The Role of Colloquial French in Communication and Implications for Language Instruction

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AMERICAN STUDENTS and teachers who go to France often experience serious comprehension problems when they are confronted with the informal, everyday use of the language. The problem can be illustrated by the following examples of conversational speech.

J(e) (ne) pas c(e) qu'i(ls) font. / *Sepaskifõ*/
Et nous, on fait quoi, c(e) soir?
/ enuõfekwasswar/
C'est pas c(el)ui-la qu'i(l) m(e) faut.
sepasqilakimfo/
J(e) (n)ai pas assez d(e) fric. / ʒepaasedfrik/
T(u) aurais pas cent balles à m(e) prêter. /
tɔrɛpasãbalamprete/

In short, the language they hear is very different from the one they learned in the classroom. It is colloquial, everyday, conversational French. Even the best students, if they have not had any prior exposure to it, find themselves baffled by it. Yet, little in their training has ever prepared them to understand colloquial French or even to be aware of its existence and function in the total socio-linguistic spectrum.

Comprehension of Colloquial French versus Standard French

Countless are the testimonies of such frustrating experiences, both from students and from language educators, and they provide a strong indication that a problem does indeed exist. But how serious is it? To what extent is listening comprehension impaired when students are confronted with the colloquial use of French as opposed to its formal use? In order to investigate this problem, the writer conducted a study involving 128 prospective French teachers—i.e., French majors, usually in their senior year and who were attending methods classes—from seven major universities.[1] Criterion measures included 1) a questionnaire, 2) a listening comprehension test of colloquial French and 3) a listening comprehension test of standard, formal French. The two tests contained the same number of items and the same semantic or informational content in each item. The only difference was that in Test 1 the message was expressed in colloquial French and Test 2 used standard or even rather formal French.

The content of the test reflected the types of significant phonological, syntactic, and semantic features of colloquial French that have been identified by various researchers. A formal assessment of the validity of each item was established by consultation with 16 native

[1] The universities involved were Columbia, Florida State, Purdue, Ohio State, Utah State, and the University of Massachusetts.

speakers[2] who were asked to indicate how typical of everyday, informal French they considered each utterance. Only items that obtained a rating of 4 or above on a 1 to 5 scale were retained, and the mean validity for the resulting test was 4.83. Additionally, the test was administered to a group of native speakers who all obtained a perfect score, thereby confirming its validity.

A statement and rejoinder or question and answer multiple choice format was selected. The students were provided with a test copy on which the choices were written. To further insure that the difficulty resided in the stem rather than in the choices, the rejoinders were all written within the *français fondamental*. An item analysis of the test yielded a reliability of 0.909 using the Kuder Richardson 20. The reliability for the control test of standard French was 0.926. The two tests were administered a week apart.

Results show that the scores obtained on the colloquial test ($\bar{x}$ 31.59, s.d. 12.82, median 30. out of a possible total score of 80) were much lower than those obtained on the test of standard formal French ($\bar{x}$ 62.13; s.d. 11.28, median 67). The mean difference of 30.54 is significant at .001 level. The results, therefore, reveal a very low comprehension level of colloquial French and a huge discrepancy between students' comprehension of colloquial French and of formal French.

A separate computation of test scores for students who had spent 3 months or more in a French speaking country yielded a mean score of 44.58 on the colloquial test as opposed to 26.44 for those who had not. On the test of formal French the mean scores were respectively 69.19 for those who had stayed in France and 60.14 for those who had not. The substantial difference on the test of colloquial French as well as the much smaller difference on the test of formal French suggests that there is a lack of exposure to colloquial French in regular college language training, and that practically the only way students ever get that exposure is by living in France where colloquial French is naturally used in everyday social interaction. Residence abroad, therefore, seems to be especially valuable in providing a unique opportunity for exposure to the informal language. This is further corroborated by a correlation of r = 0.608 (significant at the 0.001 level) between scores on the colloquial test and amount of time spent in France, the only other significant correlation being with the number of courses taken from native speakers ($r = 0.475$). (The same correlations with scores obtained on the test of standard French were only r = 0.254 and r = 0.216 respectively.) There was no significant correlation between test scores and number of years of college French.

In order to find out which aspects of colloquial French presented greater comprehension problems to American students, the 80 items of the test were subdivided into subtests, each focusing on a particular linguistic aspect, and the scores on the different subtests were compared. Subtest A, which focused only on phonological aspects, yielded the highest percentage mean score ($\bar{x}$ 51.62). The next highest mean score ($\bar{x}$ 49.07) was obtained on Subtest E, which combined all aspects but presented them in the context of two short conversations. Subtest B, which focused on syntactic aspects, yielded a mean score of 42.70. Subtest C, containing only lexical and semantic aspects, yielded a still lower score ($\bar{x}$ 32.60). The lowest score was obtained on Subtest D, which combined all linguistic aspects of colloquial French ($\bar{x}$ 32.52). A similar comparison of the relative difficulty of the subtests of the control test (standard French) showed very little difference from one subtest to the next, thereby confirming that the difficulty differential in the colloquial test resided in the content of the subtests rather than in their format. These results show that comprehension was most seriously impaired when all linguistic aspects of colloquial French were combined, as normally happens in spontaneous speech. They also reveal that the single most difficult aspect of colloquial French is its lexicon.

