

How the French get Engaged An analysis of French interactional style

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1. Introduction

This paper looks at the cultural concept of *l'engagement* (literally 'commitment' or 'involvement'), and how this relates to French interactional style. It is based on a corpus of the recorded conversations of six native French speakers. The conversations were analysed with the aim of looking at some of the interactional strategies used and the importance of *l'engagement*. Using a short excerpt from one of the recorded conversations, certain features of French interactional style will be examined, such as frequent overlaps and disagreements, all of which can be seen to display a closeness between the interlocutors. The paper also looks at the concept of *renvoyer la balle* ('toss the ball back'), an important aspect of French interactional style. The paper will show how French interaction is a combination of co-operation and conflict, and propose that both of these are essential elements in the concept of *l'engagement*.

1.1 French interactional style

À Paris, l'engueulade est un rite extrêmement stylisé obéissant à ce qu'on pourrait appeler le Code Incivil: plus vous êtes grossier avec les gens et plus vous valorisez leur existence.... La dispute est au Parisien d'aujourd'hui ce que la pensée était pour Descartes: Vitupero, ergo sum! Car, pour les initiés, cela veut dire, en fait: 'Nous sommes à Paris, et il est évident que vous faites partie de la tribu!'

'In Paris, bawling people out is an extremely stylised ritual which obeys what could be called the Uncivil Code: the ruder you are to people, the more you value their existence.... Arguing is to today's Parisian what thinking was to Descartes: *Vitupero, ergo sum!* Because to the initiated, what it means in fact, is: 'We are in Paris, and it's obvious that you're one of us!'

(The Key)

In an attempt to understand this reputation that the French have earned, my work follows that of Christine Béal who recorded interactions between French and Australian employees at a French company in Melbourne in the early 1990s (1990, 1992, 1993 inter alia). She proposed that the notion of *l'engagement* ('commitment'), and being *engagé* ('committed', 'involved') in a conversation were extremely important in French interactional style.

Using the notion of Cultural Scripts (Wierzbicka 1994), Béal has proposed the following cultural rule for *l'engagement* (1993: 102):

l'engagement

Chacun a le droit d'avoir ses propres désirs, ses propres opinions, ses propres sentiments. Mais chacun a le devoir d'exprimer ses désirs, ses opinions, ses sentiments, de façon claire pour les autres, et si les autres veulent l'influencer, il a le devoir de défendre et de justifier ses désirs, ses opinions, ses sentiments.

'Everyone has the right to have their own wishes, their own opinions, their own feelings. But everyone has the duty to express their wishes, opinions,

feelings, clearly to others, and if others want to influence them, they have the duty to defend and justify their wishes, opinions, feelings.'

Using the same style, I propose the following definition of *s'engager* ('to commit oneself', 'to become involved in'), which outlines the ideals of French conversational style (adapted from Béal 1993: 103):

someone is saying something now
 I think something
 I want to say it now
 I can say it now
 if I say it this person can know I feel something good towards them
 they can feel something good towards me

This notion of positive feelings comes from knowing that your interlocutor is interested in what you are saying and wants to contribute to the conversation, because you have given them food for thought. French interactional style permits, and indeed encourages, contribution to the conversation while the interlocutor is still speaking. This overlapping shows that one is so interested and involved (*engagé*) in the conversation, that one cannot wait until the end of the interlocutor's turn before contributing. At the same time, disagreement in French conversation shows that you have heard your interlocutor, and want to share your opinion with them. Arguing affirms a closeness between the speakers, and shows that their relationship can withstand differing opinions.

Béal found that these features of French interactional style (among others) contributed to the Australian English speakers' notion that the French are 'rude' or 'arrogant' (1990: 18). French conversational strategies such as frequent overlaps, finishing each others' sentences, and punctuating the discourse with personal remarks and (often differing) opinions, are ways of showing spontaneity, involvement, enthusiasm and interest (i.e. *l'engagement*) for French speakers, and bring the conversants closer together (1993: 103). These strategies do not share the same positive values in Anglo interactional style.

