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Since when has regional planning been vague?

An analysis of textual data from 7 regional master plans of Ile-de-France region between 1939 and 2019

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Abstract

This paper explores whether discursive vagueness has been used for a long time in planning documents, in the case of the Ile-de-France region. To do so, we analyzed seven main regional plans between 1939 and 2019, with the help of textometry. What emerges is a major pivotal moment in the way regional planning is formulated, between the late 1960s and the mid-1970s. Two phases can be distinguished: (1) a “before” phase in which discourse and rules are intrinsically linked, in a normative and regulatory approach; and (2) an “after” phase in which regional discourse aims above all to support the actions of the various players, largely abandoning normativity and the definition of clear rules. We interpret these results as the reflection of a major change in the planning system in France in the late 1960s, as well as an evolution in the way urban planning norms are written.

Keywords: planning discourse analysis, regional planning, Ile-de-France region, planning norms, discursive vagueness

1. Introduction

Recent planning research has highlighted a strategic dimension of plans that had previously been rather overlooked: discursive vagueness (Buhler and Lethier, 2020; Chesneau, 2023). “Discursive vagueness” refers to a series of discursive devices such as the use of concessionary wordings, or the elimination of time and space references. This allows actors, and particularly local authorities, to deal with a subject imposed (often by their central government) without making too strong of a commitment when it is not intended (Kaza and Hopkins, 2009; Buhler, 2021)¹.

Vagueness in contemporary planning discourse may seem paradoxical at first sight, since the plan no longer functions (for some subjects) as a way of saying “what is planned”, but as a mean for creating blurred zones, subjects where negotiation and other less “publicized” modalities of action take over (Kaza and Hopkins, 2009). These vague elements of discourse can also be interpreted as ways to maintain room for negotiation in order to avoid conflict with municipalities, landowners and developers (Levy, 2015).

This does not mean that any attempt to plan a city is doomed to end in vagueness. As Charles Hoch (2007, p. 21) puts it: “plans that say little about how to turn policy into projects may be said to lack means-ends coherence.” Rather, vagueness is one of the components of the plans’ discourse, and its proportion has increased in the case of French local plans since the 2000s (Buhler and Lethier, 2020; Buhler, 2021). From this finding, two questions emerge: (1) is this growing use of vagueness also observed in other national contexts?; and (2 - if we restrict the focus to the French context) for how long these (vague) discursive devices have been in use? In this paper, we address this second question, which calls for a diachronic approach on planning documents themselves.

Indeed, several research originating from the “plans as signals” approach have identified that plans themselves are an ideal material for analyzing discourse and interactions between actors (Hopkins, 2001; Hopkins and Knaap, 2018, 2019). In the context of plan making, and for various subjects, these actors are seen as being able to either: (1) contribute, sometimes fully and transparently, to the discourse setting up, sometimes (2) in a rather encrypted way, or (3) not to contribute at all, in order to retain certain information. Following this theoretical framework, it seems that tracking a series of comparable plans over time enables us to distinguish discursive evolutions (stylistic, lexical ...) that reflects institutional and political changes.

Constructing a diachronic reading of plans over a long period of time make it thus possible to test two hypotheses. We can assume (a) that use of vagueness in planning is recent and is explained by governance changes related to the emergence of neo-liberalism in spatial planning; or we can assume (b) on the contrary, that vagueness always has been present in planning discourse, because it is part of the broader genre of institutional discourses in which vague terms and devices are a major component.

To this end, we propose to examine the ways in which discourse is made in regional planning documents on a rather long period of time (80 years) taking as an example the capital region of

¹ The issue of vagueness/fuzziness in urban planning is not entirely new, since it has been the subject of previous developments, essentially focused on the objective of minimizing it during exchanges between planning actors (De Roo, 2007; Porter and De Roo, 2007).

France, Ile-de-France, through a corpus of 7 regional planning documents and their revisions (between the 1939 PARP plan to the latest 2019 SCoT-M).

The regional development plans for the capital region were chosen because they are - in France at least - one of the rare examples of temporal continuity (over a long period of time) in the development of plans that are made at on a comparable geographical scale². These documents have of course changed in form (development plan, master plan) and have been embedded in different political contexts (Saez, 2021). However, these dissimilarities do not prevent their structural proximity: all these documents provide access to a diagnosis, orientations, statements, and arbitrations established among various stakeholders (Chesneau, 2023). The documents (see the list of plans considered in section 2.1) analysed in this paper are therefore comparable with each other. The corpus thus appears consistent and is suitable for examining how planning discourse have evolved over time in the Ile-de-France context using systematic tools, such as textometry.

