

The Semantics of French Discourse Particles *quoi* and *ben*

Sophia Waters

University of New England

swaters2@une.edu.au

Abstract. Discourse particles are strewn throughout natural spoken discourse, revealing the speakers' attitude towards what they are saying and guiding the interlocutors' interpretation of that utterance. The majority of works in the area of the French discourse particles *quoi* and *ben* provide detailed analyses and place their primary focus on usage. Problems arise, however, when word usage is discussed without a systematic approach to semantics. The present study applies the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) method of description to these particles, proposing definitive explications that can be substituted into naturally occurring examples of *quoi* and *ben* without causing any semantic loss. Explications, framed in the culture-neutral terms of the NSM, capture the subtleties of meaning conveyed by each discourse particle. They are presented in parallel English and French versions and are tested against a corpus of spoken French.

Keywords: French discourse particles; Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM); semantics

1. Introduction

This study examines two French discourse particles *quoi* and *ben*, as found in sentences such as the following:

(1) A: *Et là, vous vous êtes fait avoir ?*

A: ‘And you got tricked there?’

B: *Ben, oui parce que je suivais un peu trop près, quoi.*

B: ‘Ben, yes because I was following a bit too closely, quoi.’

According to Locke, discourse particles encapsulate “the postures of the mind while discoursing” and “have the sense of the whole sentence contained within them” (1894 [1690]:98-100). The German philosopher Leibniz asserted that discourse particles are “all marks of the action of the mind” (1981 [1765]:330). These “small words”, which are strewn throughout natural spoken discourse, are responsible for expressing the speakers’ attitude, intentions and feelings towards what they are saying, and guiding the interlocutors’ interpretation of that utterance. They function at utterance level, simultaneously referring to a discourse segment and containing the attitude, feelings and intentions that speakers have towards what they are saying.

There is a large variety of competing terms for these linguistic items and a number of approaches towards their analysis. The chosen term for this paper is “discourse particle”, used interchangeably with “particle”. This term partially overlaps with what have been most commonly called “discourse markers” (Fraser 1990; Hansen 1998a, 1998b; Müller 2005; Schiffrin 1987; Travis 2005, 2006), “pragmatic particles” (Beeching 2001, 2002) and in French, *particules énonciatives* (Fernandez-Vest 1994) and *particules* (Bruxelles & Traverso 2001). “Discourse particle” has previously been used by Aijmer (2002) and Hansen (1998a). This is a more restrictive term than the broader label “discourse marker”, which frequently encompasses phenomena such as interjections, which can generally stand as “utterances by themselves” (Ameka 1992:108). I define discourse particles as forms that occur on the edges of intonation

units and cannot stand alone because they are semantically fused to the intonation unit in which they occur.¹

Hansen (1998a:75) makes the important point that it is inaccurate to say that discourse particles function only as guides to interpretation in an already given context. As with other linguistic items, discourse particles go beyond this and play an active role in the construction of that very context. Discourse particles are grammatically optional; their use is at the discretion of the speaker. Nevertheless, in many languages they are both frequent and have high communicative significance.

Discourse particles are generally described using one of three methods (cf. Goddard 1998). The existing literature on French *quoi* and *ben* has used these methods individually or in combination.

A first method is to assign a technical or semi-technical label to discourse particles. Andrews (1989) labels *quoi* an “utterance terminator”,² while Beeching (2001, 2002) brands the same word a “politeness marker” and a “marker of camaraderie”. Beeching (2002) groups *quoi* with other discourse particles such as *c’est-à-dire* and *enfin* as a set of “repairers”. Such descriptive labels are somewhat helpful to our understanding, but a label is by no means a definition. Often it is just as difficult to understand and explain as the particle itself and it does not predict the range of use. Labels do not capture the subtleties of meaning conveyed by the particle, more precisely, the meaning that it adds to the context that could not be understood without its use (Travis 2005:39).