The aim of this paper is to examine some of the interactional features of an excerpt of a conversation between two native French speakers, and to look at how these features relate to the notion of *l'engagement*.

2. Methodology

My findings are based on four tape-recorded conversations of 45 minutes each, which were analysed using a Conversation Analysis approach (cf. Sacks 1987, Schegloff 1995). The participants of each conversation were two native speakers of French (one male, one female), and myself.¹ An attempt was made to ensure that the conversations were as similar as possible, and that the topics discussed were the same. These included life in Australia, the difference between the French and the Australians, the role of honesty in a relationship and the importance of expressing one's opinion.

The eight consultants² were chosen on the basis of the length of time they had been in Australia. Seven of the consultants had been here for less than two years, and five of them for a matter of weeks only. The consultants were all aged between 20 and 32, except for one who was 61. However, as this was not a sociolinguistic study, I did not control for age, gender, socio-economic background or town of origin of my consultants (two were from Paris while the others were from different parts of France). While I recognise that these factors could cause certain differences, I believe that the similarities displayed by all of the

¹ My participation in the conversation was limited to asking occasional questions to facilitate the conversation, and to adding occasional comments.

² Two of the consultants were used only to make up numbers, (to enable me to study their partner's interactional style) as one had been in Australia for more than two years, and one was French Canadian.

- Irène: *ah! je m'en fiche ... et ben oui j'suis pas payée j'ai quand même fait le déplacement hein donc ... [ça prouve quand même]*
 Guillaume: *[elle est riche] .. elle est d'une famille juive très riche comme ça*
 Irène: *ah! le racisme! =*
 Guillaume: *= ????? ???? ?*
 Irène: *???? et euh .. et euh non non mais c'est vrai que euh .. euh .. diplomate parfois [ça]*
 Guillaume: *[c'est] bien être gosse de riches hein! =*
 34 Irène: *= je suis pas une gosse de riches arrête tes conneries =*
 Guillaume: *= c'est une bourgeoise [parisienne gosse de riche]*
 Irène: *[j'suis pas une gosse de riches] j'suis pas une bourgeoise du tout [c'est]*
 Guillaume: *[bourgeoise!]*
 Irène: *c'est pas vrai! =*
 Guillaume: *= c'est c'est ... c'est =*
 Irène: *= c'est des valeurs c'est différent tu sais une ????? c'est différent =*
 Guillaume: *= elle a des thunes*
 42 Irène: *un peu .. arrête de dire ça c'est pas vrai attends euh .. franchement si j'avais des thunes comme ça je ... je ... j'sais pas je serais pas... je serais pas à me chercher à partager un appartement je [m'offrirais]*
 43 Guillaume: *[mais tu] veux partager un appartement parce que tu aimes le contact*
 44 Irène: *voilà ah moi [c'est]*
 45 Guillaume: *[moi j'ai] un copain qui arrive et qui cherche un apparte ... et une girl-mate*
 Irène: *quel âge [il a?]*
 Guillaume: *[une] room-mate .. vingt sept*
 Irène: *c'est bon!*
 Guillaume: *ah la la!*
 Irène: *vendu!*
 Guillaume: *d'accord*
 Irène: *vendu! =*
 53 Guillaume: *= tu vois? il y a que le sexe qui l'intéresse!*
 Irène: *c'est pas vrai! c'est .. c'est pour ça que .. [ce matin]*
 55 Guillaume: *[mais il] est pas beau il est gros il est roux bleack!*
 56 Irène: *c'est pour ça que ce matin je le .. j'ai visité ... euh ... enfin mon ex est roux c'est pour ça que j'ai [visité]*
 Guillaume: *[ah!] =*
 Irène: *= euh euh euh euh ... un appartement ce matin avec deux nanas pourtant euh bien loin mais deux nanas je préférerais donc comme quoi pf bon d'accord d'accord ce soir je vais visiter un apparte avec un mec mais bon*
 Guillaume: *ah!*
- 1 Guillaume: *Honesty is genetic yeah =*
 Irène: *=I think that a good compro[mise]*
 Guillaume: *[it] must be gene[tic]*
 4 Irène: *[yeah] no .. a good compromise is diplomacy in any case that's for sure no in that respect er yeah =*
 5 Guillaume: *= no way!*
 Irène: *yes it is! =*