In this paper, we will first present the methodology developed, including a detailed presentation of the corpus considered and the method developed. Then we will present the results obtained which convergently signal a major change in the regional planning discourse between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s. We then organize a discussion around several analytical hypotheses, with a specific focus on the long-term evolution of the written formulation of the “norm” in regional plans.

2. Corpus and Method

To answer the question of how long has vagueness been in use in the planning prose, we have compiled a series of urban planning documents that have shaped regional planning in the Ile-de-France region, from the first development plan for Paris region (PARP) in 1939 to the “Schéma de cohérence territoriale de la Métropole du Grand Paris” (SCoT-M) in 2019. Although urban planning in France dates back to the Cornudet Acts (1919 and 1924), we have excluded this tradition of municipal planning from our analysis and focused exclusively on regional plans and schemes³.

2.1. A corpus of seven urban planning documents

The first plan considered is the “Plan d'aménagement de la région parisienne” (PARP) of 1939. It was drawn up at the end of the 1920s under the direction of Henri Prost, chief architect and

² Naturally perimeters are not exactly the same as the urban region has spread in the meantime.

³ This series has been extracted from a textual database covering urban planning in the Ile-de-France region from 1919 to 2019. The database contains more than 355 digitised documents, 15% of which have been transcribed. Each town planning document is linked to the preparatory documents and discussions that took place during their preparation. This network of texts is the result of documentary research based on several sources: parliamentary documents published in the *Journal Officiel* (1919-1935), seven inventories of the ministries responsible for planning between 1910 and 1990 (National Archives), archives of the Ile-de-France Regional Council and Internet data for the latest documents. These textual data are currently being deposited on Nakala (IR* Huma-Num) and will soon be available to the public: Chesneau (2024). *Collection: Ile-de-France urban planning corpus 1919-2019*, NAKALA, DOI: 10.34847/nkl.78d52zja.

town planner of the “Comité supérieur de l'aménagement et de l'organisation de la région parisienne” (CSAORP). The two main aims of the plan were to replace the *laissez-faire* approach of the past, and to curb the region's urban growth, which was considered “monstrous”. Five years after its approval, the PARP plan was revised, but the war and the occupation prevented its completion. In 1950, the Minister for Reconstruction and Town Planning, Claudius Petit, presented a major report to the Council of Ministers entitled *Pour un plan national d'aménagement du territoire*, in which he announced the entire policy to be followed until the mid-1960s. Because of the importance of this text and the strong state control of planning at the time, we have considered it to be a quasi-revision of the PARP and have therefore included it in the corpus. The PARP was not revised until 1956, mainly by the urban planner Pierre Gibel, under the direction of Pierre Sudreau, the commissioner for reconstruction and urban planning for the Paris region.

After the election of Charles de Gaulle in 1958, and the establishment of the Fifth Republic, the government prescribed a “Plan d'Aménagement et d'Organisation Générale de la Région Parisienne” (PADOG) but left the existing institutions untouched. The same people who had drawn up and revised the PARP therefore set to work on this new plan. In fact, the PADOG was quickly validated in 1960, in line with the previous plans. One of the main contributions of this plan was to advocate a new form of governance for the development of the Île-de-France region and to encourage the creation of “a single regional authority capable of acting on behalf of both the central government and the local authorities” (Alduy, 1979).

A new team led by Paul Delouvrier created the “Institut d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la Région Parisienne” (IAURP) in 1960 and the “District⁴” of Paris in 1961. This dynamic led to the drafting of a preliminary two-decade program for the Paris region in 1963, known as the “Livre blanc”, which served as the explanatory memorandum for the third document in our corpus, the “Schéma directeur d'aménagement et d'urbanisme de la région de Paris” (SDAURP) of 1965. In the history of development plans for the Paris region, this master plan represented a major doctrinal shift. The State took the view that it should voluntarily organize the distribution of the population in the region, in particular by creating “New Towns” (“villes nouvelles”). However, it was not officially approved in 1965 and, from a legal point of view, it did not officially abrogate PADOG. It was not officially approved until 1976, under the name SDAURIF, after two failed attempts of revision (1969, 1971).

From the 1980s onwards, planning falls out of favor. Shortly before the 1981 presidential elections, the government decided to revise SDAURIF, whose data were no longer up to date. However, the new government did not take up the initiative and it was not until 1986 that the Ile-de-France region relaunched the project. The Regional Council entrusted IAURIF with this task and, at the beginning of 1989, adopted the regional planning project entitled “Ile-de-France 2000”. Although the 1988 presidential elections did not change the political context, the government of Michel Rocard wanted to assert the predominant role of the State in the development of planning policy in the Ile-de-France region. After a long struggle between the State and local authorities, the SDRIF was finally approved by decree on 26 April 1994.

