

***Nous and On in Semi-formal French:
Pragmatic Uses of Institutionalality and Distancing***

Deborah King

Doctoral Student, Ph.D. Linguistics

The University of Texas at Arlington

Abstract: French linguists have long noted the substitution of the indefinite pronoun *on* for the 1st person plural pronoun *nous*, in both formal and informal situations. Studies of informal conversation have found this replacement to be nearly categorical (Laberge and Sankoff 1980; Coveney 2000). By contrast, this study found a much higher percentage of *nous* compared to *on* in interviews and speeches with political or business-related themes (roughly 60% *nous* to 40% *on*). The data suggest that many speakers use *nous* and *on* in pragmatically distinct ways: *nous* for institutionalality, *on* for distancing. However, *nous* can underscore institutionalality even in potentially face-threatening situations, while *on* can distance despite the institutionalality of the referent. This study indicates that both style and conversational implicature play a role in pronoun choice.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

According to recent studies, the pronoun paradigm in modern French is going through a process of major restructuring. Along with its six definite pronouns, French also makes use of the indefinite pronoun *on* ‘one’, ‘anyone’, ‘someone’, which has long been flexible enough to stand in for any of the others when needed—most commonly for *nous*, the 1st person plural pronoun.

- (1) *On se ramassait tous dans la salle à diner, puis la télévision, puis on écoutait le hockey.*

‘*We* all got together in the dining room, with the television, and *we* listened to (watched) hockey.’ (Laberge & Sankoff 1980: 274)

While this usage was once merely common, in recent decades it seems to have edged closer to becoming universal. Meanwhile, the 2nd person pronouns *tu* and *vous* have begun acting as indefinite pronouns.¹

¹ This is very common in Canadian French. (Laberge & Sankoff 1980)

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

- (2) D'après moi, c'est pas avec des guerres que *tu* réussis à faire un pays, *tu* t'assis puis *tu* discutes.

‘As far as I’m concerned, *you* don’t build a country with wars, *you* sit down and *you* discuss.’ (Laberge & Sankoff 1980: 278)

1.1 Background

On originally developed from Latin *homo* ‘man’ to take on its present-day grammaticalized, indefinite pronominal sense, ‘one’. Use of *on* to refer to the 1st person plural (following Welton-Lair [1999: 146], I will call this the “egocentric *on*”²) arose in the 19th century (Posner 1997), or perhaps even earlier. However, it is only the current generation that has seen an almost categorical use of *on* for *nous*, especially in Canadian French (Laberge & Sankoff 1980).

According to Laberge and Sankoff (1980), *on* has “virtually ousted *nous*” (p. 271) in Montreal French, leaving the “unmarked, unless-otherwise-indicated reading of *on*” as ‘we’ (p. 274). Coveney (2000) also notes that *nous* is “highly marked” (p. 467) and has been “almost entirely replaced by *on*,” (p. 447) but that *nous* has a slightly higher occurrence rate in France than in Canada.³ Because of its roots in working-class speech, the egocentric *on* was once quite stigmatized; however, increased usage seems to have diminished its perception as incorrect (Coveney 2000). It is certainly no longer as stigmatized as some other informal speech tactics, such as *ne* dropping (Rehner & Mougeon 2003). Even members of the upper social class now use the egocentric *on* (Blanche-Benveniste 1997a).

Whether *on* will eventually entirely replace *nous* remains to be seen. Blanche-Benveniste (1997b) believes that the changes have stabilized, noting that while even the most educated have

² The term *egocentric* can also refer to the much rarer use of *on* to mean ‘I.’ Coveney (2000) uses the term “[+definite] *on*” for the same phenomenon (p. 448).

³ Coveney reports the following percentages for *nous* usage when compared with clearly egocentric uses of *on*: 0.5% Quebec City (Deshaies 1991); 1.6% Montreal (Laberge 1977); 4.4% France.

begun to use the egocentric *on*, all speakers retain *nous* as a variant for formal topics/speech situations. Coveney (2000) also believes that *nous* will survive in formal speech domains.

Coveney approaches the problem of *nous* versus *on* from semantic, discourse, pragmatic, speech style, and demographic angles. His conclusion is that style is the primary motivation for a speaker's choice, with formal topics and situations tending to trigger *nous*. Demographic factors also play a part, with older speakers, females, and those of a higher social or educational status tending to use *nous* more frequently.

