

## On the Evaluation of Reported Speech by French Adolescents: *Ouais* as Discourse Marker

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*Reported speech often serves as an important context for evaluations and assessments of others. In an analysis of naturally occurring speech among students in a suburban Paris secondary school, I consider the ways in which French adolescents (ages 16-19) employ the nonstandard affirmative "ouais" as a prefatory discourse marker in direct reported speech. I argue that the use of this marker serves to signal the banal or predictable nature of the recycled speech that it introduces. As such, "ouais" is frequently found in animations of others who are perceived as representative of negatively evaluated identities and/or ideologies.*

Over the past ten to fifteen years, analyses of verbal interaction have substantially broadened our understanding of direct reported speech. Previous conceptualizations tended to view reported speech as the faithful reproduction of prior utterances in the con-text of conversational narrative-with "faithful" understood here as referring to both con-tent and form. Recent analyses, however, have pointed to some of the complexities and ambiguities inherent in this form of speech, and to the displays of creative agency that it frequently involves. Thus we have moved from what Clark and Gerrig (1990) have termed the "verbatim assumption"

towards a view of reported speech as "constructed dialogue," in Deborah Tannen's (1989) phrase-that is, a discursive resource that allows for intricate, strategic manipulations of voice in both narrative and non-narrative contexts (see also Alvarez-Caccamo, 1996; Baynham, 1996; Vincent and Perrin, 1999). Among the important contributions to this emerging perspective have been works demonstrating the fluidity of the formal boundaries of reported speech (e.g., Klewitz and Couper-Kuhlen, 1999), as well as the stylization of that speech as a means by which speakers convey their evaluations and assessments of the reproduced utterances (e.g., Besnier, 1993; Günthner, 1997, 1999; Holt, 1996, 1999).

In this paper, I examine the use of a discourse marker that frequently serves to preface direct reported speech in contemporary spoken French: namely, the affirmative *ouais*, a common nonstandard phonological variant of the standard *oui*. I contend that analysis of this marker illustrates some of the complexities of reported speech, and that it does so in two distinct ways. First, the very status of *ouais* in the context of reported speech is inherently ambiguous. While the syntactic and prosodic cues in the examples that follow suggest that *ouais* may be interpreted as part of the speech being reported, other considerations strongly favor the conclusion that it is, instead, a discourse marker that is incorporated into the reproduced utterance in order to convey a specific evaluation about that utterance, and, by extension, about its author. The use of such an evaluative marker, in tandem with shifts in voice quality and prosody, thus contributes to what Suzanne Günthner (1999), drawing on Bakhtin, has termed the "layering of voices" in the context of direct reported speech. My examples are drawn from audio recordings made during ethnographic fieldwork among students at a private secondary school in a Parisian suburb. The students were in the last two years of the *lycée*, or high school, and were generally between 16 and 18 years old; most were from backgrounds that would be best described as middle-class.

The first example is taken from a lunchtime conversation on the school grounds between myself and a student I call Céline. At one point in our chat, Céline excused herself briefly so that she could talk with Danielle, one of the school's *éducatrices* (roughly the equivalent of a guidance counselor), who was standing nearby. Céline, whose relationship with her parents had become increasingly stormy, had made an appointment with a social worker that afternoon to discuss

the possibility of drawing a housing subsidy that would allow her to move into her own apartment. She thus needed to explain to Danielle that she would be absent from classes that afternoon. On returning from her conversation, she gave the following report:

(1)