Following the adoption of a series of major laws between 1995 and 2000 (LOADT, LOADDT and SRU), the 1994 SDRIF was revised by decree in 2005, after it had been criticised as a kind of “super POS” that slowed down development rather than encouraging it. Regional workshops were then organised to bring the State into dialogue with local authorities and major public

⁴ Districts are a past form of intermunicipal bodies.

institutions in the Paris region. On the basis of a consolidated draft SDRIF, the public consultation was launched at the end of 2007. However, following the legislative changes introduced by the Greater Paris Act (June 2010) and the Grenelle I and II Acts (July 2010), the "Conseil d'État" issued a negative opinion. Planning objectives, including regional objectives, had changed: the project is not part of sustainable development, to which France had committed itself in Rio in 1992, and the Greater Paris project required a rethink of planning scales.

After several unsuccessful attempts a new revision process was launched in 2011, starting with a consultation process known as the "Regional Territorial Conference". In 2012, the Ile-de-France Regional Council adopted the update of the SDRIF, entitled "*Objectif: Ile-de-France 2030*". As a preamble, the Council drew up a new version of the "Regional Vision", which was presented as "the social project that the Region wishes to build with all its partners, in the near future (tomorrow) and in the distant future (2030)". After receiving the opinions of the State, departmental councils, consular chambers, etc., and a public consultation, the project was adopted in autumn 2013 and approved by the Council of State in December 2013.

Finally, the 7th document in the corpus is the "SCoT Métropolitain" (2019). In the Ile-de-France region, the planning documents architecture was radically overhauled with the creation of the "Métropole du Grand Paris". It is now structured around the SDRIF, the "SCoT Métropolitain" and several intercommunal land-use regulatory plans called "PLU". From a legal point of view, the SDRIF is binding on the SCoT-M, which must be compatible with it, but in practice the revision of the SDRIF in 2013 has been delayed by the current preparation of the SCoT-M. Although the boundaries are different, the planning issues overlap. In order to be able to cover the end of the 2010s, we have considered this plan⁵.

Over these 80 years, these documents have changed form, from development plans to master plans, and have had different types of speakers. What they all have in common, however, is that they present, each in its own way, the broad development guidelines for a more or less distant future (5, 10 or 15 years, depending on the period), based on a diagnosis. Despite their differences, they have a number of similarities (Pincemin, 2012) and their "polyphony" (Perrin, 2004) can be seen as a means of collective representation.

2.2. Textometric reading

We used textometry for analysis the corpus, with the help of TXM software. The advantage of this software is that it can be used to describe and compare the formal characteristics of words and/or sentence segments and to model diachronic variations within the different partitions of the corpus. The semantic meaning of a theme then emerges from the confrontation between, on the one hand, global views derived from statistical processing (i), and, on the other hand, consultation of local contexts of enunciation, at a finer scale (ii). By combining quantitative and qualitative processing in this way, this method enables the identification of new information that would otherwise be inaccessible to the human eye (Rastier, 2011, p. 13).

Our work is based on this method in order to gain insight into the evolution of planning documents in the Ile-de-France region through a back-and-forth movement between the texts themselves and statistical data. To do this, we'll begin by observing the construction of discourse through the study of sentence components to better understand how writing has evolved in these documents over time. We will then look at their lexicon, in particular pronouns, which show

⁵ We have not been able to integrate the SDRIF-E, which is currently being approved.

whether or not a speaker or writer is in charge of the discourse, as well as verbs (all tenses and modes) and common nouns, both of which provide information on the content and description of the elements highlighted in each document.

3. Results

To determine a possible chronological evolution in the discourse of plans, we have partitioned our working corpus into 7 parts (table 1), each corresponding to an urban planning document and, when applicable, its revisions.

Table 1: The corpus of planning documents from 1919 to 2019 divided into 7 groups

| Corpus partition | Number of words |
|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| PARP and revisions 1950 and 1956 | 27 844 |
| PADOG 1960 | 57 349 |
| SDAURP 1965 | 84 000 |
| SDAU 1976 | 63 464 |
| SDRIF 1994 | 84 638 |
| SDRIF 2013 | 61 887 |
| SCoT-M 2019 | 103 232 |

The volume of these texts can fluctuate from one to four times their size, but they are still of a comparable scale, which makes the use of textometry possible. Furthermore, the statistical tools we use take this discrepancy into consideration, as they are based on the relative share of a given graphic form/term category in each document.