1.2 Goals

The focus of this paper is the pragmatic uses of subject *nous*⁴ and egocentric *on* in semi-formal contexts. Coveney's research indicates that formal situations and "standard speaker" demographics are strong predictors of *nous* usage, and vice versa. However, the fact that even in formal situations people with high social status still often choose to use *on* indicates that, at least for some speakers, there may exist a pragmatic distinction between the two (otherwise, why not categorically use *nous* in formal situations?). It may be that the focus of previous research on informal French has skewed perceptions of the overall use of *nous* in French society. Unlike previous studies, the data for the present study was drawn from semi-formal contexts such as interviews and Internet chat sessions⁵ covering semi-formal topics such as politics, business, and entertainment. The speakers were middle to upper class adults. No doubt formality and demographic factors have raised the usage levels of *nous* in these samples. The salient issue, however, is that here we find a sector that utilizes the two variants at nearly equal levels (subject

⁴ I will ignore uses of *nous* as a disjunctive pronoun or object clitic for the purposes of this paper, except inasmuch as they point to the egocentricity of *on*. These uses are not in complementary distribution with *on*, and, as Coveney (2000) notes, are in no danger of being lost from use.

⁵ While it may be questioned whether a chat session should be categorized as a "semi-formal" speech situation, I would argue that the particular chat session examined was quite similar to an interview, with the interviewees acting as representatives of their organization, a fairly formal capacity through a less formal venue. Instances of *nous/on* usage were drawn almost exclusively from the interviewees.

Nous and *On* in Semi-formal French

nous: 60%; egocentric *on*: 40%), thus providing a much better basis on which to compare and analyze their use.⁶

Based on this data, I will show that *nous* and *on* are indexical terms which share truth-conditional meaning, yet whose pragmatic functions allow the speaker to communicate shades of meaning beyond the truth-conditional level. Specifically, I will argue that *nous* has an institutional function while *on* has a distancing function, and that these functions are performed by means of conversational implicature.

2.0 DATA AND METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the data for this paper were taken from transcripts of semi-formal interviews and Internet chat sessions. These include: an interview with former French president Jacques Chirac covering national and world issues; a chat session in which a female representative of the radio network France Info discussed the network's process of selecting a listener jury; an interview with a female representative of the Fédération Française de la Franchise (French Franchise Federation); and an interview with a male vocalist discussing his artistic work.

The chats and interviews mentioned above were chosen from online sources based on several factors: 1) relatively high levels of *nous* and *on* usage (i.e., the interview was not focused primarily on the speaker, producing only tokens of *je* 'I'); 2) variety of topic (music, politics, business, etc.); 3) timeliness (within the past five years); 4) demographic factors of the interviewee (gender and age).

Tokens of subject *nous* and egocentric *on* were collected, counted, and analyzed. Subject *nous* was isolated from disjunctive or object clitic uses based on syntactic factors. Selecting

⁶ Coveney's (2000) corpus, by comparison, provided only 49 tokens of *nous* compared to 1,057 uses of the egocentric *on*.

instances of egocentric *on* was slightly more complicated. The procedure used is described in §2.1 below. The results of the count were 89 tokens of subject *nous* (roughly 60% of tokens) and 58 tokens of egocentric *on* (roughly 40% of tokens).

2.1 Filtering Out Indefinite On

Since my intention was to deal only with egocentric uses of *on*, I used Welton-Lair's (1999) criteria to weed out those uses which clearly did not have a 1st person plural reference. According to Welton-Lair, egocentric *on* is indicated when:

1. context makes clear that the action is performed by a “relatively well-defined group of people”;
2. context does not exclude the speaker from inclusion in *on*'s scope of reference; and
3. first person pronouns or verb inflection in the vicinity make it clear that an egocentric interpretation is intended (p. 146-148).

A few examples will serve to illustrate Welton-Lair's criteria. In example 3 below, criteria 1 and 2 are satisfied. We know both who the referents of *on* are, and that they do not exclude the speaker; rather, they explicitly include her.

- (3) Bien moi puis mon mari *on* a gagné la course.

‘Me and my husband, *we* won the race.’ (Blondeau 2001: 456)

The disjunctive pronoun in example 4 serves a similar function, and satisfies Welton-Lair's third criterion.