¹ Admittedly “discourse particle” may not be an entirely satisfactory label for all instances of *ben*. When opening an answer to a question, *ben* shows interjection-like properties. Staying in line with the current literature on *ben*, in this paper it is referred to as a “discourse particle”. As this is a semantic study, space does not permit further discussions of terminology.

² This terminology is not ideal on a number of levels. In a strict sense, *quoi* does not terminate utterances because the speaker may add further discourse after *quoi* as attested in our data, see examples (5), (7) and (9).

A second method of conventional description is to list examples of the particles and provide a commentary on their “uses”. Chanet (2001) employs this method, dividing occurrences of *quoi* from the CORPAIX corpus³ into groups: its use in interrogative utterances; with a left-dislocated subject; in *il y a* [‘there is/are’] sequences; etc. Under each of these subheadings is a discussion of the meaning of that particular placement. Chanet (2001) shows that *quoi* can be used in numerous different contexts, but this method falls short because the burden falls on the reader to use their linguistic intuition and infer the similarities and differences of use. Moreover, the question of meaning seldom arises with this method, and when it does, it is the reader who must do the work.

A final method consists of comparing the particles from one language to similar particles or expressions in another language, usually English. Beeching (2002) mentions that in certain contexts *quoi* corresponds to *like, y’know, if you know what I mean* and *sort of*. Whilst this method is useful, it disregards that there are individual differences of meaning within this group of glosses, making it all the more confusing for language learners to figure out what the exact meaning of *quoi* is. Three centuries ago, Locke (1894 [1690]:99) already remarked that glosses are usually as difficult to understand as the words they are trying to define. Other problems with this third method are twofold: particles rarely correspond perfectly from language to language, and English is used as the most common yardstick, thus encouraging Anglocentrism.

2. Methodology

The previous section highlighted some of the problems on French discourse particle description in the current literature. The Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) surmounts the pitfalls of conventional methods of description, such as definitional

³ Collected between 1977 and 1999 by the Groupe Aixois de Recherche en Syntaxe (GARS), directed by Claire Blanche-Benveniste. It comprises over 150 interactions, taken from natural speech totalling one million words.

obscurity, circularity, descriptive ambiguity, inaccuracy, and terminological ethnocentrism. This section will apply the NSM framework to the domain of French discourse particles.

2.1. *The Natural Semantic Metalanguage*

The NSM is a rigorous descriptive methodology based on natural language. It is a highly constrained yet flexible mini-language of simple indefinable meanings (“semantic primes”) and their intrinsic universal grammar. Defining the meaning of a word or an expression with the NSM means it is explained (“explicated”) in simple universal human concepts that do not need additional explanation themselves and can be found as words (or word-like elements) in all languages.

This method is the implementation of the idea put forward by European seventeenth century philosophers such as Arnauld, Antoine, Descartes and Leibniz, that only a small set of simple concepts are needed as a base for all human understanding. To quote Arnauld & Nicole (1996:64),

...it would be impossible to define every word. For in order to define a word it is necessary to use other words designating the idea we want to connect to the word being defined. And if we again wished to define the words used to explain that word, we would need still others, and soon to infinity. Consequently, we necessarily have to stop at primitive terms which are undefined.⁴

The NSM is founded on the premise that all languages of the world share a common core of simple basic meanings. Over almost four decades of empirical cross-linguistic research has been dedicated to discovering and testing these primes (Goddard 2006;

⁴ The original quote in French: « ...il seroit impossible de définir tous les mots. Car pour définir un mot, on a nécessairement besoin d'autres mots qui désignent l'idée à laquelle on veut attacher ce mot, et si on vouloit encore définir les mots dont on se seroit servi pour l'explication de celui-là, on en auroit encore besoin d'autres, et ainsi à l'infini. Il faut donc nécessairement s'arrêter à des termes primitifs qu'on ne définisse point. » (Wierzbicka 1972:6).