3.1 A discourse that becomes increasingly nominal

The analysis by grammatical categories enables us to study the construction of the discourse and avoid a reading guided only by circumstances and the lexicon. Indeed, the lexicon is dependent on current events and the circumstances of a particular period. It carries information – and we'll look at this later – but it is also the product of an era and its events.

So, to begin with, we observed the distribution of the various grammatical categories that make up discourse, according to the documents (i.e. plans) considered. CFA can be used to visualize a collection of numerical data linked to lexical units, generally organized in double-entry tables (also named contingency tables). These tables present words or categories of terms in rows and external categorization modalities in columns, such as year, author, title, category, etc. The CFA then provides a synthetic representation of the vocabulary distribution.

In a CFA, the proximity of a row point to a column point means that there is "an attraction between that row and that column" (Cibois, 2007, p. 28)⁶. Furthermore, "the closer a point is to

⁶ All quotations translated by us.

the center, the weaker its attractions or oppositions. When a point is strictly at the center, this means that it is in a situation of independence with all the other modalities" (*ibid.*: 34).

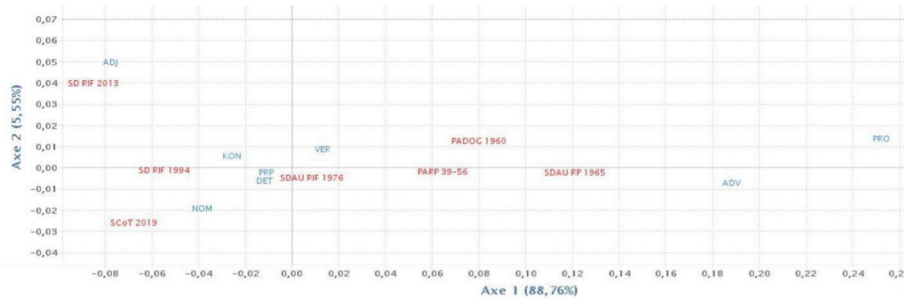


Figure 1: Distribution of grammatical discourse categories by documents (CFA)

We can observe a diachronic evolution in the construction of sentences in urban planning documents, dividing the corpus into two parts (see Figure 1) : on the right of the graph, the years 1939 to 1965 (PARP and its revisions, PADOG and SDAURP) present a discourse with a verbal consistency as evidenced by the presence of verbs (“VER” on the CFA), adverbs (“ADV”) and pronouns (“PRO”), while the years 1994 to 2019 (the two SDRIFs and the SCoT) present a more nominal discourse with an over-representation of nouns (“NOM”), determiners (“DET”), adjectives (“ADJ”), prepositions (“PRP”) and conjunctions (“KON”). The year 1976 (with the SDAURIF plan) stands out as a pivotal year, on the ordinate axis.

The shift from verbal to nominal discourse is typical of the evolution of institutional discourse (Krieg-Planque, 2012). Nominalization is an argumentative tool, presenting the relationship between two terms (noun + noun complement) as necessarily existing. In other words, it imposes a pre-construct, referring to an "object of the world already there, pre-existing the discourse" (Sitri, 1996), and has the "effect of erasing the agent, verbal aspect and modality of the previous statement" (*ibid.*). This evolution of urban planning discourse thus demonstrates a desire for enunciative erasure (Rabatel, 2004): the discourse is disembodied and no longer carried by a defined speaker or group of speakers.

3.2 A discourse that gradually avoids clear expression of the speaker's identity

This observation is confirmed by the use of subject personal pronouns in the corpus:



Figure 2: CFA of the distribution of personal pronouns by corpus documents

Chronologically, the pronouns *je* and *on* (*you/one* or *we/they/people*) attract the first part of the corpus (1939-1976) to the left-hand side of the graph, while the two SDRIFs (1994 and 2013) are polarized by the pronouns *il*, *Elle*, *Elles* and *Ils* (*he*, *she* and *they*) (see Figure 2).

