

Opinion exchange in French conversational interaction

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study is an analysis of the interactional environment of opinion exchange, based on a corpus of seven informal conversations between native speakers of French recorded in 2010. While previous research has highlighted a predilection for diverging views in French conversation, the data here reveal considerable mitigation in the expression of opinions and disagreement. The frequent use of impersonal expressions in the data is also analyzed and contrasted to textbook presentations of opinion exchange. The purpose of the study is to increase awareness among both instructors and learners of the role of expressing and responding to opinions in French conversational interaction, and to offer suggestions on how to integrate this dimension of real-world talk into classroom teaching.

Over the last two decades, a number of data-based research studies have focused on phenomena like turn-taking (Wieland, 1991), listener feedback (Laforest 1994; 1996), interruption, and overlap in ordinary conversation between speakers of French in France and Canada. The research and analysis of Mullan (2002), Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1996), and Béal (1993; 2010), among others, have helped to identify elements of French interactional style. Research has shown, for example, that conversation between speakers of French from France is marked by frequent overlap and animated back-and-forth, reflecting the values of involvement and spontaneity, and that Americans and other native speakers of English, by contrast, tend to wait for an interlocutor to finish before taking a turn, reflecting a cultural respect for autonomy. Both Mullan and Béal have conducted contrastive studies of French speakers from France and English speakers from Australia in professional and private settings. French interactional style as described by these researchers is said to reflect a culture which values divergent opinion rather than consensus, representing a confrontational or conflictual ethos,

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in contrast to Anglophones who are more conflict-averse (Béal, 2010, pp. 59-60; Mullan, 2012, p. 323).

Prior research on opinions

...social conversation, for the French, is a commitment.

Carroll (1987), in her classic analysis of French-American cross-cultural differences, notes that social conversation, for the French, is a commitment; it is taken seriously in the sense that it represents, reflects, and creates a real connection between people: the more you know someone, the more you talk. Ordinary conversation, she writes, is more about relationships than about information or topic (p. 47). In a similar vein, Béal (1993) argues that it is not for nothing that the term *engagé* (as in *littérature engagée*) came into being in France; the term expresses the willingness to render one's views public and defend them. According to Béal (2010), French speakers value clarity, sincerity, and honestly expressing what one thinks (p. 379), and conversation is characterized by the revelation and solicitation of personal opinions, a taste for argument, expression of emotion, and a relatively small number of precautions to protect the interlocutor's face (p. 60).¹ Anglo-Saxon norms, by contrast, underscore the value of reserve, tact, and being non-committal (p. 352).

Mullan's (2010) research has shown that native speakers of English often utter disclaimers functioning to downgrade the value of opinions in favor of fact, a phenomenon she attributes to an Anglo-Australian notion of egalitarianism. The English tag question "isn't it?" (e.g., it's a lovely day, isn't it?) is one manifestation of a "levelling tendency" which functions to invite agreement while still leaving room for a potentially different view. For French speakers, however, according to Mullan, "the emphasis is not so much on tolerating different opinions, as on encouraging them, with a view to creating an exchange" (p. 40). She also points to the emphasis placed on individual judgment in French education, and the expectation instilled early on that students demonstrate this judgment by expressing their own points of view (p. 125). While Mullan states that French speakers do sometimes mitigate opinions, citing Lacroix (1990, pp. 339-340) who suggests in a study on politeness that frequent disagreement actually necessitates tact and mitigation, she does not pursue this issue in her book.²

Research questions

The present study is an attempt to answer the following research questions:

(1) How do speakers introduce statements of opinions? (2) How do speakers elicit opinions from an interlocutor? and (3) How do interlocutors respond to the expression of opinions? Definitions of the word "opinion" in both French and American English dictionaries share common elements. In *Le Petit Robert* (1977), opinion is defined as "*Manière de penser, de juger; attitude de l'esprit qui tient pour vraie une assertion; assertion que l'esprit accepte ou rejette (généralement en admettant une possibilité d'erreur)* [way of thinking, judging; attitude of mind that holds an assertion to be true; assertion that the mind accepts or rejects (usually admitting the possibility of error)] (p. 1313); in *Le Petit Larousse* (1993) as

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“*Jugement, avis émis sur un sujet*” [judgment, stated view on a subject] (p. 719); and in Webster’s (1996) as “(1) a belief or judgment that rests on grounds insufficient to produce complete certainty;” and “(2) a personal view, attitude, or appraisal” (p. 1358). For the purpose of this study, opinion is defined as an expressed judgment, personal view, or evaluation.