- (4) quand *nous on* est en train de dormir

‘while *we* are asleep’ (Coveney 2000: 456)

I would amend Welton-Lair's criteria by noting that criterion 3 is not absolutely necessary, especially when other linguistic factors come into play, as they often do. I specifically

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

refer to the idea of triple co-presence as defined by Clark and Marshall (1981), who argue that mutual knowledge necessary for definite reference can be established by linguistic co-presence, physical co-presence, and/or community membership.

Linguistic co-presence can be provided by either the larger context of the entire dialogue, or by the semantic content of the verbal phrase associated with the indexical. In order to correctly identify the referent of *on* in example 5, you must know that the speaker herself is one of the readers she mentions, a fact you would only know if you had been following along earlier in the chat.

- (5) Ensuite, *tous les lecteurs* se réunissent. *On* lit les lettres préselectionnées à haute voix et *on* vote.

‘Then, all the readers come back together. *We* read the preselected letters aloud and *we* vote.’

Interpreting example 6 (taken from further along in the chat just mentioned) involves recognizing that whoever *on* may be, it is someone who received a large number of letters. This knowledge allows us to correlate *on* with the speaker, who we know was involved in letter-reading.

- (6) Quand *on* reçoit les 3527 lettres, *on* en a les bras qui tombent.

‘When *we* received the 3,527 letters, we had our hands full.’

Physical co-presence performs a similar function. The referents of example 7 can only be located by hearing the people involved speaking.

- (7) Est-ce que le ministre de l'Intérieur, dont *on* vient de parler, a les qualités d'un homme d'Etat?

‘Does the Minister of the Interior, of whom *we* were just speaking, have the qualities of a statesman?’

Lastly, community membership may help clarify the referent of *on*. Example 8, viewed in the absence of direct linguistic co-presence, could technically take any reading of *on* (I/you/he/one/we/they).

(8) Et *on* ne pourrait pas y envoyer les forces de l'ONU maintenant?

‘And couldn’t *we* send UN forces there now?’

However, our knowledge that the UN is a coalition of many nations, including France and French citizens by association (of whom the speaker is one), allows us to postulate ‘we’ as a likely gloss.

In conclusion, linguistic co-presence, physical co-presence, and/or community membership may make it clear that an egocentric interpretation is intended even when no first person pronouns or verb inflections are used.

2.2 Analysis of Tokens

Having isolated tokens of subject *nous* and egocentric *on*, I hypothesized that factors of distancing, institutionality, and/or exclusivity might play a part in the pragmatic functions of each occurrence. To aid my analysis, I rated each token *yes* or *no* in response to the following questions:

a) Distancing: Could the action performed by the token (or its results) be considered potentially embarrassing, degrading, or image-damaging to either the speaker or group?

b) Institutionality: Does the set of the members constituting the token equal an institutional group⁷ such that some members of the group can be included in the action by association?

⁷ The Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines an *institution* as “a significant ... organization in a society or culture; an established organization or corporation ... especially of public character.”

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

c) Exclusivity: Do the members constituting the token exclude the hearers (interviewer and/or audience)?

As it turned out, the first two criteria were critical to determining the pragmatic functions of *nous* and *on*, while the third seemed to have little correlation to *nous/on* usage.

3.0 PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF *NOUS* AND *ON*

As discussed above, *on* has historically been indeterminate. Even in its egocentric use, it retains a greater level of indeterminacy than *nous*, as demonstrated by its greater dependency on context for referent identification (i.e., *nous* intrinsically includes the speaker; *on* may or may not.) Stewart (1995: 210) rates the pronouns along a scale of determinacy according to ease of precisely identifying the referent:

Figure 1: Scale of Pronoun Determinacy

+ determinate	je	‘I’
↑	nous	‘we’
↓	tu	‘you’ (sg)
- determinate	vous	‘you’ (pl)
	on	‘one’

A logical assumption, therefore, would be that, if pragmatic distinctions do exist between *nous* and *on*, they arise from this sustained level of indeterminacy. Upon examination of the *nous/on* data, I found that they pointed to a pragmatic usage for *nous* based on a high level of determinacy (the institutional use) and a pragmatic usage for *on* based on low determinacy (the distancing use).

3.1 Institutional Nous

Referents which constitute an *institutional group*, such as nations, religious groups, or business organizations, regularly motivate the use of *nous*. In example 9, the speaker uses *nous* to refer to France, while in example 10, the same speaker uses *nous* for the organization she represents, la Fédération Française de la Franchise (French Franchise Federation, or FFF).