Goddard & Wierzbicka 2002; Peeters 2006, 2010; Wierzbicka 1996). The sixty-three semantic primes of the NSM combine in simple grammatical constructions that are translatable across a large number of languages. They are used to define words and concepts that are semantically more complex than they are themselves. Explications attempt to model a speaker's meaning by paraphrasing the semantic content in its entirety. To demonstrate the translatability of the NSM, the explications of *quoi* and *ben* are presented in parallel English and French versions (see Table 1 for the list of exponents).⁵

The stringent framework of the NSM has been previously applied to the description of discourse particles across a variety of languages. Some examples include: Goddard (1994) on Malay *lah*, Travis (2005) on Colombian Spanish *bueno*, Besemeres & Wierzbicka (2003) on *lah* in Singapore English, Chappell (1991) on *me* in Mandarin Chinese, and Harkins (1986) on a number of Warlpiri particles.

⁵ Notes: primes exist as the meanings of lexical units and not at the level of lexemes. The exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes or phrasemes. They can be formally complex and have combinatorial variants (allolexes). Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties. See Peeters (2006, 2010) for further details.

THE SEMANTICS OF FRENCH DISCOURSE PARTICLES *QUOI* AND *BEN*

Substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, BODY	JE, VOUS, ⁶ QUELQU'UN, QUELQUE CHOSE, GENS, CORPS
Relational substantives:	KIND, PART	TYPE, PARTIE
Determiners:	THIS, OTHER/ELSE, SAME	CE, AUTRE, MÊME
Quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, MUCH/MANY, SOME, ALL	UN, DEUX, BEAUCOUP, CERTAINS, TOUT
Evaluators:	GOOD, BAD	BIEN, MAL
Descriptors:	BIG, SMALL	GRAND, PETIT
Mental predicates:	THINK, KNOW, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR	PENSER, SAVOIR, VOULOIR, SENTIR, VOIR, ENTENDRE
Speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE	DIRE, MOTS, VRAI
Actions, events, movement, contact:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH	FAIRE, ARRIVER, BOUGER, TOUCHER
Location, existence, possession, specification:	BE (SOMEWHERE), THERE IS, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE / SOMETHING)	ÊTRE (QUELQUE PART), IL Y A, AVOIR, ÊTRE (QUELQU'UN / QUELQUE CHOSE)
Life and death:	LIVE, DIE	VIVRE, MOURIR
Time:	WHEN, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT	QUAND, MAINTENANT, AVANT, APRÈS, LONGTEMPS, PEU DE TEMPS, POUR QUELQUE TEMPS, MOMENT
Space:	WHERE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE	OÙ, ICI, AU-DESSUS, AU-DESSOUS, LOIN, PRÈS, CÔTÉ, DANS
Logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF	NE...PAS, PEUT-ÊTRE, POUVOIR, À CAUSE DE, SI
Augmentor, intensifier:	VERY, MORE	TRÈS, PLUS
Similarity:	LIKE	COMME

Table 1. Semantic primes – English and French

⁶ For justification, see Peeters (2009).

2.2. *Data*

This research has been carried out using a hand-compiled corpus taken from natural speech on the French news program *Le Journal* which was broadcast on the Australian television channel SBS between February and October 2006. The data set comprises 62 instances of *quoi* and 35 of *ben*. The speakers recorded were both the newsreaders and interviewees; however, the discourse particles *quoi* and *ben* were used exclusively by the interviewees. In addition, naturalistic observation was invaluable, as were in-depth consultations with five university-educated French native speakers on a university exchange program. An advantage of using the news recordings as a source of example sentences was that it provided a broad sample of the French public. Because the use of these discourse particles is considered by many as *mal parler* ‘speaking badly’ (Chanet 2001:56) and because interviewees were aware that they would be broadcast across France, it is likely that they paid more than usual attention to their wording, adjusted their speech register, and hereby reduced their usage of *quoi* and *ben*. Nonetheless, both particles occurred very frequently in our data.