Another incidental finding was a general lack of awareness of the relationship between speech styles and social situations. One of the conversations used in the colloquial test took place between two bus drivers. That conversation was also transposed into standard formal French for the control test. The juxtaposition of a formal speech style and the type of characters and situation involved was immediately perceived as highly comical by the native speakers who heard

[2] These native speakers were all college educated and several were college professors.

it, whereas most American students failed to notice this incongruity.

It is evident from these data that American students and future teachers have only a very minimal understanding of colloquial French and awareness of the nature, function, and range of appropriateness of the various speech registers. It is equally evident that their college language training fails to prepare them to understand French as it is spoken by French people in the very type of informal, spontaneous interaction which students most want to share, which cultural anthropologists identify as the most genuine expression of a culture and which most linguists equate with the "real," live language of the people.

Resources and Strategies for Improving Listening Comprehension of Colloquial French

What can be done to remedy this situation? The solution will involve several interrelated steps: 1) placing greater emphasis on listening comprehension; 2) including in the materials used for listening comprehension practice a generous amount of authentic colloquial French; 3) developing students' awareness of the role and socio-cultural parameters of the various speech styles; 4) helping students to identify and interpret the significant features of colloquial French and their relationship to traditional syntax and phonology; and 5) integrating these activities into all levels and types of French language and culture study.

The processes and the different steps involved in listening comprehension—based on the available psycholinguistic information—have been analyzed excellently by Wilga Rivers (1975). Most of her analysis applies to the comprehension of colloquial French as well as of standard French. Quinn (1975) also addressed the subject and cautiously reminded us that we know very little about the actual mental processes of speech perception, except that it is an active process of decision making which operates at the phonological, lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels. Such decisions, however, do not proceed in a linear fashion from sounds to words to sentences, but are interrelated, our expectations, perceptions and decisions on any of these levels influencing the decisions we make on the other levels. It should be added that our decisions are based on our prior knowledge and expectations concerning not only the language itself but also the socio cultural context, the topic discussed, the personalities of the speakers, and the meaning of paralinguistic cues (Rivers, 1975). This is of particular relevance to the comprehension of colloquial French, where sound sequences, word order, and meaning often differ significantly from standard French, which forms the basis for students' expectations and where their familiarity with the socio-cultural context is limited.

In addition to stressing the active decision making aspect of listening comprehension, Rivers and Quinn have emphasized.

1) the necessity of giving students ample practice in listening comprehension and of providing them with what Quinn terms a rich linguistic environment;
2) the importance of structuring the listening activity so as to, a) provide students with the prior knowledge, expectations, and motivation that will maximize comprehension, b) relate it to specific language or non-language tasks which provide a goal for the activity as well as feedback to the student, and c) give students practice in the identification and interpretation of specific linguistic and non-linguistic cues;
3) the importance of presenting them with authentic speech as soon as possible. This is important, not only because authentic speech is the real, natural language which we ultimately want our students to understand, but also because it differs significantly from the contrived speech of pedagogical materials. If students are familiar only with formal or contrived speech, their linguistic expectations will be based on their knowledge of formal French and will be of limited help when they are in the presence of authentic informal speech.

Authentic speech need not be exclusively in formal or colloquial speech. It can indeed cover the whole gamut of speech styles, as the examples presented by Rivers and Quinn suggest, from radio broadcasts to informal street interviews. But authentic speech implies informal and even colloquial speech, if one refers to the casual interaction between people which prob

ably constitutes the largest amount of verbal exchange taking place in a given culture. Therefore, whether it is explicitly stated as in Rivers, or implicitly as in Quinn, it must be inferred that both authors think that while it is important to cover the whole range of speech styles, a large share of listening comprehension practice should be devoted to informal, colloquial French.

What kind of authentic informal speech documents can the average American teacher have access to? Many of the following suggestions have already been made by Rivers, Quinn, and other authors:

1) Record conversations with or between French visitors to your school or to your city.
2) Ask French schools or French correspondents to prepare tapes of free, unedited discussions on topics of common interest.
3) Make recordings from short wave radios of panel discussions, interviews, and live reporting in France and in Canada. If you do not have the facilities available you may request such materials from the French Cultural Services or you may try writing directly to the radio stations (see Nelson and Wood's *Radio in Foreign Language Class* for more specific information).
4) The journal *Le Français dans le monde* has several soft records of street interviews which can easily be copied on tape.
5) Ask French teachers with whom you correspond to record radio or television programs for you and offer to do the same for them.
6) When you visit France, take a portable tape recorder and record conversations unobtrusively in the kind of setting or on the type of subjects that are usually presented in textbooks (shopping, reactions to current events, discussing weekend projects, eating out in a restaurant, etc.).
7) Encourage your students to see French films, especially those where the language is not stilted and formal, and to record segments of the conversations for further in-depth work.
8) Invite several native speakers who know one another well and ask their permission to discreetly tape their conversation. They may be slightly intimidated at first – and consequently more formal – but they will soon relax and be natural. You may also intervene to direct the conversation toward the topics that you know your students would be interested in.
9) Some commercially prepared materials already exist. Pimsleur's *Le Pont sonore* acknowledges the difference between the major speech styles. *familier* (colloquial), *standard*, and *soigné* (formal), and it provides listening activities that exemplify those differences. The section on colloquial French is composed of short sentences that reflect the main phonetic changes that occur in fast informal speech. However, it does not take any account of false starts, hesitation pauses, and fill-in words. It also limits itself to the phonetic aspect of colloquial French, on the premise that comprehension problems due to phonetic variations are most evident in colloquial French. Phonetic difficulties, however, are by no means the only type of difficulty presented by colloquial French, nor probably the most important one, as the writer's own research indicates.

There are also several detective stories prepared and recorded by the British Broadcasting Corporation which are available from the E.M.C. Corporation (*Suivez la Piste, Aérodrame, Vient de paraître*, etc.). The recordings are technically excellent and they use simple French, especially in terms of syntax. At the same time, they retain the simplicity, colorfulness, and authenticity of informal speech. They are also fun and interesting to listen to and they illustrate many situations of everyday life, such as helping someone use a public telephone, ordering drinks in a café, inquiring about a hotel room, or discussing topics of current interest. The accompanying textbooks provide complete tape scripts, some vocabulary help, some pattern drills, and right or wrong comprehension checks. If teachers wish to stress listening comprehension, however, they may prefer not to let students use the books and to develop supplementary materials of their own instead. For instance, at The Ohio State University we have prepared a self-paced student manual of *Suivez la Piste* (Bonin,

1974) which includes, a) some information about the setting and the protagonists for each episode, b) a more extensive vocabulary list than the one provided in the textbook, c) some cloze procedure listening activities, d) a self-check for the right or wrong questions recorded on tape, and e) a set of questions about each episode. In this way, teachers may let students work completely on their own, check their work periodically in their workbooks, or use each episode and set of questions as a departure point for class discussion, skits, story completion, etc.

Materials such as those described above can be used with equal success in different types of classes. In conversation classes they can provide a point of departure for discussion by presenting ideas and attitudes that students can react to. Ideally, both to facilitate comprehension and to sensitize students to speech styles, the same topic could be dealt with on several levels. For instance, one could start with a formal editorial on the death penalty, then listen to a radio panel discussion on the same topic, then to a recording of street interviews or an informal discussion among friends. In a culture and civilization class, they can serve as illustrations of the differences and similarities in cultural patterns. Students may also be asked what socio-cultural inferences they can make about the relationship of the speakers, their mode of interaction, their cultural assumptions, their value system, and their reactions. In a pronunciation class, constant comparison should be made between careful, formal diction and informal speech, and the resulting sound changes, so that students will become aware of speech styles and be able to understand natural informal speech. In grammar classes, likewise, students should be shown what happens to traditional syntax in casual speech. Finally, these documents can even be used in a literature class, in the form of interviews with literary figures or actors, but also in the form of recordings of plays or passages from novels where the colloquial style is used.

The strategies that can be used to develop listening comprehension of colloquial French are much the same as those suggested for comprehension of standard French. Many of the following have already been suggested by various authors. They can be subdivided into preparation to listening and into post listening activities, all of which tend to give students a purpose for listening, help in processing the sound stream and help in focusing their attention on the relevant elements.

Prior to listening to the recording the teacher may want to do one or more of the following:

1) give an introduction to its theme;
2) give a summary of its content;
3) extract basic sentences to be heard and analyzed before listening to the whole passage;
4) provide students with a list of colloquial vocabulary words and their standard French equivalents;
5) give students some words in standard French and ask them if they can figure out from the context what their colloquial counterparts are;
6) give students a standard French version of the conversation and ask them to indicate 1) which words were used in place of certain standard words, 2) which differences they noticed in the syntactic structure, and 3) which differences they noticed in the sound sequences;
7) ask them to identify the cultural differences that the conversation illustrates;
8) ask them to listen for specific information focusing on the "who, where, when, and how," on the relationship of the speakers or on their feelings toward one another;
9) give them, before listening, the list of questions that they will be asked to answer after listening to the passage;
10) give students all the necessary information about what is to be said in each repartie of the exchange, have them compose the dialogue in standard French, then have them compare it to the real, colloquial conversation.