- (9) *Nous* sommes le pays le plus exportateur en Europe en matière de franchise, ce qui s'explique par le fait que *nous* sommes le pays où la franchise est la plus développée et la plus ancienne.

‘*We* are the European country with the highest exportation rate of franchised goods, which can be explained by the fact that *we* are the country where the franchise is the most developed and of longest standing.’

- (10) Bien sûr et *nous* sommes très très militants puisque c'est la Fédération Française de la Franchise qui a créé la Fédération Européenne de la Franchise, en 1972, et qui regroupe aujourd'hui vingt cinq pays avec lesquels *nous* travaillons régulièrement, avec lesquels *nous* échangeons . . .

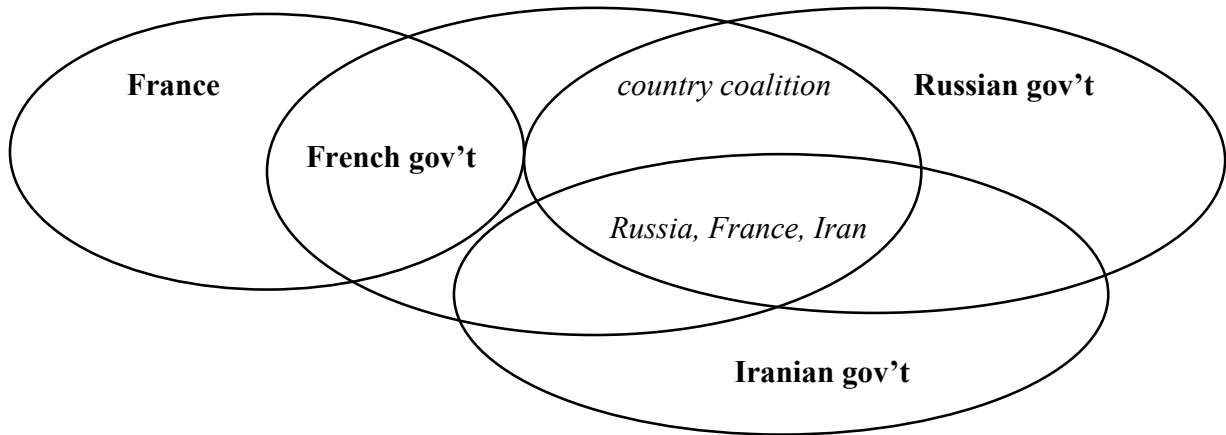
‘Of course and *we* are very, very militant since it was the French Franchise Federation which created the European Franchise Federation, in 1972, and which comprises today 25 countries with whom *we* regularly work, with whom *we* exchange . . .’

This usage of *nous*, which was observed nearly without exception in my data, could stem from the highly determinate nature of well-defined groups. While the exact members of the group may be subject to change, the entity itself remains constant. Furthermore, members of such groups tend to view themselves as participants in the actions of the group by association, whether or not they physically perform the action.

Not every deictically indicated group constitutes a generally-recognized institution. Furthermore, any given speaker may hold membership in multiple groups, some of which overlap. This is illustrated in Figure 2, below, which is based on an interview with former French president Jacques Chirac. In the figure, each circle indicates distinct institutional groups (bold), and the overlapping areas indicate subgroups (italicized), not necessarily universally recognized as institutions.

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

Figure 2: Jacques Chirac group membership



In such cases *nous* usage may operate as a *para-institutional indicator*, that is, a pragmatic device to signal that the speaker is now viewing a contextually defined set as an institution for the purposes of discussion. This is a useful device for situations where the group in mind is not universally recognized as an established organization (the italicized subgroups in Figure 2), or where the institutional reference shifts. The examples below, taken from an interview with French President Jacques Chirac on world affairs, could be analyzed in this way. (See Appendix for the full context of examples 11-13.)

In example 11, *nous* is used to refer to a clearly institutional entity, France.

- (11) Il y a tout de même eu une réaction internationale forte, à laquelle d'ailleurs *nous* avons beaucoup participé puisqu'aux trois pays initiaux, l'Allemagne, l'Angleterre et la France, se sont joints les États-Unis, la Russie et la Chine.

‘There was all the same a strong international reaction, in which moreover *we* [France] have greatly participated since three initial countries, Germany, England, and France, were joined by the United States, Russia, and China.’