Although axis 2 contributes less to understanding the distribution of pronouns within the CFA, the particular case of the 2019 SCoT leads us to return to the text to observe the uses of the pronoun *nous* (*we*). Thus, the examples below show that the use of *nous* in this part of the corpus does not reflect an enunciative assumption of responsibility but presents a general value corresponding to the population of the territory concerned:

‘We are all metropolitans, we live at the pace and scale of the Metropolis, we travel through it every day, we live here, work and study there, we take part in cultural or sporting activities elsewhere, and we use all kinds of means of transport to come and go.’⁷

‘No matter where **we** are in the metropolis, being able to find a job, suitable housing, but also the services, shops and facilities **we** need on a daily basis should be a matter of course.’⁸

⁷ The authors' translation for the following paragraph : "**Nous** sommes tous métropolitains, **nous** vivons au rythme et à l'échelle de la Métropole, **nous** la parcourons chaque jour, **nous** habitons ici, travaillons et étudions là-bas, **nous** pratiquons des activités culturelles ou sportives ailleurs et **nous** utilisons pour cela toutes sortes de moyens de transport pour aller et venir."

⁸ The authors' translation for : "Quel que soit le lieu où nous sommes dans la métropole, pouvoir trouver un emploi, un logement adapté, mais aussi les services, les commerces, les équipements dont nous avons besoin au quotidien doit relever de l'évidence."

The gradual elimination of 'I' variants, offset by the emergence of more frequent uses of 'we' and 'he/she/it', marks a transition towards: (1) more frequent use of passive voice, as well as (2) more descriptive sentences and (3) pronouns that allow first-person speech without precisely defining the speaker ('we' and related written forms). This last feature is characteristic of institutional discourse, which endeavors to formulate a discourse 'emanating from a collective entity presented as indivisible while being the product of negotiation among various points of view'

3.3 Prescription and rule-setting gradually fade away

To observe this diachronic evolution in greater detail, we have analyzed the use of verbs and common nouns in the corpus.

With regard to verbs, whose lemmas⁹ we have observed at least ten times in the corpus - in order to avoid hapax¹⁰ that could distort the results - the calculation of specificities¹¹ shows an opposition between the PARP, the PADOG and the SDAU RP, i.e., the oldest documents on the one hand, and the SD RIF and the SCoT on the other. The 1976 SDAU RIF again finds itself in an in-between position, close to neutrality. Thus, between 1939 and 1965, we see a discourse with several aspects:

- a cognitive dimension, with verbs such as *foresee, understand, interest, envisage, suppose, justify* or *predict*;
- a discursive dimension, with *ask, detail, decline, indicate, tell, propose, accuse, reveal, etc.*;
- a normative dimension, with *prohibit, authorize, grant, impose, admit, submit, execute, must, should, may, order*.

The following extract illustrates the highly prescriptive and normative form of the plans in the first half of the corpus.

'These easements prohibit building or exceeding a certain height, and **forbid** enclosing properties with anything other than hedges or clear fences that do not obstruct views.' (PARP, 1939, Programme général, chapitre 5)¹²

In the plans for the years 1994–2019, three other dimensions predominate:

- a dimension of action, with the overuse of verbs such as *structure, mesh, protect, undertake, house, irrigate, decongest, artificialize, feed, count, produce* or *manage*;

⁹ A lemma is the canonical form, or the dictionary form, of a set of word forms. For verbs, the lemma corresponds to the infinitive form. For nouns (and, in French, adjectives), it's the masculine singular form.

¹⁰ A hapax is a word that occurs only once in a corpus.

¹¹ The calculation of specificities allows us to observe the distribution of the forms studied in the different parts of the corpus. Specificity is positive when these forms are overused (their frequency is higher than the expected theoretical frequency) and negative when they are underused (their frequency is lower than the expected theoretical frequency) (Leblanc, 2005: 66).

¹² Original excerpt : « Ces servitudes interdiront de bâtir ou de dépasser une certaine hauteur de construction et défendront de clore les propriétés autrement que par des haies ou des clôtures à claire voie ne masquant pas la vue. »

- a dimension of support and “working together”: *welcome, involve, support, protect, watch over, associate, caution, accompany, participate, link, connect, contribute or mobilize*;
- a more political dimension, involving the enhancement of what has already been done and the continuity of what is planned: *improve, enhance, consolidate, pursue, grow, strengthen, perpetuate, renew, maintain, promote, increase, optimize, promote, evolve, adapt, initiate, etc.*

The following extract is typical of this shift towards a more partnership-based, less prescriptive/injunctive approach to formulating future actions.

‘The undeveloped land located in Tremblay-en-France, to the south of the airport, is naturally destined to host new world-class activities. It is important that they be developed through a selective location policy, involving the State and local authorities and avoiding premature waste of this regionally important land asset.’ (SDRIF, 1994, Annexe : Le Schéma Directeur en huit départements)¹³

The chronological opposition between the two "halves" of the corpus thus seems to reside in the way planning is approached: on the one hand, before 1976, planning was approached from the angle of **prescription and rule-setting**; on the other hand, after 1976, it is a question of **valuing action** - and in particular joint action - and what is **achieved** by the institution.