Methods

The corpus consists of seven informal conversations ranging in length from seven to twelve minutes each, for a total of 70 minutes of videorecorded data collected in 2010. The study subjects, who volunteered to participate, were fourteen educated native speakers of French from France. All but two were men, and approximate ages ranged from the early 20s to late 30s. One participant was educated in French through high school, four through college and nine through graduate school. Participants were therefore similar with respect to age and education, as in Béal’s (2010) study (p. 20). Nine participants had spent one to four months in the United States; four had lived here for two to three years; one speaker had 20 years’ U.S. residency. Thirteen of the fourteen participants therefore had less than three years’ time in the U.S., and nine participants had less than four months’ time. As Mullan (2012) has pointed out, length of time spent in a foreign country can affect interactional style (p. 330), and, by way of comparison, the participants in her (2012) study of disagreement had spent less than two years in the country of their second language. Participants in the present study were paired according to gender and approximate age. In all cases, the pairs of individuals who conversed were acquainted with each other, and in several cases knew each other quite well; therefore the variable of relationship between interlocutors was constant. Participants were given a choice of topics “on the spot,” with a few minutes to think before speaking. The topics actually chosen included participants’ views of American life based on their personal experience in the U.S., the pros and cons of the European Union, the effect of globalization on French life, the role of French in the world beyond France, and sports in the United States versus France. Participants were instructed to speak informally for approximately ten minutes, and to let the conversation evolve in its own way. The researcher was present at the recordings, as was the case in Mullan’s (2010, 2012) research, but did not participate in any way once the conversations began. Audio files of all conversations were transcribed, resulting in 57 pages of transcription, and the videorecordings were reviewed for nonverbal cues and visual context.

Findings

Expressing opinions

In conversational interaction, opinions can be formulated as simple affirmations or statements, without any signal (Bragger & Rice, p. 120), or they can be explicitly identified or “marked” as opinions by the speaker. In the data of this study, personal expressions like *je pense que*, *je crois que*, or *j’ai l’impression que* [I think that, I believe that, I have the sense that], given in Table 1, and impersonal expressions like *il faut dire que* [you have to admit that] or *il est certain que* [there’s

no doubt that], in Table 2, function to express opinions and introduce ideas, and frequently occur at the beginning of a turn. The identification of an utterance as opinion occurs as a response to a direct question (*qu'est-ce que tu penses de.../ je pense que*) [what do you think of.../ I think that] in the following example:

- A: *est-ce que à ce moment-là tu considères que le facteur langue c'est
c'est un facteur de puissance nationale à l'étranger* [do you think then
that language is a factor in national power abroad]
B: *je pense que ça peut y contribuer...* [I think it can contribute to it...]³

Explicit signaling of opinions is also used for statements that are not necessarily true or verifiable. Thus on the topic of language, cultural influence, and shared history, one speaker posits that the French are closer to Quebecois than to Anglophone Canadians (*je pense qu'on est plus proches des Québécois que du reste du Canada*) [I think we are closer to the Quebecois than to the rest of Canada]. *Penser que* (in the *je* or *tu* form) is used in statements and questions 31 times by six different speakers, *croire que* [to believe or think that] five times by four speakers, and *trouver que* [to find that] occurs only once.⁴ There are no instances of *je ne pense pas que*. The expressions *je pense*, *j'ai l'impression* (without *que*) are usually found at the end of a turn, with falling intonation. *A mon avis* [in my opinion] can occur in the middle of a turn, following a verb. *Pour moi* [for me] indicates personal opinion or interpretation (here's how I see it). As Béal (2010) previously found, the expressions *moi*, *je* and *moi personnellement* [personally, I] in the data are used at the beginning of a turn to emphasize the speaker's point of view (p. 108). Overall, in fast-paced exchanges there is less explicit signaling of opinion.

Table 1

Personal expressions	No. of occurrences
<i>je pense que</i> [I think that]	24
<i>je crois que</i> [I think that]	5
<i>pour moi</i> [for me]	3
<i>à mon avis</i> [in my opinion]	2
<i>il me semble que</i> [it seems to me that]	2
<i>j'ai l'impression que</i> [I have the impression that]	1
<i>je trouve que</i> [I find that]	1
<i>je suis persuadé que</i> [I'm convinced that]	1
<i>je dirais que</i> [I'd say that]	1

Attenuated, nuanced statements of opinion (*j'ai un peu l'impression*, *on a effectivement un peu l'impression*) [I have somewhat the impression, indeed one has somewhat the impression] are common in the corpus. In one case, a statement begins as an expression of certainty but is immediately mitigated: *mais c'est sûr que leuro à mon avis est un facteur vraiment très positif* [it's a fact that the euro in my opinion is a really positive factor]. The modifier *un petit peu* [a little bit] (e.g., *oui c'est effectivement un petit peu dommage*) [yes it is indeed a bit of a shame] is used eight times by five different speakers. Mullan (2010) has noted a number of such mitigating devices, including phrases like *il me semble que* [it seems to me

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that], adverbs like *peut-être* [perhaps], adjectives like *possible* [possibly], and tag questions (*tu ne trouves pas?*) [don't you think?] (p. 126). Not only is attenuation quite frequent in this corpus, but in one conversation, the speakers produce what amounts to a collaborative interpretation, culminating in a formulaic summary of their views (*le sport n'est plus un moyen mais une fin c'est une conception différente du sport*) [sports are no longer a means but an end it's a different concept of sports]. This phenomenon of joint construction of an argument runs counter to the idea of opposition highlighted in much previous research.