3. *Quoi*

Apart from being used as a discourse particle, *quoi* is often used as an interrogative pronoun and relative pronoun. Its literal meaning corresponds to English ‘what’. When functioning as a discourse particle, *quoi* closes an intonation unit. The *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* (1992) mentions that this usage of *quoi* in familiar language is a way of summarising a list or an idea. Because a single utterance can contain a string of intonation units, *quoi* can occur multiple times within a speaker’s turn.

Quoi attracts a degree of stigma because it is associated with the spoken language of the working class and the less educated. The public see *quoi* as a way of *mal parler* ‘not speaking good French’, and most linguists have ignored it, with some going as far as to say that *il ne sert à rien* ‘it does nothing, it’s useless’ (Chanet 2001:56). Beeching (2002:53) says *quoi* comments on the language without adding anything to the

propositional content of the utterance, and thus can be omitted without any semantic loss.

Dictionaries do little more than provide a few clues about its meaning. When it comes to descriptive adequacy, bilingual dictionaries are on a par with the monolingual dictionaries. *The Collins Robert French English Dictionary* (1998) provides a single example of *quoi* as a discourse particle, reproduced here below:

(2) *(excl) puisque je te le dis, quoi!**

Lit. ‘because I’m saying this to you, **quoi!**’

‘I’m telling you it’s true!’**

The *Petit Robert* (2006), a monolingual French dictionary, provides these two examples, followed by my English translations:

(3) *FAM. (achevant une explication, une énumération)*

« *Je sers au régiment étranger.* »

« *Au régiment ?* »

[...] « *À la Légion, **quoi!*** » (Bernanos)⁷

FAM. (at the end of an explanation, a list)

“I’m serving in the foreign regiment.”

“In the regiment?”

[...] “In the Foreign Legion, **quoi!**” (Bernanos)

(4) « *Tout ce qu’ils possédaient [...] leurs champs, les arbres et même les vaches, un chien avec sa chaîne, tout **quoi.*** » (Céline)

“Everything they owned [...] their fields, the trees and even the cows, a dog with its chain, everything, **quoi.**” (Céline)

⁷ My emphasis.

The meanings indicated by these dictionaries are insufficient semantic representations and do not predict the domain of use. The definition in (2) from the bilingual dictionary forces the reader to deduce the meaning using their linguistic intuition. The two asterisks play an important role in understanding the definition. The abbreviation key in the dictionary explains that a single asterisk means this expression must be used carefully, while two asterisks indicate that even more care is needed. This highlights the lack of one to one correspondence of particles across languages.

The level of familiarity expressed by the two translations in (2) does not correspond, further confirming that glosses do not match up across languages. The definition from the Collins Robert is not entirely satisfying for the second language learner because it is a translation of one expression. Examples (3) and (4) provide additional clues: as a discourse particle, *quoi* occurs in spoken language and the domain of usage is mentioned, namely that it occurs after an explanation or a list. The burden to figure out what *quoi* means always rests on the reader's linguistic intuition. Nowhere is it clearly spelt out.

3.1. Discussion and explication

In this section the range of use and the meaning of *quoi* are discussed in detail and the NSM is applied.

Quoi can complete lists, explanations and superlative sentences. It presents the speaker as at a loss for words because they have actually reached the end of what they intended to say or cannot think of anything more to say. A definition of *quoi* should accommodate both of these meaning components. Let us consider some examples.

In (5), a young boy (11 years old) was interviewed about his birthday party that was organised at the zoo. In his utterance he uses two superlatives *magnifique* 'fantastic' and *le plus bon* 'the most "goodest"'. Even though his grammar is not correct, his usage of *quoi* is. Using the discourse particle here conveys that he is incredibly happy and that he does not know what more to add. His lack of words may come from his age, eleven; he has trouble expressing himself with correct grammar and the pause after *quoi* shows that he is overcome with happiness. At the end of the second clause in

the example, the young boy runs out of superlatives and rounds off his utterance with *quoi*. For a short time he does not know what else to add, and then comes out with *c'est le top* 'it's the best.'