3.4 Fewer references to objects and concrete items, offset by more themes covered

If we take a closer look at the common nouns overrepresented in the various documents, the same chronological pattern emerges. In the first part of the corpus, we find an overrepresentation of numerical or accounting data (*dwelling, a billion, width, height, m³, year, worker, surplus, purchase, kilometer, inhabitant, building, etc.*), but also very concrete elements linked to the territory and its issues (*area, municipality, road, development, grouping, hygiene, sewer, evacuation, junk, recycling, core, conurbation, location, aerodrome, industry, center, axis, city, leisure, highway, shore, valley, intra-muros, vehicle, poverty, employment, etc.*). Finally, the notion of rule or norm is also over-represented (*article, non aedificandi, property, program, proposal, government, order*).

The second half of the corpus also presents elements that make up the challenges of regional planning, but these are no longer the same: *university, IUT, heatwave, protection, drought, biodiversity, health, energy, crisis, inequality, mobility, cycling, precariousness, school, climate, green, consumption...* The interests and objectives have therefore shifted towards education on the one hand, and the environment on the other.

A number of factors suggest that a major shift in Ile-de-France regional planning discourse took place between 1965 and 1976. This division into two major halves allows us to identify specific lexical and stylistic features (see Table 2).

| Overrepresentation of ... | First half of the corpus (1939-1976) | Second half of the corpus (1976-2019) |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|

¹³ Original excerpt : Les terrains non urbanisés situés sur Tremblay-en-France, au sud de l'aéroport, sont naturellement destinés à accueillir de nouvelles activités de niveau international. Il importe qu'ils soient valorisés par une politique sélective d'implantations, associant l'État et les collectivités territoriales et évitant de gaspiller prématurément ce patrimoine foncier d'enjeu régional.

| ... types of sentences | Verbal sentences | Nominal sentences |
|------------------------|---|---|
| ... pronouns | 'Je' | 'Il'/'elle' + 'nous' |
| ... nouns | Prescriptive and normative assertions Numerical data, norms, concrete elements | Valuation of partnership action and of already achieved results New topics (higher education, environment) |

Table 2: summarized results of regional plans discourse analysis

Apart from the addition of new topics, which seems obvious given the evolving legal framework, the rest of the features indicate a discourse that is increasingly approaching the institutional genre, moving away from more injunctive and regulatory forms. These results indicate that, over the long term, regional planning documents, particularly those relating to the Ile-de-France urban region, are gradually losing their normative substance.

4. Discussion

We assumed two specific hypotheses at the beginning of this paper. First, we assumed that (a) the emergence of vagueness in planning prose could be linked with the emergence of a neo-liberal model of urban planning. However, the results do not seem to support this assumption, as the major change in terms of discourse occurred chronologically earlier, at the end of the 1960s. In the case of the Ile-de-France region, this involved a general overhaul of the planning system, giving a new role to regional planning.

4.1 The changing role of regional planning

The evolution of regional planning discourse in region Ile-de-France seems to chronologically follow the establishment, in France, of a 'hierarchy of standards' in spatial planning through the LOF-Act (1967). This law introduced a new national planning system where two main plans played a central role: (1) the POS¹⁴ (a regulatory urban planning plan) at the municipal level which defined the land-use permissions and prohibitions at the plot scale, and (2) the SD¹⁵, strategic plan made up at the built-up area level.

In 1967, this new division of institutional competences therefore define the municipal level as the scale for town planning rules, leaving a more strategic and guiding role for higher order documents, such as the regional planning documents analysed in this paper.

4.2 Writing the rule: from command to recommendation

At the beginning of the paper we also formulated (b) the idea according to which urban planning, being linked to the genre of institutional discourse, would always have been (at least partly) vague. This second hypothesis also seems rather false. Indeed, the first part of our corpus (1939-1976) shows a planning discourse much closer to legal and political genres than to institutional one.