Perhaps most striking is the variety and number of impersonal expressions (usually with the subject pronoun *on*) found in the data. A list of these expressions, each of which occurs once, are given in Table 2. Expressions such as *on a l'impression que, il faut dire que* [one has the impression that, you have to say that] are used to express or elicit opinions, introduce topics, or add information to a topic. Expressions like *on a vu que, on peut voir que, or on sait que* [we've seen that, one can see that, we know that] are used in some cases to present an opinion as an observation or statement of common knowledge.

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A number of these expressions are characteristic of argumentation and are of particular interest to more advanced language learners. For instructors, the recurrence of these phrases is a reminder of the importance of the pronoun *on* and its various functions in both formal and informal spoken French.

Table 2

Impersonal expressions

- on peut voir aussi que* [we can see that]
- on a vu que* [we have seen that]
- on voit que* [we see that]
- on sait très bien que* [we know very well that]
- on sait que* [we know that]
- on ne pourrait pas se poser la question* [couldn't one wonder whether]
- on a presque l'impression* [one almost has the impression that]
- on a l'impression que* [one has the impression that]
- on peut se demander* [one could wonder]
- on se demande* [one wonders]
- on peut se poser la question aussi de savoir si* [one can also wonder whether]
- on va se demander on peut se demander pourquoi* [one might wonder one can wonder why]
- on se rend compte que* [one realizes that]
- est-ce qu'on peut considérer que* [can one consider/think that]
- ce qu'il faut se dire c'est que* [what you have to say to yourself is]
- il faut dire que* [you have to recognize that]
- c'est intéressant que* [it's interesting that]
- c'est sûr que* [it's a certainty that]

Eliciting opinions

... there are not many instances of direct elicitation of opinions in the data.

The most basic finding is that there are not many instances of direct elicitation of opinions in the data. As indicated above, the direct question *qu'est-ce que tu penses de...?* (occurring in three cases right at the beginning, to start off the conversation), elicits the symmetrical rejoinder *je pense que*. In two instances this direct question provokes repeated use of *je pense que* in the response, up to four times in one case, suggesting a kind of structural priming, or re-use of the same syntactic form, in the interaction.⁵ Once the conversations are underway, the direct question is not prevalent. Yes/no questions beginning with *est-ce que tu penses que* [do you think that], when they occur, are often found at the beginning of a turn. Indirect, impersonal questions, like *on peut se demander pourquoi...* [one might well wonder why] are used to put ideas and opinions on the table, introduce topics, and guide the talk.

Responding

... the data point to the importance of frequent response in conversational interaction.

Several findings stand out in this category. First, and more generally, the data point to the importance of frequent response in conversational interaction. Most conversations in the corpus are characterized by animated back-and-forth, despite taking place in the formal, unnatural setting of a recording studio. Secondly, disagreement is infrequent in the data, and attenuated through the use of impersonal expressions or other means when it occurs. Mullan (2012) cited the high frequency of disagreement in her data as evidence of the “positive evaluation of disagreements in French interactional style” (p. 323), but in this corpus there is more mitigation, more indirect communication than what is sometimes suggested about the French in conversation in both research and textbooks.

Anglophones' preference for agreement may well be signaled by the phrase “I couldn't agree more, but” (Mullan, 2012), yet in the data of the present study of French speakers, the equivalent phrase, *je suis cent pour cent d'accord avec toi, mais* [I agree one hundred percent, but] is also found. There are many instances of emphatic agreement, showing active participation and engagement; one also finds examples of symmetry and repetition which function to validate an expressed opinion (*en France ça passerait pas très bien / non en France ça passerait très mal*) [in France that would not go over well / no in France that would over very badly].

The following excerpts from two conversations, on the topics of labor strikes and sports, respectively, provide particularly compelling examples of the deferral of disagreement within a turn and over a series of turns. Passages in which hesitation and potential or actual disagreement occur are highlighted in bold. The conversational talk is represented as utterances rather than sentences, and standard written punctuation is omitted. A question mark indicates part of an utterance that is inaudible or hard to understand.

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Transcript #1 [See Appendix A for translations]

- B: *alors ça m'étonne parce que les les donc les gens euh manifestent pour travailler moins mais ce sont des gens qui n'ont ne sont même pas dans le monde du travail dans le cas des lycéens c'est des gens qui ne sont même pas encore dans le monde du travail qui manifestent en disant ben non d'entrée de jeu je ne voudrais pas beaucoup travailler je vais vouloir travailler le moins possible*
- A: *le moins possible voilà*
- B: *en payant (?) évidemment le plus possible*
- A: *le plus possible oui*
- B: *ça c'est un concept que j'ai du mal à comprendre en France **et qui pourtant domine tous les***
- A: ***c'est quelque chose qui n'est pas généralisé** enfin toutes les écoles qui vont sortir les cadres de la France je parle des facultés de droit les classes préparatoires en écoles d'ingénieurs ou des écoles de commerce bizarrement y a jamais de grèves là dedans les élèves sont tous en train de travailler leur concours on peut se poser*
- B: ***mais bon ça fait pas la majorité de la France***
- A: *malheureusement non*