While they are listening, students may be asked to:

1) fill in missing words in a written script;
2) take dictation;
3) give an approximate transcription of what was said;
4) rephrase each response in standard French with the help of systematic questioning from the teacher and then analyze the differences.

After listening to the audio document, students may be asked to:

1) write a summary in standard French of the main points of the conversation;
2) answer right or wrong, multiple-choice or content questions relating to the content of the passage;
3) identify the main ideas that were expressed and discuss their own feelings and reactions to the points of view;
4) identify and discuss the cultural differences that they noticed;
5) analyze the dynamics of interaction between the speakers and discuss their own reactions to the situation.

An important outcome of such exposure should not only be a better comprehension of informal spoken French but also an awareness of the nature, range of applicability, and significant features of the various speech styles. The next two sections will, therefore, attempt to define the socio cultural parameters of colloquial French and to present its most salient linguistic features.

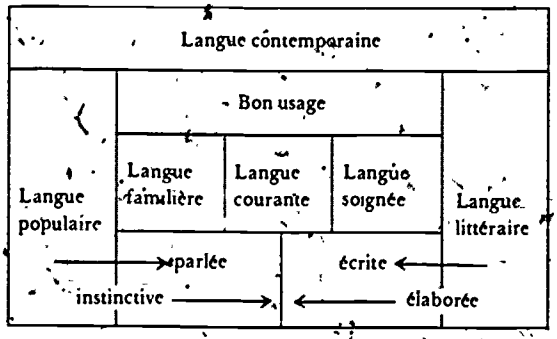
Definition and Socio-linguistic Function of Colloquial French

Colloquial French should not be confused with slang, although it may derive a large part of its lexicon from slang. Nor is it the language of the lower or uneducated classes. Webster's dictionary defines colloquial as "pertaining to, or used in, conversation, especially familiar conversation, acceptable and correct in ordinary conversation," and *Le Petit Robert* adds *"qu'on emploie naturellement, en tous milieux, dans la conversation courante"* Thus, colloquial French or *le français familier* is simply an informal use of the language which implies the parity of the social status of the speakers and the spontaneity of their speech.

The progressive disappearance of any clearly class-associated type of French is largely due to the generalized access to education, the omnipresence of the spoken language in the media, and the breaking down of social barriers between classes. According to Guiraud (1969), colloquial French is the result of the merging of two historically distinct types of speech: the informal speech of the bourgeois classes and popular French as spoken by the *peuple* (p. 24). Because of the numerical superiority of the working classes, and because the social recognition they gained also extended to their language, their access to the mainstream of French life had a greater impact on the language. Colloquial French may, therefore, be viewed also as a sort of popular language which has been filtered and purified by the linguistic habits acquired through education.

The study of the evolution of the language shows that most new forms have a popular origin. In the course of their ascent, many are discarded but many also gain progressive acceptance and finally become established as the norm. What still appears somewhat colloquial today may well become standard tomorrow; thus, colloquial French is often referred to as *le français avancé* by linguists. In fact, according to Guiraud, not only is colloquial French widely used by all social groups, but it may be linguistically more authentic and, therefore, more enduring than formal French. Rather than conforming to artificial rules imposed by grammarians who tried to freeze the evolution of the language three centuries ago, colloquial French behaves according to the organic and historical laws of the evolution of French and, therefore, represents a more advanced stage of its natural development (p. 25).

Current spoken language encompasses three basic *niveaux de langue* or speech registers, colloquial French *(français familier ou relâché)*, standard French *(français standard ou courant)* and formal French *(français soigné ou recherché)*. Those three levels constitute what Colette Stourdzé (1969) terms *le bon usage*. The way she views their function is illustrated by the figure below.



This figure also shows that the spoken form, in general, is more influenced by popular and colloquial French, whereas the written form is more influenced by formal and literary French. The elision or maintenance of the *ne* part of the negative is a good illustration of this dichotomy. In conversation, the elision of *ne* is so common that one hardly notices it (e.g., *J(e) crois pas),* whereas it is improper to drop it when writing a letter. Thus, the dictates of the *bon usage* are different depending on the medium.

What is considered proper or acceptable not only varies according to the medium (writing versus speaking), but also according to the circumstances of the act of communication. A native speaker of a given language actually controls several varieties of that language and intuitively knows when to use them, depending on what Crystal and Davy (1969) have termed "situational variables" or "dimensions of situational constraints." Some of the situational variables that determine the kind of speech style to be used in a given act of oral communication are "dialect," "discourse," "province" and "status." "Dialect" refers to the kind of linguistic features that reveal the geographical origin of the speaker (regional dialect) or his position on the social scale (social dialect). "Discourse" refers to two kinds of variability. a) the difference between speech and writing, and b) the difference between monologue and dialogue which results from the nature of the participation in the language event. "Province" refers to the features that can be correlated with the kind of occupational or professional activity in which the speakers are engaged. "Status" refers to the systematic variations which correspond to the relative social standing of the speakers. Factors associated with status are formality versus informality, respect or deference versus familiarity or rudeness, intimacy, kinship and hierarchical relations in general. Although there is no one to one correlation between a set of linguistic forms and a given situation, certain features tend to be more frequent in one speech style than in another and can, therefore, be regarded as "significant features."