¹⁴ 'Plan d'occupation des Sols'

¹⁵ 'Schéma Directeur'

As we have seen in our analysis, the rule of law in urban planning describes a norm that "consists in modalising actions by means of obligations, authorisations or prohibitions" (Alland and Rials, 2003, p. 1080)¹⁶. It should be seen as a set of explicit reference models for action. While obligations, permissions or prohibitions are actions that are at the core of urban planning norms, their development has a social purpose (Weber, 2019). The main objective is to use institutional rules to coordinate the decisions of decentralised actors operating at the local level. Development plans and master plans can therefore be seen as texts that act as 'operators mediating regulatory relations' (Smith, 2018, p. 24). The specificity of this regulation is that it is carried out primarily through texts, in which words encode both a reading of the current state of the city and the expectations of the state with regard to its development (Chesneau, 2021). It is through this agentivity of words that the link between institutions and everyday urban planning practices is established and that negotiations can take place in the event of disagreement (Lascoumes, 1990).

Our results seem to show that the prescriptive nature of the rules set out in them gradually fades over time, and today they are little more than flexible or vague guidelines. This observation leads us to a better understanding of the way the norm is constructed in these different texts by focusing on their characteristics that emerge from our analysis. In our case, spatial planning plays the role of a flexible and strategic framework rather than a document that "says what will be" and would be prescriptive for the lower institutional levels.

An analysis of the plans shows that before 1976, norms were commanding, mandatory and directive in nature - in particular by setting out technical and numerical standards - and aimed to standardise behaviour by resorting to prohibition. After this date, norms evolved towards recommendations. Its aim is to reconcile diverse and even divergent interests. It therefore becomes more conciliatory, flexible and permissive. In a spirit of accommodation, its function is less to achieve quantitative objectives than to recognise the possibility of certain hitherto unacquired rights to be asserted or supported. This is expressed, for example, as follows:

"**Recognise** a certain number of establishments, currently classified as short-stay, for their actual medium-stay activity, particularly geriatric" (SDRIF 94)¹⁷

"Each area of the Île-de-France region will be **recognised** in the same way as the major centres, as parts of the city that need to be developed. Because real centralities, points of concentration of greater urban intensity, will have been created, the agricultural, wooded or natural areas of the Île-de-France's peri-urban or rural zones can be preserved. This spatial organisation will offer different ways of living in response to the diverse needs of Île-de-France residents" (SDRIF 2013)."¹⁸

¹⁶ Original quote : « consiste à modaliser des actions par l'obligation, la permission ou l'interdiction »

¹⁷ Original excerpt : « **Reconnaître** à un certain nombre d'établissements, actuellement classés en court séjour, leur activité réelle de moyen séjour, notamment gériatrique »

¹⁸ Original excerpt : « Chaque territoire de l'Île-de-France sera **reconnu** au même titre que les grandes polarités comme des morceaux de ville à aménager. Parce que de véritables centralités, points de concentration de plus grande intensité urbaine, auront été créées, les espaces agricoles, boisés ou naturels des zones périurbaines ou rurales de l'Île-de-France pourront être préservés. Cette organisation spatiale offrira des façons différentes de vivre en réponse aux besoins divers des Franciliens »

"Forest identified and preserved under the Forestry Code for its ecological, heritage and/or cultural characteristics. This **recognition** is evidenced by a classification and by strong protection that prohibits any change in land use."¹⁹ (SCoT-M 2019)

The shift that takes place over time shows that the norm is not removed from urban planning documents over the decades, but that it is expressed differently, by erasing pronounced linguistic markers, opening the way to another way of constructing the relationship between urban planning and law.

This transformation took place between 1965 and 1976, at a time when the territorial basis of town planning law was completely changed by the "Loi d'orientation foncière" (LOF). From a legal point of view, this transition from plans to master plans corresponded to the establishment of a hierarchy of rules that was strengthened at the top and extended at the bottom. At the top, the master plan must comply with general rules that apply to the whole of the national territory. These rules are imposed by the "Code de l'urbanisme", which in 1973 got rid of the provisions concerning building and housing contained in the first "Code de l'urbanisme et de l'habitation" of 1954. Downwards, at the municipal level, land use rules were henceforth set by land use plans (POS). This means that each municipality must define the precise rights attached to each plot of land within its territory, in accordance with the urban policy guidelines set out in the master plan. The corollary of this transfer of powers is that there is no longer any need for the master plan to include a detailed description of the organisation of the urban fabric of each municipality in the region, specifying the purpose of the buildings, the density, the location of reserved areas, etc. It is up to the local authorities to define the rights attached to each plot of land. Ultimately, it is up to the building permit officer to interpret the application of the main principles of urban policy in minute detail.