- 7 Guillaume: = are you mad diplomacy there's nothing more er ... nobody
 lies more er =
 Irène: = no! =
 Guillaume: = steals [more]
 Irène: [no] that's not [true]
 Guillaume: [than a] diplomat they'll take you
 for a ride =
 Irène: = no diplomacy [????]
 Guillaume: [Oh] come here come here come here come here
 Irène: no! [no]
 Guillaume: [you] know the snake in [er in]
 Irène: [????] yeah yeah
 Guillaume: Jungle [Book]
 Irène: [Book]
- 19 Guillaume: 'trust [in me...]' (sings)
 Irène: [(sings)] [???? a French guy]
- 21 Guillaume: [no no no] and all that just to swallow you whole you
 must be kidding
 Irène: no I've got the .. no no ... diplomacy I .. that's just it as a poor trainee
 Guillaume: ah!
 Irène: but that's just it yes but no but =
 Guillaume: = the poor trainee! =
 Irène: = poor trainee [at
 XXXX] (name of company)
 Guillaume: [all
 that because she's not paid!]
 Irène: ah! I don't care ... and well yes I'm not paid and I did pay my own way
 out here so ... [that just proves]
 Guillaume: [she's rich] .. she's from a rich Jewish family
 Irène: ah! racism! = (referring to an earlier topic of conversation)
 Guillaume: = ??? ????
 Irène: ??? and er .. and er no no but it's true that er .. er .. sometimes a
 diplomat [it]
 Guillaume: [it's] good being a kid from a rich family huh! =
 34 Irène: = I'm not a kid
 from a rich family stop talking bullshit =
 Guillaume: = She's a bourgeois [rich kid from
 Paris]
 Irène: [I'm not a rich
 kid] I'm not at all bourgeois [that's]
 Guillaume: [bourgeois!]
 Irène: not true! =
 Guillaume: = it's it's ... it's =
 Irène: = it's a question of values it's different you
 know a ??? it's different =
 Guillaume: = she's rolling in it
- 42 Irène: a bit .. stop saying that it's not true hang on er .. honestly if I was rolling
 in it I ... I ... I dunno I wouldn't be ... I wouldn't be looking for an
 apartment to share [I'd get myself]
- 43 Guillaume: [but you] want to share an apartment because you like
 the contact
- 44 Irène: exactly oh for me [it's]
- 45 Guillaume: [I've] got a friend arriving who's looking for a flat ...
 and a girl-mate
 Irène: how old [is he?]
 Guillaume: [a] room-mate .. twenty-seven
 Irène: okay then!
 Guillaume: oh la la!

- Irène: sold!
 Guillaume: alright
 Irène: sold! =
 53 Guillaume: = you see? she's only interested in sex!
 Irène: that's not true! that's .. that's why .. [this morning]
 55 Guillaume: [but he's] not good-looking
 he's fat he's got ginger hair yuck!
 56 Irène: that's why this morning I .. I visited er ... well my ex has ginger
 hair that's why I [visited]
 Guillaume: [ah!] =
 Irène: = er er er er ... an apartment this morning
 with two girls it's quite far out though but I preferred two girls so
 there well okay okay tonight I'm going to see a place with a guy
 but anyway
 Guillaume: ah!

3. Overlaps

Overlaps are an essential feature of French interactional style, used to express interest and show involvement (or *l'engagement*) in the conversation. According to Carroll (1988: 36-37), the 'continual interruptions in French conversation' are 'in no way a matter of cutting someone off in the middle of a word or sentence ... but to show my interest in the other's remark ...'