Main Linguistic Aspects of Colloquial French and Their Effect on Listening Comprehension

Rather than presenting a thorough and systematic overview of the significant features of colloquial French, this section will identify the major sources of interference with listening comprehension. Some examples of the most salient phenomena will be included as illustrations.

One of the reasons stated by Rivers (1975) and Quinn (1975) for using unedited spoken language was its built in redundancy which makes comprehension easier, and the frequent pauses and fill in words which give the listener time for processing the speech stream. Neither author offers research data to support their claims, however, and the writer's own research did not provide information on that aspect of the comprehension of colloquial French, since the items were not broken up by hesitation pauses and rephrasing. The abundance of cues and the help they provide in understanding has been very convincingly demonstrated by Rivers, but it is the writer's conviction that the advantage gained by such redundancy may well be lost unless the listener is also familiar with other aspects of colloquial French, such as those described below.

1) As a result of the relative degree of familiarity, shared knowledge and freedom to express one's emotions in a spontaneous, unedited form which are implied by the use of the colloquial style, there is a deterioration of the syntax and, a correspondingly heavy reliance on supra segmental features. In fact, it can be said that the importance of rhythm, speed and intonation are inversely proportional to the grammatical coherence of the sentence, and directly proportional to the emotional state of the speaker (Léon, 1968).

In colloquial speech, utterances will be delivered in a staccato rhythm rather than in an even one. They will follow a highly inflected intonation contour. They will be broken up by exclamations, laughter, and hesitation pauses as well as by interruptions and non verbal cues from the interlocutors. In this rapid crossfire of verbal and non verbal exchange, where each utterance is often suspended in midstream either because of an interruption or because the background of shared knowledge makes it unnecessary to complete the thought, or because the speaker is groping for his ideas or venting his emotions, the foreign listener may get lost very easily. He does not share the speakers' pool of common life experience, cultural allusions and non verbal cues. Hardly has he started processing the elements of a sentence when it is in

terrupted in the middle and he has to mentally formulate its completion, based on his expectations, while trying to listen to the next utterance. At the same time, the listener must retain temporarily its essential meaning in case the speaker comes back to it after a short diversion, as is often the case in colloquial speech which proceeds by darts and rushes in different directions rather than a steady flight to the goal. He also has to fill in what he could not hear because several people were speaking at the same time or because of surrounding noises. And, finally, he has to contend with an often faster tempo. In a study conducted by Jacqueline Lindenfeld (1969), one of her subjects had a rate of speech of 1 minute and 20 seconds per 100 words in formal speech versus 1 minute per 100 words in colloquial speech, for another subject it was 45 seconds and 35 seconds respectively. The difference, however, is not so much in an overall greater speed but in the fact that groups of words are rushed together while others are allowed to trail off or be separated by long hesitation pauses or fill in words (often considerably contracted, for instance. *bien → ben, mais alors → malors, mais enfin → menfin, c'est à dire → stadire*).

The ungrammaticality, brevity and choppiness of the sentence and the high percentage of misfires or false starts as well as the reliance on shared knowledge and on intonation to convey the meaning can be illustrated by the following utterance:

> Tu sais . euh . . oui, j(e) t'ai dit . . . euh . . . (hesitation, caution) Ben oui, j(e) te l'ai dit hier . . . Menfin, tu t(e) souviens pas! (impatience) Eh ben tes copains . . . i(ls) . . . i(ls) . . . oui, quels salauds quand même! hein! (disgust). I(ls) sont pas venus, tes copains! Et les autres), I(l)s étaient pas contents, j(e) t'assure (annoyance, sarcasm).

Unless the student has been trained to discriminate between meaningful and irrelevant cues or fill in words, he may well be confused and overwhelmed by the amount of data to process. One advantage of colloquial speech for the foreign listener, however, should be in the abundance of affective cues. It may be hard to understand what was actually said, but it is relatively easy to perceive excitement, anger, pleasure or even sarcasm in the intonation, gestures and facial expressions of the speakers.

2) Due to the deficiency and deterioration of the syntax, intonation and rhythm assume functions that are normally performed by the syntax. For instance, in colloquial French, intonation, rather than word order, is commonly used to differentiate questions from statements (e.g., *Tu viens? Vous êtes d'accord? C'est fait avec quoi?*). Confirmation questions are asked by means of an appended formula (e.g., *C'est joli, hein?*) or by use of the negative (e.g., *Vous trouvez pas que c'est une bonne idée?*). Questions can also be reinforced by the use of expletive elements (e.g., *Où est-ce qu'il est? — Où est-ce qu'il est donc? — Où diable est-ce qu'il est donc?*).