4.3 Injunctive vagueness or worded texts?

As can be seen, the organisation of the principles of planning law follows an easy-to-understand logic: at the top of the hierarchy are the most general rules and at the bottom the most contingent. The consequence of this organisation is that no text is autonomous; it forms part of a linear structure which, according to François Ost and Michel Van de Kerchove, has become circular over time, based on a tangled hierarchy made up of "strange loops" (1987, p. 183–253). The result is that the higher up in the hierarchy of norms the planning rules are, the less detailed they are. What we have called vagueness could be interpreted as a mark of maturity of planning law, where the norm is not systematically expressed in prescriptive terms.

Paradoxically, this essentially qualitative approach to the norm (i.e. vague language) is nevertheless legally prescriptive. The master plans are binding on the schéma de cohérence territoriale (Scot), the plan local d'urbanisme (PLU), the plan de déplacements urbains (PDU) of the Île-de-France region and the plan métropolitain de l'habitat et de l'hébergement (PMHH), while, as we have pointed out, leaving local authorities a margin of interpretation. If this gradual nominalisation of these texts does not contradict their mandatory nature, it might be because of the principle of compatibility, which requires that the lower rule does not contradict the higher rule. In reality, this legality is assessed in the light of the planning principles and objectives defined in a very comprehensive manner, including the "regulatory" and "cartographic" guidelines that make up the prescriptive provisions of the SDRIF. The master plans can

¹⁹ Original excerpt : « Forêt identifiée et préservée au titre du Code forestier pour ses caractéristiques écologiques, patrimoniales et/ou culturelles. Cette **reconnaissance** est actée par un classement et par une protection forte qui interdit notamment tout changement d'affectation du sol. »

therefore be seen as 'outsourcing' the legal content of the planning guidelines to the municipalities (Sulpice, 2023), as shown by the litigation on this issue (JurisClasseur Collectivités territoriales, 2021).

Although planning law has become increasingly complex over the years, it is still based on the need to control land use in order to better control the dynamics of urban growth in a region, the forecast and planning of housing quantity, and (3) the distribution of economic and other activities over the considered area. Since the Grenelle I and II Acts, this framework has also been directly linked to ecological transition policies, such as land-use planning to reduce land consumption (zero net artificialisation by 2050) and transport needs, or to preserve biodiversity. All of these objectives require the use of quantified measures to reduce (CO₂, hectares of built up area, etc.) or increase (biodiversity, energy savings, etc.), just as the PARP or the SDAU 1965 required the most accurate quantification of building needs at the time.

The hierarchy of norms we have described has undoubtedly had the effect of diluting the current imperatives of ecological transition. As Frédéric Rolin points out, 'the legal cascade effect between the different levels of implementation of the national energy transition policy means that it is simply ineffective in imposing precise targets on urban planning documents'. He adds: "We know that for several decades the Conseil d'État has pursued a policy of relaxing [the relationship of compatibility] between two norms" (Rolin, 2021), a principle that no longer guarantees the prescriptive nature of the norm as such.

5. Conclusion

This textometric study of regional planning documents in the Ile-de-France region between 1939 and 2019 reveals a pivotal moment in their evolution. This change, which took place in the 1960s-1970s, corresponds in fact to the implementation of the LOF, enacted in 1967, which established a comprehensive system of planning documents in France, and imposed the strategical coordination at the inter-municipal level.

The corpus shows a shift from verbal to nominal discourse, as evidenced by the distribution of the grammatical categories that make up discourse, and the gradual erasure of the enunciative endorsement in the documents. We move from a discourse that gives pride of place to the pronoun "I" to one that gives more space to pronouns characterizing the use of the passive, description and vagueness concerning the speaker.

Observation of the lexicon overrepresented in the corpus shows that the pre-LOF period presents, (1) a normative dimension, in the sense that the norm is clearly expressed by precise terms (prohibit, authorize, etc.) together with (2) a more concrete aspect, with lexis linked to measurement, quantities and precise locations.

In the later period, both the action carried out and planned are highlighted and valorized, as well as the joint work involved by the diversity of actors.

All of these results invite us to think that the use of vagueness in the planning prose is primarily linked - in the French case - to the reshaping of the planning system which took place at the end of the 1960s. This seems to better explain chronologically, the emergence of such a discourse register, much better than hypotheses of urban neo-liberalism or of a planning discourse that would have always been vague.

In terms of perspectives, these results invite us to analyze the presence and evolution of vague discourses in other urban and national contexts. To do so, our results show the importance of considering (when conducting diachronic analyses) a set of planning documents, covering various scales. This would make it possible to track the shifts of certain parts of the document (in our case, the most normative, concrete and precise aspects towards the lower level). With this in mind, we follow recent developments reclaiming for analyses of “networks of plans” (Hersperger et al., 2024).

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