When, in the context of the dialogue, France appears to be joining forces with other interested countries, the speaker switches to *on* to describe the less distinct entity. In his next reference to the same group, however, he uses *nous*, indicating it has been *institutionalized* for the purposes of the dialogue.

- (12) *On* a fait des propositions à l'Iran concernant la coopération nucléaire civile, à laquelle ils ont droit et que *nous* ne contestons pas, concernant la coopération économique, concernant la stabilité politique dans la région.

'*We* [France + other countries] made some propositions to Iran concerning civil nuclear cooperation, to which they have a right which *we* [new institution: country coalition] do not contest, concerning economic cooperation, concerning the political stability in the region.'

In example 13, the speaker again uses *nous* for his newly-coined institution. However, he is about to shift referents again. He expresses the wish that the country coalition plus the country of Iran can come to an agreement, using *on* to describe the non-institutional entity. But in the very next reference he uses *nous* again, indicating that he has already institutionalized the new group.

- (13) *Nous* restons dans l'incertitude. Je souhaite que l'*on* arrive à un accord. *Nous* aurons à discuter de tout cela au G8 qui se tient à Saint-Petersbourg, comme vous le savez, à partir de demain et où se retrouveront tous les pays concernés.

'*We* [country coalition] remain in uncertainty. I hope that *we* [country coalition + Iran] will come to an accord. *We* [new institution: all countries involved] have to discuss all this at G8 which is being held at St. Petersburg, as you know, starting tomorrow and where all the interested countries will meet.'

This interpretation is less clearly supported than that of obviously institutional entities, but it provides an intriguing possibility for future study.

While the concept of institutionality is similar to that of exclusivity/inclusivity, it is clear the two concepts are not identical.⁸ Institutional use may or may not exclude the hearers, depending on whether they fit into the group described. Most of the listeners who heard the radio broadcast of the interview including examples 9 and 10 above would have been included (as French) in the *nous* of example 9, but excluded from the *nous* of example 10, which encompassed only members of the FFF.

⁸ While Posner (1997: 139) says "*on* has tended to move towards the designation of an inclusive plural," Coveney (2000) denies that inclusivity/exclusivity has any true correspondence with *on/nous* usage. Likewise, the data gathered for this paper show little correspondence of this type.

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

As seen in example 14 below, use of the institutional *nous* can be a highly effective technique for evoking a particular referent when contrasted with *on*. In this example, the speaker, EB (a representative of the radio station France Info) is discussing her interaction with Camille Laurens (CL), a writer collaborating with the station, but not an employee of France Info. EB's first two references are to the well-defined, yet non-institutional group of herself and CL. She abruptly switches to *nous* in her third referent, effectively cutting CL out of the reference.

- (14) *On va se parler pour vérifier qu'elle a bien reçu les livres. On va éventuellement se retrouver à l'antenne mais nous ne parlerons pas à Camille Laurens du contenu de ses lectures.*

‘*We* [EB and CL] are going to talk to verify that she really received the books. *We* [EB and CL] eventually are going to meet again on air, but *we* [France Info] won't speak to Camille Laurens about the content of the readings.’

3.2 On for Pragmatic Distancing

While *nous* is often used in the highly determinate case of institutionality, *on* is favored for *pragmatic distancing*. In one type of pragmatic distancing, *face-saving*, the speaker wishes to remove himself from the sphere of those responsible—and therefore blamable—for the action. Stewart (1995) looks at pragmatic distancing from the framework of politeness theory, stating that speakers choose *on* when a certain measure of ambiguity assists in face protection. In the interview with Jacques Chirac, the politician more than once switches to *on* in situations where he might not wish to take responsibility for an unpopular statement.

- (15) *On ne peut pas changer les choses.*

‘*We* [French government] can't change these things.’

- (16) *On n'a pas fait les réformes nécessaires que je souhaite et que j'avais demandé.*

‘*We* [Chirac administration] haven't made the necessary reforms which I desire and which I asked for.’

It is interesting to note that the interviewers nearly always chose to use *on*—perhaps because questioning another’s actions is inherently a face-threatening act. In example 17, a question posed by the interviewer to President Chirac, *on* could conceivably be glossed as either ‘you’ or ‘we.’ It is (as Stewart argues) this very ambiguity which helps the speaker save the face of the addressee by not making him directly responsible.

- (17) Donc, *on* ne peut pas changer la ligne et les critères de régularisation au cas par cas, c'est ce que vous vouliez dire?