**Céline:** ((*returning*)) C'est bien on s'entend bien avec eux franchement. T'sais euh-  
**SJA:** Danielle?  
**Céline:** Ouais franchement avec les éducatrices j'hésite pas à leur dire t'sais quand il y a des problèmes, voilà j'ai (un mal de santé) y a ceci y a ce-  
**SJA:** =Ouais? (3) Ah tu lui as parlé de::  
**Céline:** Ouais voilà, j'ai dit bon, voilà j'ai des petits problèmes, voilà, faut que j'aille voir une assistante cet après-midi,  
**SJA:** Et c'est pas grave,  
**Céline:** Elle m'a fait bon d'accord c'est pas trop grave et tout, tu vois même ils s'intéressent tu vois ils ne font pas ((*faster, louder*)) **{ouais, y a des cours, na na na,}** // tu vois  
**SJA:** Ouais, ouais,

Céline's final turn in this excerpt is not a recycling of an actual utterance, but rather a fabrication of hypothetical speech, in this case an utterance that "might have been" (cf. Goffman, 1974; Myers, 1999). This fabrication serves as a contrastive example that supports the positive assessment of Danielle and her fellow *éducatrices*. Of particular interest for our purposes is Céline's use of *ouais* as a prefatory marker to introduce this utterance.

As noted above, the status of *ouais* is inherently ambiguous. On the one hand, *ouais* immediately follows the speech act verb phrase *ils ne font pas* (they don't say/go), suggesting that it is to be interpreted as part of the reported utterance. More importantly, the increase in volume and acceleration in tempo that signal the shift into reported speech clearly precedes the use of *ouais*, lending further support to such an interpretation. Other considerations, however, support a different conclusion. First, there is no clear question provided in the context or cotext for which *ouais* might serve as a suitable response. Second, *ouais* and *oui* are of course, semantically speaking, expressions of affirmation or agreement, but the hypothetical speech being reported here constitutes a challenge, if not an outright refusal. Finally, we can surmise that a school administrator like Danielle would be unlikely to use the non-standard variant *ouais*, rather than *oui*, in talking about a school-related matter with a student on the school grounds. Taken as a whole, these observations suggest that *ouais* is not, in fact, a component of the reproduced utterance, but rather that it serves to convey additional information or opinions about the utterance. In this case, the evaluative lamination is clearly negative, as the utterance exemplifies the kind of nagging that might be expected from other, less understanding school administrators.

Example 2 is drawn from the same conversation with Céline. Once again, *ouais* serves to introduce an example of hypothetical or fabricated speech, but in this case both the speech and its author can be said to be fabrications. Here, the reported utterance does not convey what "might have been," but rather, a somewhat exaggerated example of what one might expect to hear from a representative of a particular social category. The excerpt thus exemplifies what Bakhtin (1981) referred to as the "parodic stylization" of another's speech, with the target in this case being the stereotypical young street tough of modern-day urban France—a figure commonly referred to as *la racaille*. Just prior to this excerpt, Céline and I had been chatting about a new campaign against youth violence launched by an organization called *Stop la Violence* (Stop the Violence), which was being publicized by the radio station Radio Nova and its monthly magazine. Among other activities, Nova had been broadcasting a half-hour call-in program on the theme of youth violence and its prevention every evening. Listeners were invited to phone in or come to the studios to talk about their experiences and ideas about possible solutions to the problems

faced by young people. As this example indicates, Céline strongly approved of this campaign, and she encouraged me to tune into Nova to listen to the show. At the same time, she pointed out that not all of the callers' contributions were equally interesting or enlightening.

(2)

**Céline:** C'est vrai(h)ment génial t'as déjà entendu les débats et tout?

**SJA:** // Non

**Céline:** A la radio?

**SJA:** Non. Non il faut que j'écoute, c'est- c'est tous les soirs à: dix-neuf heures // c'est ça?

**Céline:** Mouais. Ouais. Faut tomber sur des bons trucs parce qu'(au temps) des fois t'as des gars ils (viennent que pour) parler, bon tu//comprends leur haine et tout mais:

**SJA:** Ouais.

**SJA:** //Ouais, ouais si c'est juste euh-

**Céline:** ( ) sert à rien quoi c'est (seulement) ((nasal, rhythmic)) {ouais, y en a marre, et tout, c'est relou, na na na,}