Intonation also assumes a key role in the articulation of the discourse. The relationship between clauses is no longer expressed by syntactic means (e.g., *Il n'est pas venu parce qu'il était malade*, or *Etant donné qu'il était malade, il lui a été impossible de venir*), but by the juxtaposition of ideas linked by the appropriate intonation (e.g., *Il n'est pas venu. Il était malade.*). Occasionally, however, the speaker may wish to emphasize the relationship between the different elements, in this case, emphatic forms will be used in place of the usual conjunctions (e.g., *Il aurait bien voulu venir, seulement voilà, il est tombé malade.*).

Intonation, paired with an idiomatic use of certain constructions, can also convey a meaning which is substantially different from the standard one. For instance, *"Qu'est-ce qu'i(l) va tomber!"* is not a question about what is going to fall but an emphatic exclamation about the amount of rain the speaker expects to see pouring down any minute. Likewise, *"Qu'est-ce qu'on va s(e) faire passer"* is said in anticipation of the scolding the speakers expect to be subjected to; and *"Qu'est-ce qu'i(l) fait beau!"* is simply the colloquial equivalent of the formal expression *"Comme il fait beau!"*

As a result of these syntactic features of colloquial French, the non-native has to pay close attention to intonation as well as to word order. He has to mentally supply the missing function words or recognize their emphatic replacements, he has to distinguish between words that carry functional meaning and those that simply convey the mood of the speaker, and he has to be aware of possible idiomatic meanings.

3) Sentences do not always follow the word order that students have learned to expect from their exposure to standard French. In colloquial

French, the word order frequently reflects the affective priorities of the speaker. Depending on which concepts come first to his mind, emphasis can be placed on the subject (e.g., *Les copains, ils vont m'aider, Lui, il s'en fiche*), on the direct object (e.g., *Ce livre, tu l'as lu?*), on the verb (e.g., *Battus, on les a battus à plate couture!*), on the attribute of the subject (e.g., *Pas fin, le mec!*), or on the adverb (e.g., *Trop . . . , il mange trop*). Any element of the message can also be emphasized by the use of *c'est* (e.g., *C'est moi qui vous le dit*) or other emphatic devices (e.g., *Pour ce qui est de la bagnole, j(e) m'en occuperai*).

Another striking difference between colloquial and standard French is the deletion of the *ne* part of the negative (e.g., *je sais pas* which is often pronounced *chepa*).

4) Because of the elision of sounds and even of certain grammatical elements, or because of rushed or mumbled words and interfering noises, the student is often unable to recognize words or constructions that she knows.

Governed by a need for speed and facility, the phonology of informal French is characterized by a careless articulation of many sounds and the elision of some. This is particularly the case with the mute "e," which is dropped whenever the resulting articulatory difficulty is not too great (e.g., *Je n(e) te l(e) dirai pas.*).

The elision of the mute "e" also results in a) a reduction of the number of syllables (e.g., *j(e) vous l(e) dis* / ʒvuldi /, *c(el)a (ne) s(e) voit pas* / sasvwapa /), b) an accumulation of consonant clusters (e.g., *i(l) s'est r(e)pris* / iserpri /, *j(e) t(e) l'ai dit* / ʃtledi /), c) a greater frequency of *consonnes géminées* (e.g., *Ça(e) sent* / sassã /, *i(ls) sont d(e)dans* / isõddã /), and d) the assimilation of the consonants thus brought together (e.g., /ʒ/ becomes /ʃ/ in *j(e) pense* /ʃpãs/).

Other sounds can also be dropped, such as the "u" of the pronoun *tu* (e.g., *t'es pas venu?*), the "l" of the pronoun *il* (e.g., *i(l) s'est trompé, i(l)s iraient* / izire /, *i(l) y a* / ja /), and the "l" and the "r" especially when they are at the end of a word (e.g., *c'est un pauv(re) type, elle (n)a p(l)us rien à se mett(re) su(r) l(e) dos, i(l) y a que(l) que chose su(r) la tab(le)*).

As a result of these phonetic changes the word boundaries become blurred and students have more difficulty in segmenting the speech stream into recognizable elements. Since the mute "e" has only rarely a phonetic value, its elision also results in a heavier concentration of information carrying sounds. Students usually lack the thorough knowledge of the phonology, syntax and lexicon of the language that would enable them to have the right set of expectations and to fill in what they did not hear or did not perceive clearly.

5) Semantic processing is also impaired by the presence of many unknown terms and this, in turn, reduces the accuracy of the listener's expectations about phonology and syntax.

Whereas the morphology, syntax and phonology of colloquial French can be derived from, or related to, known forms, its lexicon includes many words that non-natives have never encountered before or which are used with totally different meanings. It is like having to learn a whole new set of terms, and for this reason it often proves to be the single most difficult aspect of French for the foreign student (e.g., *il (n')y pige rien* versus *il ne comprend pas, on va se balader* versus *nous allons nous promener, c'est kif kif* versus *c'est la même chose, passe-moi ton dico* versus *passe-moi ton dictionnaire*).