‘So, what you mean to say is that *we* can’t change regulation policy and criteria on a case by case basis?’

Focus shift is another kind of pragmatic distancing that may be motivated simply by a desire to highlight the action rather than the agent.

- (18) La formule a fait ses preuves. *On* donne le pouvoir aux auditeurs. Tout change chaque année: auditeurs et président du jury et c'est bien comme ça.

‘The formula is tried and true. *We* give the power/the power is given to the listeners. Everything changes each year: listeners and president of the jury and it’s good like that.’

This type of distancing is indicated when the action does not seem to be potentially damaging to the referent.

3.3 Quantitative Support

Do the data really support the claims made above for separate pragmatic uses for *nous* and *on*? Although the data for this study were limited (147 total examples of subject *nous* and egocentric *on*), they seem to support this interpretation. Of the 89 uses of subject *nous*, 68 were clearly institutional, and 19 could be interpreted as discourse-internally institutional (as in examples 12 and 13). Two uses of *nous* were less definite than expected.

- (19) *Nous* allons y venir, j'imagine.

‘We’re headed that way, I imagine.’

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

Arguably, this reflects the juncture of style and pragmatic use alluded to in §1.2.

Of the 58 uses of egotistical *on*, 28 were clearly non-institutional, while 24 were face-threatening situations calling for pragmatic distancing. It is possible that focus shift may account for the remaining 6 uses of *on* for institutional entities.

Clearly, the institutional function of *nous* and the distancing function of *on* will sometimes be in competition. Thus, we see 8 potentially face-threatening situations where the speaker nevertheless chose to use *nous*, suggesting that institutionality had pragmatic priority in these utterances. We also find 24 institutional situations where the speaker resorted to *on*, suggesting that distancing had pragmatic priority.

4.0 NOUS, ON, AND CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

What is the nature of the two pragmatic functions identified for *nous* and *on*? In her discussion of indeterminacy for face protection, Stewart (1995) says that the meaning is carried by conversational implicature. She suggests that *on* use is a type of flouting of Gricean maxims—most likely the maxims of quantity (be as informative as possible) and manner (avoid ambiguity). By being ambiguous and thus less informative than possible in situations where a clear referent is intended, a user of *on* may create the implicature that ‘Even though I am the one who performed the action, if only by association with the group, I do not assume responsibility for it.’

Contrariwise, *nous* use can carry the implicature of solidarity and acknowledged group membership—‘I assume responsibility and association with the actions of this group, regardless of whether I actually performed them personally.’ As with all implicature, contextual clues are important for determining meaning. Specifically, *on* in a non-institutional situation would not necessarily implicate distancing.

4.1 Testing for Implicature

Two tests indicate that an analysis of conversational implicature is best. First, if the meaning can be defeated, either by speaker repair or hearer challenge, it is likely to be produced by conversational implicature. Stewart gives an example of hearer-challenged implicature in which one speaker, JC, first uses *nous*, suggesting that his actions were taken in the context of a group. When this is challenged, he switches to an even more indeterminate form to further distance himself from blame. (Recall Stewart's scale of determinacy, Figure 1.)

(20) JC: ... puisque ce livre, *nous* avons souhaité le publier, il ne fallait pas tricher...

BP: qu'est-ce que vous ... qu'est-ce c'est que ce *nous* que vous employez?

JC: non mais c'est vrai *on* en avait beaucoup parlé avec Yves Berger et Jean-Claude Fasquel et un certain nombre de...

BP: mais c'est vous qui le publiez c'est pas eux quand-même

JC: mais *on* disait qu'*on* pouvait peut-être...

BP: Je! Je! (Stewart 1995: 205)

JC: ...since this book, we_[nous] wished to publish it, we couldn't rig...

BP: What is it you ... What is this we_[nous] that you're using?

JC: no but it's true we_[on] talked about it a lot with Yves Berger and Jean-Claude Fasquel and some other...

BP: but even so, you were the one who published it, not them

JC: but we_[on] said that we_[on] could maybe...

BP: I! I!

BP, the interviewer, refuses to accept either one of JC's implicatures, reminding him that he alone is responsible for publishing the book.

Nous and *On* in Semi-formal French

Second, reinforcement would confirm that the meaning created by *nous/on* use is in fact created by conversational implicature. Example 9, reproduced below as example 21, hints at reinforcement of the institutional implicature by directly equating *nous* with its intended institutional referent ‘the country’ (i.e., France).