Transcript #2

- B: *ce ce ce qui aussi c'est un autre point euh je pense qu'il existe ici en particulier pour les sports relativement techniques c'est que il y a une barrière financière qui se qui est plus présente ici qu'elle ne l'est en France c'est à dire que les gens qui sont capables de se payer des sports qui nécessitent un matériel relativement cher ne peuvent pas le faire avec un matériel comme on peut le retrouver en France de moins bonne qualité*
- A: ***j'suis pas sûr** pour les euh pour la plupart des sports vraiment les sports rois les quatre sports rois que sont le baseball le basket le football (?) on trouve tout ça très facilement dans les écoles on peut se faire des équipements*
- B: ***oui mais c'est***
- A: *par contre si on adapte un sport plus exotique comme l'escrime*
- B: ***hm***
- A: *là cest un peu plus compliqué pour trouver un club ou acheter du matériel c'est sans doute moins répandu aussi quand on va dans des boutiques comme les Sports Authority **mais les sports de loisir le ski le vélo euh le l'escale les choses comme ça ici sont à mon avis beaucoup moins accessibles qu'ils le sont chez nous***
- B: ***possible euh quoiqu'en France***
- A: ***euh** [still wants to speak, tries to hold floor]*
- B: *ça n'a pas toujours été non plus euh*
- A: *pour deux raisons [continues idea]*

The hesitation (*hm*; *euh*) and mitigation in these examples are indicative of disagreement as a dispreferred response.⁶ If the rejoinder in an adjacency pair is

a dispreferred response, there may be delay or elaboration of some kind. In the second excerpt in particular, disagreement is expressed in mild terms (*j'suis pas sûr; possible; oui mais*) [I'm not sure; maybe; yes but] and is not forthright; rather the speakers need some time to “work through” the talk and give voice to their views.

This finding does not confirm what has generally been said about the French predilection for conflict in previous research, perhaps due to situational factors. In this study, speakers were recorded in a studio, with a researcher present, although sitting at a distance; both the place and context were academic. Several participants themselves said, in brief follow-up interviews on what makes for interesting conversation, that they were more respectful and formal than they would have been had the topic been more mundane. Situational factors which might affect the liveliness or contentiousness of a spontaneous conversational exchange include (1) topic (how much you know and how much you care); (2) relationship and rapport between speakers (the closer people are, the less guarded they feel); (3) venue and context (formal or informal). While the performance of conversation in a recording studio differs from natural conversation with respect to purpose and situation, likely increasing a sense of formality, at least initially, all participant pairs knew each other, and some quite well, which could have offset that dimension. On the other hand, in Mullan's (2012) study on disagreement, participants were relative strangers (p. 331), and disagreement was still found to be relatively unmitigated.

With respect to agreement, the data of this corpus contain various types of responses, including long phrases like *je suis tout à fait d'accord avec toi* [I agree completely with you] and short rejoinders such as *c'est vrai* [that's true], *voilà tout à fait* [that's it absolutely] and *exactement* [exactly]. Béal (2010) has noted the emphatic character of many short reactions in French conversation (such as the triplets *oui oui oui* or *non non non*), even in formal, professional contexts (p. 107), and this kind of repetition is found in the present corpus as well (*c'est sûr c'est sûr; c'est vrai c'est vrai; c'est ça c'est ça* [that's right]; *ah oui ça je suis d'accord ça je suis d'accord* [on that I agree]).

Participants' opinions on opinions

Following each conversation, participants were asked by the researcher to comment on what makes for a good conversation among friends. Among the points made by more than one participant are the following:

- The interlocutors should have the same level of knowledge about and interest in the topic. It is desirable to have a common interest, even somewhat similar views, but with nuances, and small divergences.
- It is important to have a real dialogue and more or less equal participation by all in a multi-party conversation, not one person who dominates.
- It is interesting to have some difference of opinion, but not necessarily a strong divergence of views. Completely opposing ideas give rise to conversations which are lively but not very constructive because each

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person tends to “dig in” or get entrenched in his or her own opinions. On the other hand, complete agreement results in each person concluding that what he or she thinks is right. If the speakers are completely in agreement, there is no conversation.

- Having different opinions, even on small points, allows for discussion, and a chance to defend one’s point of view.
- Flexibility, being open to other people’s points of view, learning from others are important. Each person brings something to the conversation, so that there is an exchange, a learning process.
- There is a difference between relaxed, informal conversation between friends and a real discussion of a serious topic, in which there is a substantive exchange of ideas; in an informal conversation there is more overlap, interruption, cutting people off, finishing their sentences. There is also more *sincérité, franchise* [sincerity, candor]. In a more formal conversation, there is a “barrier” of respect.