To make matters worse, there is usually more than one colloquial word or expression that can be used in place of one standard word, and each may carry a different connotation or a different degree of intensity (e.g., *je suis fauché, je suis fauché comme les blés, j'ai pas le rond, j'ai pas un radis, je suis à sec*, etc., in place of *je n'ai pas d'argent*). Conversely, the same word can carry different meanings. For instance, the expletive *donc* can indicate friendly exhortation (e.g., *t'en fais donc pas! . . .*), a pressing request (e.g., *Ne travaille donc pas tant!*), irritation (e.g., *Taisez vous donc!*), surprise or reprobation (e.g., *Eh ben dites donc!*), or it may simply serve as an attention catcher (e.g., *Dis donc . . . , t(u) pourrais pas m(e) refiler une sèche?*).

Taken separately, each of those aspects of colloquial French would be enough to constitute a serious barrier to comprehension, but the problem is all the greater when they occur together, as is frequently the case in unedited speech. Furthermore, interference with accurate perception and successful processing on any level, be it phonological, syntactic or semantic, is likely to reduce the student's ability to have accurate ex

pectations and to make the right decisions on any other level, if the hypothesis formulated by Fodor, Bever and Garrett is true.

> The speaker-hearer's decisions about the phonetic analysis of the input are sensitive to his hypotheses about its lexical, syntactic and semantic analyses. In fact, it is plausible to suppose that decisions at *every* level of analysis are subject to feedback from decisions at higher levels as well as feed forward from decisions at lower levels [1]

Implications for Second Language Instruction

If communicative competence is truly a goal of language teaching, serious attention should be given to what such competence implies. True communicative competence, beyond the basic level, includes awareness of the significant linguistic features of the main speech styles and of the social conditions that determine their appropriateness. Although the rules are less clear cut and less binding than those of grammar, speech styles and their various components must be congruent with the situational variables, in the same way that different elements of the syntax have to agree with one another. Failure to know or to abide by these rules is just as much of a flaw in the subject's communicative competence as failure to observe grammatical rules. As Crystal and Davy (1969) said, "A test of successful education is whether we can communicate, on a range of subjects, with people in various walks of life, and gain their understanding as well as understand them. But to be in such position requires a sharpened consciousness of the form and functions of language, its place in society, its power" (p. 4).

Before concluding that colloquial French should be taught in language programs, however, one should look again at the act of communication from the perspective of the student. Given the generally accepted objective of acquiring true communicative competence, which type of knowledge will achieve the maximum output (i.e., being able to understand and to make oneself understood) for the minimum input (i.e., number of words and structures to be learned)? Is it familiarity with colloquial French or with standard formal French?

Oral communication involves an active combination of listening and speaking. As "listeners," American students have little control over the kind of speech style used by natives. They have to understand French people as they do speak, if they wish to understand them at all. It is true that they have the option of asking their interlocutor to speak more slowly, to explain a term or even to rephrase what other people have said, but this implies an interference with the natural act of communication which is neither practical nor very desirable, since the purpose of going abroad is precisely to hear the language as natives speak it spontaneously. Furthermore, even a self-imposed linguistic censorship on the part of the natives so that the foreigner will not feel left out, is going to distort the nature and authenticity of what is said, how it is said and the very dynamics of social interaction. Thus, as far as listening comprehension is concerned, the visitor who wishes to understand the kind of French that is spoken in informal conversation would greatly profit from considerable familiarity with colloquial French.

As "speakers," however, the American students visiting France need to know the kind of French that will enable them to express themselves most effectively, in the greatest number of situations, without unduly shocking or amusing their listeners, and without calling upon themselves some undesirable labeling. It seems evident that a student who has devoted much time and energy acquiring an education would not especially want to be "branded" as uneducated, uncouth, or even rude.

A study conducted by Jacqueline Lindenfeld (1969) shows that there is a significant correlation between social class and syntactic variation in French and that it is possible to identify the social class of an individual based on his or her speech. Lindenfeld limited her study to syntactic variations as exemplified in the relative complexity of sentence structure used by educated upper-middle class individuals versus little-educated working class individuals. She found that while there was almost no difference between the two classes of subjects when they used informal speech, the difference became very evident when the situational context called for a formal speech style. The colloquial speech style tends to level

[1] *The Psychology of Language*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974. p 280.

off socio economic differences, and in that respect it can be viewed as a more democratic form of language. But it is through their difficulty in speaking in a more formal and careful way when the situation *did* require it, that the lower class speakers revealed their socio economic and educational background. In contrast, the more educated speakers showed a much higher degree of flexibility, they could use a formal, elaborate or elegant language when asked to address a large audience on a serious topic as well as a carefree and colloquial language when the interchange was casual in style and content. Their ability to control and adapt their speech to the situational expectations made them better communicators. This is precisely what Crystal and Davy have identified as the mark of a truly educated speaker. Thus the goal is more to become a discriminate user of a whole range of speech styles rather than having complete and exclusive fluency in one, especially in one which may carry a social stigma if it is the only one the user has at his disposal or if it is used in an incorrect context.

