chambres prenaient jour sur des terrains vagues des environs.

“The intestinal tract of this building was a long hall to the left and right sides of which lay a series of compartments of various dimensions, in which one could [*à la rigueur*: to be exact, at a pinch, if necessary] live and which resembled rather booths than cells. These rooms opened on the wastelands nearby.” (V. Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 1862 [1881])

The evolution then goes on, with occurrences in which the idea of accuracy is not only backgrounded, but impossible to retrieve. Some 26 occurrences (1845-2002) accept only the gloss *à la limite* “at a pinch”, as in (35).

35. - J’étais venu ici pour un mois. Un mois, trente jours, trente et un **à la rigueur**, poursuit Olivier. Evidemment, je n’avais pas prévu que le jour durait six mois et la nuit six autres mois.

“I had come here for one month. One month, thirty days, thirty-one days [*à la rigueur*: at a pinch], Oliver goes on. Of course I had not foreseen that the day lasted six months, and the night six other months. (M. Tournier, *Les Météores*, 1975)

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Not only semantics: Syntactic and pragmatic aspects of the evolution of *à la rigueur*

As often with such evolutions, that of *à la rigueur* is not confined to semantic change. On the contrary, it combines semantic, syntactic and pragmatic changes, which we coded as features, as described in section 2. These changes seem to be linked, as is typical of grammaticalization processes leading from adverbial to pragmatic or discourse marker.<sup>7</sup> From a syntactic point of view, as noted in section 3, there are important differences between use-types. In use-type 2,

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<sup>7</sup> It has been suggested that the emergence of discourse marker uses could be described as a process of *pragmaticalization*. This phenomenon can be seen either as a subclass of grammaticalization phenomena (e.g. Dostie 2004, who calls it ‘grammaticalization 2’) or as an analogous process, but with a few distinctive features, especially concerning (sentence-internal vs sentence-external) scope (see for instance Erman & Kotsinas 1993, Aijmer 1997, Dostie 2004, Günthner & Mutz 2004, Hansen 2008). However, it has also been pointed out that it is not always possible to keep grammatical and pragmatic functions separate (Traugott 1995a: Section 2). Thus, following Diewald (2006) and Degand & Evers-Vermeul (2015: 74), we include pragmatic functions in the realm of grammar, and consider that *à la rigueur* undergoes a process of grammaticalization.



there is a greater diversity of constructions: the adverbial is found with a large spectrum of verb types, which may result, in some cases, in a looser relation to the verb.

With use-type 3, there is a greater positional freedom of the adverbial: the adverbial increasingly tends to free itself from the verb, and may now bear not on the utterance itself, but on the speech act. This interpretation results from the conjunction of dislocation (i.e. non integration, generally indicated by punctuation alone) and a greater positional freedom, leading to the rise of anteposition to the verb, *and* to the subject – a position already found in some occurrences of use-type 2, as illustrated in (36), but more frequent in the case of use-type 3.

36. cela regarde bien en quelque sorte le fond du poème, *mais à la rigueur il n'en fait point partie.*

“This does indeed concern the meaning of the poem, but [*à la rigueur*: strictly speaking] it is not part of it.” (Abbé d’Aubignac, *La Pratique du théâtre*, 1657)

These features show that there is a progressive loosening of the relation with the verb. This is confirmed by verbal semantics, increasingly incompatible with the semantics of the adverbial, as is the case for instance in (18) for the verb *manger* ‘to eat’. This additional clue shows the loose relation between verb and adverb. In such examples, *à la rigueur* has no bearing on the predicate or the utterance, but on a discourse level only.

### ***Speaker involvement***

As noted in a number of studies (e.g. Traugott 1989, 1995a, 1995b, Traugott and Dasher 2002, Brinton and Traugott 2005), the emergence of discourse markers often involves a process of subjectification, i.e. a shift from meanings pertaining to the characterization of the objective world to meanings involving the expression of personal attitudes of the speaker. This phenomenon is linked to the shift from *utterance-level* uses to *discourse-level* uses.

The emergence of use-type 2 is linked to a higher frequency of contexts with speaker involvement. Such contexts are already prevalent in use-type 1, with 55% of all occurrences (see examples (14-15)). However, they climb to 74% of all occurrences in use-type 2 (see example (27)) – a statistically significant augmentation ( $X^2 = 6.6$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Typical contexts of speaker involvement correspond to dialogues, monologues and interventions of the speaker/narrator, in first person. Conversely, narrative contexts are less frequent in use-type 2 than in use-type 1. There may well be a link between the two, wherein the emergence of the more pragmatic meaning present in use-types 2 and 3 is favored by the higher degree of speaker involvement in use-type 2. Thus, in our view, instances of use-type 2 could be seen as what Diewald (2002) calls critical contexts.

## **5.2. Modals, and virtualizing contexts**

Another important trigger in the evolution of *à la rigueur* seems to be its use in virtualizing contexts. Such contexts are identifiable typically through the use of an epistemic modality indicated by *peut-être* “maybe”, or a counter-factual form, such as the verb *pouvoir* “be able” in the present or past conditional (37); sometimes, with a hypothetical or concessive context.

37. Tout se passe comme s’il y avait un pacte tacite entre la Providence et moi: elle m’assure le nécessaire, mais me prend *tout ce qu’on pourrait à la rigueur considérer* comme du superflu.