These comments are pertinent for many learners of French, who are likely to find themselves in conversations in more formal settings and with people they do not know well. Learners who study abroad for longer periods of time may, on the other hand, become familiar with conventions of informal talk among friends. The point is made repeatedly, in any case, that nuanced difference of opinion and flexibility of thought are key to a successful exchange of views.

Pedagogical implications

Numerous researchers have made the case for pedagogical materials based on real spoken language (Barraja-Rohan, 2000; Béal, 2010; Beeching, 1997; Liddicoat, 2000; McCarthy, 1998; McCarthy & Carter, 1995; O’Connor Di Vito, 1991). The function of expressing opinions, like many others, is often presented in textbooks via lists of expressions (e.g., *il est bon que*) [it’s good that], which are not selected based on frequency of use in spoken, conversational French. Furthermore, these expressions are listed as lexical items, without interactional context, leaving students somewhat at a loss as to how to actually use them.⁷ The language function is also closely connected to the grammatical agenda. Expression of opinions, for example, is associated with the grammatical topic of subjunctive mood, and in some cases, particularly in intermediate-level textbooks, exercises may provide more practice of the grammatical structure than the communicative function. For example, students may be asked to supply an impersonal expression (such as *il est juste / stupide / essentiel / merveilleux que...*) [it is fair / stupid / essential / wonderful that...] followed by a subjunctive verb in order to complete a statement of opinion.⁸

The greatest number of expressions in textbooks that are also found in the data of this corpus are expressions for asking and offering opinions. However, while impersonal expressions (e.g., *on peut voir que*) [one can see that] are frequent in the corpus, textbook lists, by contrast, favor personal expressions with pronouns *je, tu, and vous* (*j’affirme que, je suis certain que*) [I maintain that, I am sure that].⁹

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The greatest number of textbook expressions not found in the data are impersonal expressions of the structure *Il est* + adjective + *que* (*Il est important que*), and expressions having to do with agreement and disagreement. For example, statements like the following, drawn from a variety of textbooks, do not occur in the corpus:

<i>J'approuve totalement ce que tu as/vous avez dit.</i>	I completely approve of what you've said.
<i>J'apprécie ton point de vue.</i>	I appreciate your point of view.
<i>Cette idée a ses bons côtés.</i>	This idea has its good points.
<i>Vous avez raison / tort.</i>	You are right / wrong.
<i>Je suis contre!</i>	I'm opposed to / against this!
<i>Je n'accepte pas votre point de vue.</i>	I don't accept your point of view.
<i>C'est ridicule, ça!</i>	That's ridiculous!
<i>Mais ce n'est pas vrai!</i>	But that's not true!
<i>Je ne peux pas vous laisser dire que...</i>	I can't let you say that...
<i>Tu as/Vous avez tout à fait tort de dire que...</i>	You're completely wrong to say that...
<i>Excusez-moi, mais ce que vous dites est totalement stupide.</i>	Excuse me, but what you're saying is totally stupid.

While it is not impossible to hear statements like these in real world talk, some are quite direct and/or contentious, and would be more likely to occur either in very informal situations such as close friends arguing, or possibly in televised political debates. Students need to learn to interact in those situations they are most likely to encounter, which may well call for politeness and attenuation.

Beyond the appropriateness of the inventory itself, learners need some sense of how these functions occur sequentially in spoken interaction (Barraja-Rohan, 2000, p. 72). For materials writers, this means including planned but unscripted recorded conversation between native speakers, with exercises to guide students' observation of the interaction (tone, involvement, or turn-taking), beginning at least at the intermediate level. At advanced levels, instructors can expose students to input materials such as conversations available on-line (film or TV excerpts, news interviews) or, when possible, transcripts of conversations to analyze.¹⁰

McCarthy (1998) and others (Barraja-Rohan, 2000; Richards, 1990; Riggensbach, 1991) have pointed out the need for learners to acquire follow-up phrases in communicative exchange. Short, evaluative comments with the structure *c'est* + adjective (*c'est vrai*), like those mentioned earlier in the context of agreement, are frequent rejoinders in everyday conversation. Adjectives in French are most often taught in textbook grammar sections as noun modifiers, as in *une longue histoire* [a long story] or *une ville intéressante* [an interesting city], with emphasis on agreement of adjectives with nouns, and placement before or after the noun. However, it would be valuable, at an earlier point in the instructional program, to teach adjectives with a lexical rather than grammatical focus, teaching only the masculine singular form, in frequently occurring communicative contexts

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(i.e., responding), so that learners have a variety of useful, easy things to say in real conversation.¹¹

It is important to be able to say something even when one may not know enough about the topic to have an opinion, in order to stay engaged. In one of the conversations of this study, one speaker was a good deal more knowledgeable about the topic than the other; he talked more, and expressed and inquired about opinions more. Nevertheless his partner kept responding, and maintained presence in the conversation by doing so. The strategies he used included latching on or linking to what the other speaker said through repetition or tokens like *voilà* or *c'est ça*, asking questions, using phrases like *il me semble que*, invoking personal anecdotes and examples (*ça me fait penser à...*) [that reminds me of], and repeating the other speaker's words and ideas (*comme tu disais...*) [as you were saying]. Other strategies might include topic shifts (Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1994, p. 43), using a question like *est-ce que tu penses que...* [do you think that...], and introducing new topics or sub-topics (Richards, 1990, p. 71), with a phrase such as *un autre point c'est que...* [another point is that...].

