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 context of conversational narrative with “faithful” understood here as referring to both content 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, their interpretations 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:

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.

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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 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 recycling 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, with-out 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:

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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... 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 writer to “lambast” 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
  - exhalation
  - // 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

References
Holt, Elizabeth. 1999. Just gassing: An analysis of direct reported speech in a conversa-