- (21) *Nous* sommes le pays le plus exportateur en Europe en matière de franchise, ce qui s'explique par le fait que *nous* sommes le pays où la franchise est la plus développée et la plus ancienne.

‘*We* are the European country with the highest exportation rate of franchised goods, which can be explained by the fact that *we* are the country where franchises are the most developed and of longest standing.’

4.2 Implicature vs. Formality

As discussed in §1, some speakers rarely use *nous*. Coveney concludes this is because *nous* is primarily a formal or standard speech variant. However, this study has suggested that *nous* and *on* have pragmatically distinct uses. Can these two analyses be reconciled? While I believe the answer is yes, further study is needed involving controlled intersection of formal and institutional topics with informal speech situations/lower-class speakers and (vice versa) informal and non-institutional topics with formal speech situations/upper-class speakers.

One possibility that might be confirmed by such a study is that the institutional implicature of *nous* is simply not present in some speech varieties. Alternatively, it may be that there is a negative correlation between use of institutional concepts and informal speech situations/topics, which would explain the low frequency of *nous* in previously-studied corpora.

5.0 CONCLUSION

There remains much that could be investigated concerning institutional *nous* and distancing *on*. Examination of a larger corpus of interviews, for example, may help formulate a more precise definition of “institution.” What is the range of institutional uses which *nous* can

express? Are there any constraints on what can/cannot be an institution? Likewise, the distancing function of *on* may be more complex than we realize—does it go beyond face-saving alone? Further investigation of the interaction of implicature and style is also warranted, as suggested in the previous section.

Since implicature is created by multiple contextual clues, I do not wish to suggest that *nous* and *on* necessarily express institutionality and distancing in all cases. If the distinction were semantic, this would have to be true. Since we do *not* see categorical usage of this type, we must conclude that the meaning is created pragmatically rather than semantically. In conclusion, the data support the conclusion that the conversational implicatures of *institutionality* and *distancing* are available for the discerning speaker and may be created through a combination of *nous* and *on* with contextual factors.

Appendix: Excerpt from an Interview with President Jacques Chirac⁹

QUESTION - Ce serait de la part de l'Iran, par exemple, le désir de détourner l'attention de l'arme nucléaire? Vous pensez que l'Iran aura l'arme nucléaire dans les deux ans à venir ?

LE PRESIDENT – Cela, c'est un autre problème, nous allons y venir, j'imagine. Ce que je sais, c'est que je me réjouis que le Secrétaire général ait accepté d'envoyer cette mission. Deuxièmement, j'ai aussi demandé que l'Union européenne envoie d'urgence M. Javier SOLANA. Je crois comprendre que ce sera également exécuté.

En tous les cas, nous devons être en permanence en initiative sur cette affaire qui est tout à fait dramatique.

QUESTION - Sur l'arme nucléaire iranienne, les positions ne sont pas claires entre les Américains, les Russes, les Européens. Et pendant ce temps-la, ils construisent, développent cet armement nucléaire...

LE PRESIDENT – Vous avez dit que les choses ne sont pas tout à fait claires en ce qui concerne le jugement porté sur les réactions d'Israël à l'égard du Liban. Elles me paraissent beaucoup plus claires en ce qui concerne la position à l'égard de la progression de l'Iran vers la mise en œuvre d'une arme nucléaire.

Vous le savez en 2004, à travers les accords de Paris, la France, avec l'Allemagne et l'Angleterre, avait négocié un accord avec l'Iran qui avait pour l'objectif de mettre un terme à l'enrichissement de l'uranium, c'est-à-dire aux technologies qui permettent d'accéder à l'arme nucléaire. Puis, en 2005, il y a eu le changement politique en Iran, et l'Iran a dénoncé, en quelque sorte, cet accord et s'est engagé à nouveau, presque à marches forcées, vers la construction de centrifugeuses, vers la mise au point des technologies permettant d'avoir l'arme nucléaire.

Alors là, **(11) il y a tout de même eu une réaction internationale forte, à laquelle d'ailleurs nous avons beaucoup participé puisqu'aux trois pays initiaux, l'Allemagne, l'Angleterre et la France, se sont joints les États-Unis, la Russie et la Chine.** Il y a aujourd'hui un accord et un front commun de la part de ces six pays, auxquels s'ajoutent quelques autres, pour avoir une position extrêmement ferme, ouverte, de main tendue à l'égard de l'Iran. **(12) On a fait des propositions à l'Iran concernant la coopération nucléaire civile, à laquelle ils ont droit et que nous ne contestons pas, concernant la coopération économique, concernant la stabilité politique dans la région.** Et au fond, concernant un élément qui, pour les Iraniens, est en réalité essentiel, même si on n'en parle pas beaucoup: c'est une espèce de reconnaissance par les Américains du régime iranien.