**SJA:** Ouais @@@

**Céline:** Ouais! Bon! @@@ // ((smiling)) {Approfondis, s'il te plaît.}

**SJA:** @@

**Céline:** It's really great, have you heard the debates and everything?

**SJA:** //No

**Céline:** On the radio?

**SJA:** No. No I've got to listen to that, it's- it's every evening at 7:00, // right?

**Céline:** Yeah. Yeah. You've got to find the good stuff because sometimes you've got these guys that (just come to) talk, OK, you // understand that they're pissed off and all but-

**SJA:** Yeah.

**SJA:** //Yeah, yeah, if it's just uh-

**Céline:** ( ) no point to it, it's (just) ((nasal, rhythmic)) {\*\*\*, we're fed up, and everything, everything sucks, blah blah blah,}

**SJA:** Yeah @@@

**Céline:** Yeah! OK! @@@ // ((smiling)) {Could you be more specific, please?}

**SJA:** @@

Notice how Céline not only animates and parodies the fabricated speaker, but then fabricates her own response. She does this by contrasting the inarticulate grumbling of the *racaille* with a mock-pedagogical rejoinder that sarcastically evaluates the reported speech and requests a follow-up: "Could you be more specific, please?" As far as

the use of *ouais* is concerned, we find a similar placement of the marker to that described in the earlier example. A noticeable shift in voice quality signals the onset of the reported speech: it is produced with a highly nasal tone, and broken into isochronous units that convey a sense of plodding, tiresome talk (*ouais / y en a marre / et tout / c'est relou / neu neu neu*). *Ouais* forms the first of five such units; thus, once again, the marker falls within the prosodically defined boundaries of the reported speech. Note too that in this example, as in the previous one, *ouais* is accompanied by additional evaluative markers that are structurally integrated into the reported utterance. In this case, *et tout*, or "and all," is a pro-form that suggests that the preceding *y en a marre* ("we're fed up") serves as a metonym for a entire genre of pointless griping. Second, *na na na*, a marker similar to the English "blah blah blah" or "yada yada," further emphasizes the predictable, banal, and ultimately uninteresting nature of the speech. Such a deployment of multiple evaluative markers within a single reproduced utterance serves to further enhance the dialogic, hybridized nature of the talk.

In each of the above examples, the speech that is introduced by *ouais* is not a recy-cling of an actual utterance, nor even an animation of an actually existing speaker. Rather, these utterances index the stereotypical speech of certain culturally defined figures. The first example mimics the inflexible school administrator who insists on strict obedience to the rules, without concern for the particular needs of individual students. The second pokes fun at the *racaille* who jumps at the opportunity to vent his rage on the radio, without offering any constructive solutions. In both cases, the implicit assessment of the speech that is conveyed by *ouais* is not simply a negative judgment of the reported speech or its authors. More specifically, I would argue that it is a judgment about the predictable, banal, or clichéd nature of the speech itself that is signaled by the marker. In my examinations of numerous uses of *ouais* and *oui* in various contexts, I have found that this evaluative connotation is consistently implied. Moreover, it should be noted that this usage of *ouais* is in no way limited to fabrications of hypothetical or imaginary speech. In the following example, it is used to mark a fairly straightforward reproduction of actual speech:

(3)

**Laurent:** Ah ouais j'étais démoralisé ma mère, ce weekend elle commence à me faire euh, **ouais euh, ça commence à être long tes cheveux hein, euh**

**Laurent:** Oh yeah, I was so bummed out, this weekend my mother starts going \*\*\* **uh, your hair's getting really long, isn't it, uh-**