“It is as if there were a tacit pact between Providence and myself: it provides what I need, but takes away all which could be, [*à la rigueur*: strictly

speaking], considered superfluous.” (J. Dutourd, *Pluche ou l’amour de l’art*, 1967)

In those cases where a modal verb or some other modal marker is present, *à la rigueur* remains in the vicinity of the modal. It has scope on the modal, not on the infinitive, and thus bears on the possibility of the event. This use-type seems to have favored the shift towards the modern use of *à la rigueur*. Note that in a few of these occurrences (9 in all), another possible gloss is “at a pinch” (French gloss *à la limite*). This is illustrated in (38-39):

38. Remarquons pourtant que ce trait de satire est mis dans la bouche de sot corrompu, et **pourrait à la rigueur** être interprété en éloge indirect [...]  
“Let us note, however, that the author has this satire come from a corrupt fool, and it could [*à la rigueur*: possibly, at a pinch] be interpreted as indirect praise” (Sainte Beuve, *Tableau historique et critique de la poésie française et du théâtre français au XVIe siècle*, 1828)
39. Les établissemens de saint Louis étoient donc antérieurs à la compilation dont je parle, qui, **à la rigueur**, et en adoptant les prologues erronés mis par quelques ignorans à la tête de cet ouvrage, *n’auroit paru* que la dernière année de la vie de saint Louis, ou même après la mort de ce prince.  
“The *Etablissemens de saint Louis* are thus anterior to the compilation I am referring to, which, [*à la rigueur*: possibly, at a pinch], and following the erroneous prologue which has been put by ignorants at the beginning of this book, seems to have been published only during the last year of the life of Saint Louis, or even after this prince’s death.” (Montesquieu, *De l’esprit des loix*, t. 4, 1755)

We believe that the explanation of this evolution is that, in virtualizing contexts, the boundary between *accurate* and *inaccurate* becomes fuzzy.<sup>8</sup> As shown by Lakoff (1977), scalar discourse markers react differently to fuzzy category boundaries. The existence of negative connotations and their emergence might indeed be linked to the scalar interpretation of *à la rigueur*. In this respect, the semantic evolution of *à la rigueur* seems typical of a subclass of discourse markers: as shown by Traugott (2006), *even* follows a similar path; after a first semantic shift, from ‘flat, smooth’ to ‘exact’, it eventually developed uses as a scalar focus marker (see also De Smet 2012).

Virtualizing contexts seem to have had an influence on the evolution of *à la rigueur*, but they were not alone. The increasing frequency of concessive-conditional contexts, after a virtualizing context (31 occurrences), as in (40), is also linked to this evolution.

40. [= example (11)] Le duc est amoureux, par conséquent il est aveugle. **A la rigueur** *il pourrait vous croire innocente* et victime d’un odieux laquais, *si je ne lui apportais que des indices. Heureusement, j’ai un dossier...*  
“The duke is in love, consequently he is blind. [*à la rigueur*: possibly, at a pinch] he could believe you innocent and the victim of a vicious lackey, if I

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. the difference between (i) and (ii) below: in (i), ‘to be exact’ bears on “at ten o’clock”, while in (ii) it is hard to say what it bears on precisely, since it could be the *possibility* (i.e. the fact that the speaker is not sure John will come) of his arrival rather than the specific time of arrival.

- (i) To be exact, John will come at ten o’clock  
(ii) To be exact, John might come at ten o’clock

brought him only clues. Fortunately, I have a whole file...” (P.-A. Ponson du Terrail, *Rocamboles, les drames de Paris*, vol. 2, 1859)

Our hypothesis in this matter is that the concessive-conditional context, questioning the validity of what precedes, gradually becomes implicit; this is thus a good illustration of the semantization of contextual effects, or invited inferencing. Such phenomena take time: this explains why these occurrences are mostly quite recent (mid-20<sup>th</sup> c.), with only very few exceptions – 2, actually, the oldest dating back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. (example (10), above). The initial idea of *accuracy* or *strictness*, immediately called into question by a virtualizing perspective, thus shifts towards a new assessment of the situation: (a) a process or state is found not to correspond perfectly to what is expected, or (b) it receives negative connotations, as made clear by glosses such as *en cas de nécessité* “if necessary”, *au pire* “in the worst case”, *faute de mieux* “for want of a better option”.

## 6. Conclusion

Our study shows that the striking semantic evolution of *à la rigueur* is in fact the result of a series of minute shifts in meaning – invited inferences resulting from the contexts of use, which change the semantics of the adverbial and thus, in turn, open up new possibilities: new contexts of use, which will themselves lead the adverbial to new inferences and new shifts in meaning. We documented these shifts on the basis of a diachronic corpus study, showing how *à la rigueur* went from an integrated, verb-dependent adverbial appearing in specific contexts with the meaning *with harshness* to more and more verb-independent uses. It is used, in Modern French, as a sentence-level adverbial, more specifically a discourse marker, a hedge, meaning *at a pinch, if need be*. This illustrates perfectly the shift from an objective world view to a more subjective one pointed out e.g. by Traugott (1989, 1995a and 1995b), that is a pragmatic-semantic process whereby “meanings become increasingly based in the speaker’s subjective belief / state / attitude toward the proposition” (Traugott 1989: 35).

Further studies should explain the difference, in Spoken French, between *à la rigueur* and another hedge, *à la limite* “at a pinch (lit. at the boundary)”, which seems to have similar uses though it followed a different grammaticalization path: in this case, the original semantic meaning is still recoverable. This could help us tackle the more complex question of how grammaticalization paths can lead constructions with very different origins to a given meaning or function.

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