This excerpt of 1:40 minutes contains only a few lines without overlapping or latching speech.⁵ This illustrates the essential nature in French conversation of what we call in English 'interruptions'. These overlaps show that one is listening, involved (or *engagé*) in, and therefore committed to the conversation. This is shown by some of the examples in the excerpt above.

The speakers consistently appear to come in when they know what the other is saying or going to say. This is demonstrated in lines 1 - 4, where Guillaume and Irène are discussing honesty and diplomacy. In (1) Guillaume pauses briefly and Irène comes in immediately to say what she thinks about a good compromise (2). When Guillaume realises what she is going to say he interrupts her and finishes his sentence (3). When Irène sees that Guillaume is going to repeat himself, she breaks in (4) to finish what she had started to say. This is an example of what might be considered a more competitive style of overlap, i.e. both speakers are vying for the floor. However, this is still a sign of involvement and desire to participate in the conversation.

Lines 42 - 45 show a similar situation, where Irène is defending herself and saying that if she had a lot of money she wouldn't be looking for an apartment to share, rather she would get her own place (42). When Guillaume realises what she is going to say he points out (43) that she wants to share an apartment because she likes contact (with other people). When Irène agrees with him and starts to explain why (44), Guillaume cuts in and tells Irène that he has a friend arriving who's looking for a place to share (45). We can see the degree of involvement (*l'engagement*) in the conversation here which allows the speakers to overlap each other but at the same time show that they are listening to each other.

4. Disagreements

Quand tout le monde est d'accord, il n'y a plus rien à se dire; quand il y a désaccord, la discussion est possible

⁵ This feature was not restricted to this conversation, but was a common feature of all my conversations.

‘When everyone agrees, there’s nothing left to say to each other; when there is disagreement, discussion is possible’

(Moeschler 1985: 153)

Schiffrin found that Jewish Americans display a preference for argument and negotiation, which she sees as a form of sociability (1984), and describes as a ‘balance between competition and co-operation’ (1985: 45). This principle could also be applied to French interactional style. This is supported by Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1990: 83-86), who claims that France can be considered a society with a confrontational ethos; one which tolerates, and even welcomes, conflict.

The disagreements detailed below include only the initiating disagreement turn,⁶ i.e. I have not included any subsequent disagreement turns on the same topic where this developed into an argument, hence these are conservative figures. The table represents four conversations: Elisabeth and Robert; Irène and Guillaume; Vincent (and Pauline); Luc (and Liliane).⁷

Table 1 - Total instances of initiated disagreements

	Total instances of initiated disagreements	Total turns	Percentage of turns containing initiated disagreements
Elisabeth	12	117	10%
Robert	10	159	6%
Irène	55	213	26%
Guillaume	38	178	21%
Vincent	11	155	7%
Luc	3	65	5%
Total	129	887	
Average	22	148	13%

From this it is clear that Irène and Guillaume were the speakers who disagreed the most, and their figures are substantially higher than the others. The following table shows the figures for this excerpt of their conversation only.

Table 2 - Instances of initiated disagreements in this excerpt

	Instances of initiated disagreements in this excerpt	Total turns in this excerpt	Percentage of turns containing initiated disagreements in this excerpt
Irène	2	25	8%
Guillaume	1	22	5%
Total	3	47	
Average	2	24	6%

⁶ I define a turn as an unbroken stretch of speech uttered by one person regardless of any interjections or backchannels uttered by interlocutor.

⁷ Pauline and Liliane are the two participants whose interactional styles have not been included.

Of particular interest here are the disagreement turns themselves - none of them are mitigated in any way whatsoever. (This was illustrated by all the speakers but is particularly striking here.) As well as fourteen tokens of simply *non* ('no') in this excerpt, we find four tokens of *c'est pas vrai* ('that's not true'), *ça va pas* ('are you mad?') (7), *tu rigoles ou quoi?* ('you must be kidding') (21), *arrête tes conneries* ('stop talking bullshit') (34), and *arrête de dire ça* ('stop saying that') (42). This lack of mitigation indicates that disagreeing is more accepted, even expected, in French interactional style.