It is no small achievement for students to grasp the idea of communicative norms and values, and the fact that conversational interaction has culture-specific dimensions. To reach this objective students need to observe native speakers in videorecorded interaction, and notice behavioral differences. They can then try out ways to elicit and express opinions in conversation, and respond to what others say.¹² Classroom output activities might include free conversation with partners or in a whole group, videoconferencing with French students, videorecorded interviews (individual or in pairs) with international students on cultural questions, mini-group projects on a current event topics, an in-class roundtable with native speaker guests, or a conversation hour with native speakers from the community and university.

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The goal, as McCarthy (1998) puts it, is to “observe, discuss and come to understand features of interaction rather than to ‘learn’ or ‘imitate’ them (p. 57). Having an opinion, expressing an opinion, and learning from different points of view are valued by French speakers when they converse. Data from spoken interaction can provide students with strategies for saying something even when they may not know enough about the topic to have an opinion, and for keeping the ball in play through engaged response. Students who engage in more formal conversations with native speakers of French can thus learn to express themselves and respond in an engaged and polite manner. Those who have the opportunity to participate in informal conversations in a study abroad context, for example, may go on to appreciate somewhat different norms of conversation among close friends. Recognizing and showing signs of involvement, interest, agreement, and disagreement is an important if somewhat neglected dimension of second or

foreign language learning, and a potential source of real enjoyment for speakers, both in classroom interaction and real world talk.

Notes

1. Face is defined by Brown and Levinson (1978) as the “public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (p. 61). Negative face relates to the notion of freedom from imposition, and positive face to the positive self-image of the interlocutors. While the content of face is culture-specific, the concept itself, and the orientation to face in interaction, are said to be universal.
2. To allow for comparison of the present study to previous research, the parameters of Mullan’s and Béal’s studies, which specifically target the expression of opinions, are given here. Mullan’s (2012) study on disagreement consisted of three short excerpts of conversation, one between two native speakers of Australian English, another between two native speakers of French, and the last between a native speaker of Australian English and a native speaker of French speaking English, for a total of six participants. The corpus of her (2010) book consisted of ten hours of separate French and English conversations, involving a total of 24 native speaker participants. Her (2002) article on French interactional style involved four recorded conversations of 45 minutes each between native speakers of French, for a total of nine participants, including the researcher. The analysis in Béal’s (2010) book is based on excerpts from several large corpora gathered in France and Australia in both professional and private settings, as well as reported anecdotes, and recorded interviews with French and Australian informants. Her (1993) article on cross-cultural talk in the workplace involved visits to a French company in Australia, interviews with 30 individuals of French and Australian nationality, and the recording and transcription of 15 hours of conversation. Other research on French interactional style referenced in this article includes smaller scale studies like Wieland’s (1991) analysis of turn-taking, based on four hours of recorded dinner conversations with a total of 16 participants, and studies based on larger corpora such as Laforest’s (1994, 1996) analyses of backchanneling cues, in which 87 narratives, varying in length from 13 to 416 seconds, were selected from a total of 308.
3. All translations from French are my own. In many cases, there may be other equally viable possibilities.
4. See Mullan’s (2010) extensive analysis of the differences between these three expressions (pp. 50-52) and their frequent function as discourse markers (p. 41).
5. On imitation and priming in conversation, see Branigan, Pickering, & Cleland (2000).
6. In certain types of conversational exchanges (e.g., invitations, requests), some responses are considered “preferred” in the discourse, and are easier to use than others (Brown & Levinson, 1978, p. 38). Acceptance of an invitation is a

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preferred response, for example. Refusal is considered a dispreferred response, and often requires more work: explanation, hedging, or apology. In the case of opinions, disagreement is dispreferred and therefore more complicated. Mullan (2012) argues that disagreements are not a face threat for French speakers in the same way as for Australian English speakers (p. 325). Béal's (2010) analyses similarly reveal a preference for negative politeness strategies and "higher concern for non-imposition" among Australian speakers, as contrasted to French. See, by way of contrast, Lüger's (1999) important discussion of attenuated disagreement in French (pp. 139-140).