(5) *C'est magnifique, quoi. C'est le plus bon anniversaire que je peux avoir, quoi... c'est le top.*

'It's fantastic, **quoi**. It's the most "goodest" birthday that I could have, **quoi**...it's the best.'

In (6), a French exchange student in Australia retells her experience going to and waiting at the hairdresser's. The speaker gives a long explanation, listing and describing the various things that happened before she was attended to, topping off her description with *quoi*. Her use of the particle is pertinent to this utterance because it has three of the necessary characteristics for its usage: it terminates a list, which in this case, is also an explanation, and it signals to the listener that she has finished because she does not know what more she could add.

(6) *Le bus était en retard, donc, je leur ai téléphoné pour leur dire que je serais en retard. Et puis quand j'y suis arrivée, elles étaient toutes occupées. Il fallait que j'attende une demi-heure, le temps qu'elles coiffent, quoi.*

'The bus was late so I rang them to say I'd be late. Then when I got there, they were all busy. I had to wait half an hour, the time it took them to do people's hair, **quoi**.'

The trainer of French swimmer Laure Manadou produced example (7). Reporters were asking him to make predictions about Manadou's upcoming race and he responded curtly. The trainer uses *quoi* after an explanation, similar to its use in (3). In this instance, the use of *quoi* sends the message that he would like to go into more detail, but does not know what more he could say. As in (5), *quoi* indicates that momentarily, the speaker cannot think of what to say. He soon recovers and adds *Un petit 58* 'A little 58'.

(7) *Ça sera bien qu'elle nage 58, quoi. Un petit 58.*

'It'll be good if she swims a 58, **quoi**. A little 58.'

Example (8) is an exchange between the author (B) and a friend, a French exchange student (A). When (A) is giving (B) advice, (B) displays a misunderstanding of the verb *remettre*. This prompts (A) to explain it to (B).

(8) A: *Il faut que tu t'en remettes, quoi.*

A: 'You've got to pull yourself together, **quoi**.'

B: *Me remets où?*

B: 'Put myself where?'

A: « *Remettre* » *ça veut dire, sors de ton petit nuage, reviens ici, quoi.*

A: '*Remettre* means get down off your little cloud and come back here, **quoi**.'

Example (9) centres on another of Laure Manadou's races. The male speaker is in awe of her success, conveying this through the repetition of the superlative phrase *absolument incroyable* 'absolutely incredible', and his stumbling attempt to further his description with *eh, j'sais pas, peut-être j'ai rêvé* 'um, I dunno, maybe I was dreaming'. Finding the ideal formulation for his thoughts is a struggle and this is expressed through the use of *quoi*. The appearance of the particle here encapsulates his desire to say more about Manadou's race and his unsuccessful search for the right words. Similar to (5) and (7), the speaker continues his exposition after *quoi*. It is as though *quoi* functions here to signal a momentary glitch in an otherwise smooth discourse section. In (2), (3), (4), (6) and (8), on the other hand, it signposts a definitive end to the discourse. An explication of *quoi* must take both these uses into account.

- (9) *J'ai trouvé qu'elle avait une maîtrise pour ces quatre cents, absolument incroyable, absolument incroyable, vraiment j'ai eu l'impression qu'elle a fait ça, eh, j'sais pas, peut-être j'ai rêvé, **quoi**. Mais j'ai eu l'impression qu'elle l'a fait comme elle a voulu.*

'I thought she mastered that 400 metres, absolutely incredible, absolutely incredible, really I had the impression that she did it, um, I dunno, maybe I was dreaming, **quoi**. But I got the impression she did it just how she wanted to.'