QUESTION - Cette main tendue a été rejetée par l'Iran ?

LE PRESIDENT – Elle n'a pas été rejetée. Cette main tendue, que l'Iran serait bien inspirée de saisir parce qu'elle ne sera pas indéfiniment disponible, cette main tendue a fait l'objet

⁹ Poivre D'Arvor (2006)

d'un : "peut-être". Autrement dit, les autorités iraniennes compétentes, nous ont dit: "Nous donnerons notre réponse dans la deuxième quinzaine d'août". **(13) Nous restons dans l'incertitude.**

Je souhaite que l'on arrive à un accord. Nous aurons à discuter de tout cela au G8 qui se tient à Saint-Pétersbourg, comme vous le savez, à partir de demain et où se retrouveront tous les pays concernés. Mais je suis, là aussi, extrêmement inquiet.

En clair, nous sommes, dans cette région du Moyen-Orient, avec la crise que nous venons d'évoquer, celle d'Israël et du Liban, avec plus généralement des initiatives prises de façon tout à fait irresponsables par le Hamas et le Hezbollah, avec l'affaire de l'Iran, -elles sont plus ou moins interconnectées, vous avez peut-être raison, je ne rentrerai pas dans le détail- nous sommes dans une situation de grande fragilité et porteuse d'instabilité.

Nous sommes dans une situation dangereuse. On est dans une vraie situation dangereuse où il faut faire très, très attention. Toutes les initiatives comptent, tous les mots comptent. On peut basculer d'un côté ou de l'autre.

D'une certaine façon, cela n'a aucun rapport mais cela me rappelle un peu la période de l'Irak, de la guerre de l'Irak, quand on s'est beaucoup interrogé pour savoir qui avait raison de ceux qui voulaient la guerre ou de ceux qui ne la voulaient pas. Je persiste à penser que ceux qui avaient raison étaient ceux qui ne la voulaient pas. Mais nous sommes aussi dans une situation qui doit être conduite avec beaucoup d'expérience, beaucoup de finesse parce que nous sommes en permanence au bord du gouffre.

Nous and On in Semi-formal French

References

- Blanche-Benveniste, C. 1997a. *Approches de la langue parlée*. Paris: Ophrys.
- Blanche-Benveniste, C. 1997b. La notion de variation syntaxique dans la langue parlée. *Langue française* 115. 19-29.
- Blondeau, Helene. 2001. Real-time changes in the paradigm of personal pronouns in Montreal French. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5(4). 453-474.
- Clark, Herbert H. and Catherine R. Marshall. 1981. Definite reference and mutual knowledge. In A.K. Joshi, B.L. Webber, and I.A. Sag (eds.), *Elements of discourse understanding*, 10-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Coveney, Aidan. 2000. Vestiges of *nous* and the 1st person plural verb in informal spoken French. *Language Sciences* 22. 447-481.
- Deshaies, D. 1991. Contribution à l'analyse du français québécois: étude des pronoms personnels. *Revue québécoise de linguistique théorique et appliquée* 10(3). 11-40.
- Laberge, Suzanne and Gillian Sankoff. 1980. Anything you can do. In Gillian Sankoff (ed.), *The social life of language*, 271-294. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Poivre D'Arvor, Patrick. 2006. Interview télévisée de M. Jacques CHIRAC, Président de la République, à l'occasion de la fête nationale, Palais de l'Élysée, le vendredi 14 juillet 2006.
- Posner, Rebecca. 1997. *Linguistic change in French*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Rehner, Katherine and Raymond Mougeon. 2003. The learning of sociolinguistic variation by advanced FSL learners: The case of *nous* versus *on* in immersion French. *SSL* 25. 127-156.
- Stewart, Miranda M. 1995. Personally speaking . . . or not? The strategic value of *on* in face-to-face negotiation. *Journal of French Language Studies* 5(2). 203-223.
- Welton-Lair, Lisa Kay. 1999. *The evolution of the French indefinite pronoun on: A corpus-based study in grammaticalization*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University dissertation.