7. McCarthy (1998) has pointed to an "overly simplistic tendency to equate speech-acts with particular linguistic formulae, a sort of 'phrasicon' of speech acts, or 'function'" (p. 19), and the tendency to invent these formulae rather than look at real data. McCarthy, McCarten, and Sandiford's (2005) ESL textbook *Touchstone*, based on the North American English portion of the Cambridge International Corpus, is a welcome exception to the traditional model.
8. All examples are drawn from the following textbooks, currently on the market in the U.S. and France: *Campus*, *Du tac au tac*, *Entretiens*, *Intrigue*, *Liaisons*, *Studio +*, and *Tu sais quoi?*
9. A notable exception is French published *Studio +*, which includes several impersonal expressions with subject pronoun *on* (*oui, mais on pourrait dire aussi que...*) [yes, but one could say that] under the category of *Nuancer un argument* [to attenuate an argument] (Bérard, E., Breton, G., Canier, Y., & Tagliante, C., 2004, p. 82).
10. For ideas and activities on the teaching of conversation and interactional norms, see Liddicoat and Crozet (2001); Thornbury & Slade (2006); Dörnyei & Thurrell (1994).
11. The conversation manual *Tu sais quoi?!*, for example, offers lists of short positive and negative reactions, as well as expressions of doubt and disagreement in the first chapter (Dolidon, A., & López-Burton, N., 2012, pp. 11-12. See also *Personnages* (Oates, M.D., & Dubois, J.F., 2010, p. 192) for an effective activity consisting of statements to which students are asked to respond with brief evaluations such as *C'est normal* [that's normal] or *C'est dommage* [that's too bad].
12. See Appendix B for examples of activities to practice these functions.

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Appendix A

Translation of transcripts

Transcript #1

- B: so that surprises me because people uh demonstrate in order to work less but these are people who haven't who are not even in the workplace in the case of highschoolers they're people who are not even in the workplace who are demonstrating saying no right off the bat I don't want to work much I want to work the least amount possible
- A: the least amount possible that's it
- B: getting paid (?) obviously the greatest amount possible
- A: the greatest amount possible yes
- B: that's a concept I have a hard time understanding in France **and which nevertheless dominates all the**
- A: **it's something that is not universal** though all the schools that graduate executives in France I'm speaking of law schools preparatory schools

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engineering schools or business schools strangely enough there are never strikes in those schools the students are all busy preparing their exams one begins to wonder

B: **but that's not the majority of French**

A: unfortunately not

Transcript #2

B: what what what also there's another point uh I think there is here especially for relatively technical sports there's a financial barrier that one finds here not in France which is to say that people who can pay for sports that require expensive equipment can't do it with equipment like what one finds in France of lesser quality

A: **I'm not sure** for uh for most sports really the four top sports baseball basketball soccer (?) you find all that very easily in schools one can get equipment

B: **yes but it's**

A: on the other hand if you adopt a more exotic sport like fencing

B: **hm**

A: then it's a little more complicated to find a club or buy equipment it's probably harder to find also when you go into stores like Sports Authority (?) **but recreational sports skiing biking uh climbing things like that here in my opinion are much less accessible than they are at home**

B: **perhaps uh although in France**

A: **uh** [still wants to speak; tries to hold floor]

B: it hasn't always been

A: for two reasons [continues idea]

Appendix B

Classroom activities to practice opinion exchange

The following exercises are intended for pair work in the classroom but could also be done individually. Intermediate level students can practice statements and responses as given, with a simple comment if appropriate. Advanced level students can be tasked with researching topics beforehand, so as to be able to elaborate more fully their opinions. All expressions for stating and responding to opinions are derived from the corpus of this study.

Eliciting and expressing an opinion

Form a question with the opening *Qu'est-ce que tu penses de/du/de la/ des...* [What do you think of ...]. Your partner will reply using one of the following expressions to introduce his/her opinion: *Je pense que* [I think that]; *je crois que* [I think, believe that]; *il me semble que* [it seems to me that]; *j'ai l'impression que* [I have the impression/sense that]; *pour moi* [for me].

1. *l'enseignement des langues aux Etats-Unis* [language teaching in the U.S.]
2. *l'influence des médias sur l'opinion publique* [the influence of media on

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public opinion]

3. *les transports publics en France* [public transportation in France]
4. *les sports professionnels* [professional sports]
5. *l'Union européenne* [the European Union]

Responding to an opinion

Respond to the following opinions stated by your partner by choosing one or more of the expressions below. You can repeat the expression for more emphasis if you like (*c'est vrai, c'est vrai*), for this is often done by French speakers in conversation. Make an additional comment if possible.

C'est vrai [right; that's true]; *c'est sûr* [that's for sure; absolutely]; *oui bien sûr* [yes, of course]; *ça je suis d'accord* (on that I agree); *oui, là dessus je suis assez d'accord* [yes, on that I pretty much agree]; *je suis cent pour cent d'accord* [I'm agree one hundred percent]; *possible* [maybe]; *je ne suis pas sûr(e)* [I'm not sure].

1. *Je crois que l'anglais est facile à apprendre* [I think English is easy to learn].
2. *Je pense que le gouvernement doit subventionner les arts* [I think the government should subsidize the arts].
3. *Il me semble que l'économie américaine va mal* [It seems to me that the American economy is not doing well].
4. *A mon avis, les parents doivent aider leurs enfants avec les devoirs* [In my view, parents should help children with their homework].
5. *On doit pouvoir voter à l'âge de 16 ans* [People should be able to vote at age 16].