Expressing one's opinion is an important part of French culture and an essential part of the notion of *l'engagement*. The exchange of ideas is highly valued as it shows commitment to the conversation by way of involvement with one's interlocutor. '... everyone has the duty to express their wishes, opinions, feelings, clearly to others, and if others want to influence them, they have the duty to defend and justify their wishes, opinions, feelings' (Béal 1993: 102). This is evidence of the positive evaluation of disagreements in French interactional style.

5. *Renvoyer la balle* ('Tossing the ball back')

French conversation can be considered a 'verbal duel' according to Béal—full of challenges and point scoring; teasing, sarcasm and provocation (1994: 78-79). Carroll (1988: 36-37) supports this by likening the exchange to 'tossing out a ball' which is to be tossed back. One of my consultants in fact remarked that he felt restricted by his level of English because he could not tease people or *renvoyer la balle*.

Vincent: *J'aime bien taquiner les gens ... mais ici je peux pas le faire parce que si je taquine et qu'on me répond et je ne peux pas répondre à place c'est pas drôle quoi ... si on peut pas renvoyer la balle ...*
 I like teasing people ... but here I can't do it because if I tease someone and they reply and I can't answer back it's not funny ...
 if I can't *renvoyer la balle* ('toss the ball back') ...

It is somewhat difficult to represent verbal duelling quantitatively but the total number of turns in the conversation would seem to be a good indicator of the dynamics of the exchange. A higher number of turns represents shorter turns (and possibly more overlaps), thereby indicating a more rapid exchange. This level of animation and participation in the conversation supports the concept of *l'engagement*.

Table 3 - Total turns

	Total turns per person	Total turns per conversation
Elisabeth	117	
Robert	159	276
Irène	213	
Guillaume	178	391
Pauline	118	
Vincent	155	273
Liliane	86	
Luc	65	151

These figures show that the conversation between Irène and Guillaume has more turns and was more dynamic than the others.

The skill of being able to ‘toss the ball back’ is demonstrated particularly well by Irène when Guillaume has been teasing her that she is only interested in sex (53) and tells her that his friend is not good-looking, in fact he is fat and has ginger hair (55), and she tosses the ball back mid-sentence—‘that’s why this morning I .. I visited er ... well my ex has ginger hair that’s why I visited...’ (56)—almost without missing a beat.

Lines 5 - 19 also illustrate the positive value and fun involved in *renvoyer la balle*, where Irène and Guillaume are duelling about diplomacy, then start singing together (19) before going back to duelling again! In fact the whole excerpt could be considered a veritable tennis match.

7. Conclusion

*la co-opération et le conflit sont deux
composantes également nécessaires à la
poursuite d’un dialogue*
‘co-operation and conflict are two equally
necessary components in the pursuit of
dialogue’

(Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990: 148)

French interactional style is made up of a combination of strategies showing enthusiasm, interest, and involvement. We have seen that these include overlaps, frequent disagreements, and the concept of *renvoyer la balle* (‘tossing the ball back’). Expressing sincere opinions is desirable and if this leads to disagreement so much the better, as this will fuel the conversation and keep it going. As Kerbrat-Orecchioni points out, too much conflict or consensus can kill the conversation, and conflict itself implies co-operation as arguing is sharing - it involves common values and presuppositions (1990: 152).

All of the above elements come together in the concept of *l’engagement* which can be considered the crux of French interactional style, described in a comment from another of my consultants:

Luc: *‘Je pense que c’est la notion d’émotion qui est plus importante dans le langage... on met vraiment beaucoup de soi quand on s’exprime’*
‘I think that the notion of emotion is the most important in language... we really give a lot of ourselves when we express ourselves’.

Transcription conventions (based on Du Bois et al. 1992, Jefferson 1994):

[]	overlapping turns (simultaneous speech)
=	latching turns (no gap between the interlocutors’ turns)
..	break in rhythm (0.2 seconds or less)
...	short untimed pause (0.3 to 0.9 seconds)
????	unclear or inaudible speech
()	my additional comments
?	question
!	exclamation

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