The effective and proper use of colloquial French requires not only the knowledge of its specific linguistic features but also a sensitivity to the socio cultural context and to the affective overtones of linguistic forms. Such awareness is definitely one of the goals language instruction should strive for, and much can be done to achieve it in the classroom, but it will remain imperfect as long as the student has not been steeped in the foreign culture itself. It also implies a considerable mastery of the "standard" language, since colloquial language – as well as poetry at the other end of the spectrum – are stylistic variations from the norm and can be fully appreciated *only* in relation to that norm, theoretical though it may be. In terms of priorities, then, the norm or standard language should be learned first, especially in the the development of speaking skills. From this perspective, then, a "middle of the road" language style will certainly be more acceptable in a greater variety of circumstances than a highly stylized one, be it formal or colloquial. For instance, it is much safer to say *J'ai très bien mangé* than *on a vachement bien bouffé*, and it will be acceptable both at a family dinner or a banquet and in a student restaurant. It may lack colorfulness, but it is neither ostentatiously formal nor offensively familiar.

Students are always eager to learn slang expressions but they must be used with considerable discrimination in order to avoid cultural faux pas. In addition, these expressions are often as ephemeral as they are colorful. As [redacted] Loriot points out in her review of *Le [redacted] kiskose* by Robert Beauvais (1975), "nothing becomes more quickly outdated than marginal languages."[4] Not only do they differ according to social and occupational groupings – thereby making the learning task much greater – but a constant interaction with the culture is required in order to know what terms are "in." Who would know, for instance, that the term for a pretty girl was *un colis*, for someone who is depressed *un superflip parano* and for a bisexual *un jazz tango* unless they had just spent some time among French students? Even native speakers quickly become out of touch with the latest slang inventions. Teaching French slang to our students may be fun, but it is a luxury that should be engaged in only sparingly and with great caution. It is simple common sense that they should learn frequently used terms before highly specialized ones, this is true of slang as well as of technical language. It is also dishonest and ultimately unkind to teach students even relatively innocuous words like *bouffer* without specifying the social contexts in which they can and cannot be used.

Another argument in favor of teaching students to speak standard French first is that it has a greater linguistic output, at least as far as phonology and syntax are concerned. For instance, given the standard form *je ne sais pas*, it is possible to derive the colloquial form *ché pas* by applying the proper set of transformational morpho syntactic rules, but the reverse is not true.

Communication, however, involves listening comprehension just as much as speaking ability. In that respect, familiarity with colloquial French will be essential if foreigners wish to understand more than just formal lextures,

[4] Le Francofolle et le néo-célinien, *L'Express* Juillet 1975, pp. 14-20.

speeches, broadcasts and other forms of public address which require decorum and careful diction. Thus both speech styles should be taught. Emphasis should be on [redacted] French for building up the speaking skill, at least at the beginning and intermediate levels, and on colloquial French as well as standard French for listening comprehension. Materials for listening comprehension practice should reflect the variety of oral styles commonly found in contemporary usage with priority given to those used in ordinary social interaction. It is not within the jurisdiction of the language teacher to pass judgment on what is "good" or "bad" native French usage, the question should be rather "How representative is it of the kind of language used in those very situations that are most typical of the foreign culture?" In order to make such judgments, teachers themselves need to have had considerable exposure to the interplay of language and culture in its native setting. Therefore, it seems most important that teacher training should include residence in the foreign country where they can observe and practice the language in action.

It is therefore recommended that advanced language studies include substantial training in socio-linguistics and in the stylistics of interpersonal communication as they apply to the target language. Such training should cover the complete range of contemporary usage, including formal as well as colloquial French, and it should be clearly related to the study of the culture, because the cultural and situational context govern their use. To provide this kind of contrastive analysis, the instructor could draw on any form of oral or written communication—from literature to impromptu street interviews—that exemplifies the language styles commonly in use. Such study would be a useful tool not only to understand and participate in everyday conversations, but it would enable the students to understand better literary works where the dynamics of interaction of the characters are often conveyed by a clever and deliberate use of the whole range of speech styles. Familiarity with colloquial French is almost a prerequisite to understanding modern novels, plays, and films where colloquial French is used to reflect the social identity of the characters as well as the author's intention not to stand on ceremony. Familiarizing students with the significant phonological, syntactic and lexical features of each speech register and their socio-cultural parameters would give them an opportunity to become truly educated speakers, i.e., speakers who are fluent and discriminating in their knowledge and use of French.

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