Responding by adding a contrasting view [Knutson, 2010; Adapted from Thornbury & Slade, 2006, pp. 258-259]

Respond to what your partner says by adding a contrasting idea. Choose from the expressions below to begin your statement.

Oui, mais... [Yes, but...]; *Je suis d'accord, mais...* [I agree, but...]; *C'est vrai, mais...* [That's true, but...]; *Mais par contre...* [But on the other hand...].

Modèle: A: *Tout est si cher actuellement, pas vrai?* [Everything's so expensive today, isn't it?]

B: *Oui, mais les salaires ont augmenté en même temps.* [Yes, but salaries have gone up at the same time.]

1. *Ce café est vraiment fort!* [This coffee is really strong!]
2. *Le français est si difficile.* [French is so hard.]
3. *Il peut faire très froid en Nouvelle Angleterre.* [It can get very cold in New England.]
4. *L'assurance médicale est nécessaire pour tout le monde.* [Health insurance is necessary for everyone.]
5. *Les Américains n'ont pas besoin de parler des langues étrangères.* [Americans don't need to speak foreign languages.]

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The following activities are particularly appropriate for advanced level conversation courses.

Interviews avec un individu francophone

Vous allez interviewer un individu francophone en français pour comprendre son l'opinion sur un sujet ou un événement de l'actualité aux Etats-Unis ou ailleurs, ou sa réaction à un film récent ou classique.

Proposez ces sujets à l'individu et laissez-le choisir celui qu'il préfère. Ensuite, faites un peu de recherche avant l'interview. Par exemple, s'il s'agit d'un film, visionnez-le à l'avance et lisez quelques revues critiques. S'il s'agit d'un sujet de l'actualité, lisez des articles de la presse francophone pour pouvoir en parler.

L'interview doit durer au moins 10 minutes. Pendant l'interview, prenez des notes ou enregistrez-la pourvu que la personne soit d'accord.

Ecrivez un résumé de l'interview (une demi-page minimum). Qu'est-ce que vous avez appris et qu'en pensez-vous? Quelles étaient les idées ou opinions les plus intéressantes de l'interview? Dans votre résumé, utilisez le discours indirect (e.g., le professeur Leblanc a dit qu'il trouvait le film superbe...).

[You will interview a native or fluent French speaker in French in order to understand his or her opinion on a topic or news event in the U.S. or other country, or his or her reaction to a recent or classic film.

Propose a few topics to the interviewee and let him or her choose one. Then do some research on the topic before the interview. For example, if the topic is a film, watch the film beforehand and read a few critical reviews. If the topic is a current event, read articles from the Francophone press in order to be able to talk about it.

The interview should last at least 10 minutes. During the interview, take notes or record it providing the interviewee consents.

Write a summary of the interview (one half-page minimum). What did you learn and what do you think about what was said? What were the most interesting ideas or opinions expressed? In your summary, use indirect discourse (e.g., Professor Leblanc said that he found the film superb...)]

Conversations avec un(e) partenaire

Avec un(e) partenaire, consultez un site web d'informations en français (par exemple www.tv5.org, www.france24.fr, ou le site d'un journal francophone) pour trouver un article qui traite d'un sujet qui vous intéresse. Faites une photocopie de l'article, que vous rendrez à votre professeur avant l'enregistrement.

Enregistrez sur vidéo une conversation dans laquelle vous parlerez avec votre partenaire de l'actualité que vous avez choisie. Exprimez votre opinion, dites si vous êtes d'accord ou pas avec votre partenaire; discutez un peu de ce que vous avez lu. Durée: 5 minutes.

N'oubliez pas que l'expression des opinions dans la conversation est valorisée chez les Français. Il ne s'agit pas forcément de vous disputer avec votre partenaire, et il ne s'agit pas non plus d'un débat. Mais pour que la conversation soit animée et intéressante,

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quelques différences d'opinion s'imposent. Pensez aussi au chevauchement de parole, à la répétition ou la reprise des mots de l'interlocuteur, et aux expressions que vous apprenez pour exprimer vos opinions.

[With a partner, consult a news web site in French (for example www.tv5.org, www.france24.fr, or the website of on-line Francophone newspaper) in order to find an article on a topic of interest to you. Make a photocopy of the article to give to your instructor before the recording.

Video-record a conversation in which you speak with your partner about the news topic you have chosen. Express your opinion, say whether you agree or disagree with your partner; discuss what you have read. Length: 5 minutes.

Remember that expressing opinions in conversation is valued by French speakers. It is not necessarily a question of arguing with your partner, and it is not a debate. But in order for the conversation to be animated and interesting, a few differences of opinion are in order. Think about overlap, repetition and uptake of what your partner says, and expressions you have learned for expressing opinions in French.]