In the above excerpt, *ouais* is used to introduce a report of what is, by all appearances, a stretch of actually uttered speech. Laurent is simply relating an interaction between him and his mother that took place over the previous weekend. Moreover, in contrast to the two previous examples, Laurent's reproduction of his mother's speech is not significantly stylized, and it contains little apparent shift in prosody or voice quality. We are thus confronted with a case in which *ouais* prefaces a relatively faithful reproduction of an utterance, one more in keeping with the conventional understanding of direct reported speech. As a result, the connection between this example and the first two is not obvious at first glance. I would argue, however, that a similar dynamic underlies all three of these excerpts. Specifically, in each of these cases, we find a characterization of speech that is not so much a reflection of original thoughts, needs, or desires as it is a playing out of culturally ordained scripts. Seen in this light, Laurent's animation of his mother's speech bears a certain resemblance to the two previous examples. Like the rule-obsessed *éducatrice* and the mumbling *racaille*, Laurent's mother is, in this case, playing a role—that of the nagging mother, pestering her son to get his hair cut—and the use of *ouais* serves to underscore the trite or predictable nature of her nagging.

A final example will demonstrate how *ouais* can impute a conventional or predictable quality to a reported utterance, even in the absence of any overtly negative evaluation of that utterance. Here, Céline is describing a recent edition of the televised literary program *Bouillon de culture*, hosted by Bernard Pivot. The program in question was devoted to several young Black and Arab novelists who write about life in the working-class housing projects that dominate many of the suburbs of major French cities.

(4)

**Céline:** Et franchement tu vois il y avait un mec, qui parlait qui a écrit un bouquin un petit Arabe, tu vois?

**SJA:** Ouais?

**Céline:** Et euh: franchement, il disait euh: ((*higher pitch, louder*)) **{ouais: franchement je suis vraiment très content d'être sur Pivot et tout, na na na,}** tu vois, vraiment

**Céline:** And frankly, you know, there was a guy who was speaking, who wrote a book, a little Arab guy, you know?

**SJA:** Yeah?

**Céline:** And uh- frankly, he was saying uh- ((*higher pitch, louder*)) **{\*\*\* frankly I'm really very pleased to be here on Pivot and everything, blah blah blah,}** you know, really-

It should be noted that Céline's overall evaluation of this speaker, as evidenced by her subsequent talk, was in no way pejorative. In a subsequent turn, in fact, she stated that the writers on the show had given a refreshingly positive image of life in the housing projects where they live. What she was emphasizing in this particular excerpt was the inherent irony of a tough-looking, streetwise young Arab male appearing on a high-brow intellectual program, and falling quite comfortably into the role of the courteous, effusive talk-show guest. Once again, I would argue that it is the playing out of a conventionalized speech genre that is foregrounded by the marker *ouais*. The writer, it is suggested, was displaying his ability to “do” being a guest on Bernard Pivot, thus confounding any initial expectations based on his appearance or demeanor.

In conclusion, it is clear that the use of this discourse marker in spoken French amply illustrates Niko Besnier's (1993) observation that the rhetorical style of reported speech allows the reporter's voice to “leak” onto that speech. Moreover, this lamination of multiple perspectives may be achieved through a variety of discursive practices, including the incorporation of evaluative markers that are ostensibly part of the actual reported utterance. Finally, it is my belief that fine-grained analyses of markers like this one can clue us in to culturally salient notions of self and personhood among speakers. The attribution of predictability in these excerpts bespeaks the central ideological significance among these speakers of the distinction between, on the one hand, cant or conventionalized speech, and on the other, an “authen-

tic” voice capable of uttering its own thoughts, in its own unique way.

### Transcription Conventions

- . end of intonation unit; falling intonation
- , end of intonation unit; fall-rise intonation
- ? end of intonation unit; rising intonation
- ! emphatic stress
- self-interruption; abrupt cutoff in sound
- : lengthening
- @ laughter
- h exhalation
- (h) laughter or exhalation within a word
- // point of overlap with subsequent turn
- = “latching” of turns with no gap
- (3) approximate pause length in seconds
- () uncertain transcription
- (( )) transcriber comment
- { } stretch of talk over which transcriber comment applies

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