An explication is an explicit description of the semantic content of a word. It has to be able to stand in the place of the particle and perform the same task without adding to or subtracting from the semantic content. *Quoi* is used in what appear to be different contexts: superlative utterances where the speakers are overjoyed (as in 5) or in awe (as in 9), after explanations (as in 6) or lists (as in 6 and 8), or instances where the speaker wants to express their impatience with the speech act (as in 7). The common thread in these uses of *quoi* is the speaker's desire to continue speaking and their concurrent inability to momentarily think of anything else to say, either because they are experiencing a loss for words or because they have come to the end of what they planned to say. Whichever the case may be, an explication must allow for both cases.

Explication for discourse particle *quoi*

[A] ..., *quoi*

- (a) I want to say something more about it
- (b) when I think about it now, I don't know what else I can say

[A1] ..., *quoi*

- (a) je veux en dire quelque chose de plus
- (b) quand j'y pense maintenant, je ne sais pas ce que je peux dire

The ellipsis (...) in the top line represents the discourse to which *quoi* attaches. Component (a) opens with the speaker's desire to continue their utterance. The 'it' refers to the utterance the speaker is completing with *quoi*. In component (b), the

temporal reference ‘now’ reflects that the speaker has reached a point in their discourse where they do not know what more to add. It also shows that this state of ignorance is only temporary, allowing for the continuation of the discourse.

The example set clearly reveals that the discourse particle *quoi* is frequently associated with the expression of negative feelings such as frustration or impatience, but that it is also highly compatible with discourse expressing positive feelings such as joy, happiness and relief. Therefore it is not necessary to include a component in the explication specifying an association with exclusively negative feelings.

The semantic content sheds some light on the negative attitude some people have towards this particle. *Quoi* indicates a desire to continue speaking and a necessary concomitant loss for words. This is by no means a sophisticated message yet it is still significant because it contains the attitude the speaker has towards what they just said.

4. *Ben*

Si tu demandes à un Français ce que ça veut dire « ben », il va certainement te répondre « Ben, j’sais pas. »

‘If you ask a French person what “**ben**” means, they’ll definitely say, “**Ben**, I dunno.”’

An informant who was questioned about the meaning of *ben* produced this candid report. At first this response may appear to be less than helpful, but this native speaker has intuitively used *ben* in exactly the place where one would expect to find it. It leaves no room for doubt that although native speakers take these small words for granted and have intuitions as to their use, the exact meaning may still evade them. Nevertheless, I have found that the NSM makes it possible to construct a definition for this elusive particle satisfactory to even the most sceptical of French informants.

4.1. *Ben: Position and function*

Ben is said to derive from a rural pronunciation of the adverb *bien* lit. ‘well’ (*Dictionnaire historique de la langue française* 1992). As a discourse particle, it can be pronounced in three different manners: *ben* [bɛ̃], *ben* [be:] and *Ben!* [bɛ̃ʔ]⁸. It can occur in two positions with two separate but related functions in an utterance: as the initial turn-opener for a speaker and at the boundary between two intonation units. Like *quoi*, *ben* is frequently disapproved of, associated with the lesser educated and the working classes. The folk notion is that *ben* functions as a “filler”, and is used to buy time. It can also be a way of holding the floor in a conversation and signalling to interlocutors that the speaker is going to say more because they want to and have to (cf. Béal 1992, 1993).

In both positions the particle passes comment on something that has just been mentioned (see footnote 11 for a discussion of *ben* in response to non-verbal material). As a turn-opener, it often introduces an answer to a question, frequently a “stupid question” (Hansen 1998a:256). Utterance-medially, it relates to something the speaker himself has said. *Ben* often signals that what follows contains some pivotal information that is already obvious to the speaker and, according to the speaker, should be to the listener as well. Speakers use *ben* because they feel a simultaneous desire and an obligation to say something. As François (1998:20) states: “my utterance [which follows *ben*] is entirely due to objective reality...I present it however, as a personal choice.”⁹ When *ben* appears, it is an instruction to the listener to look for a message in the surrounding discourse. More often than not, the speakers provide the message themselves because they want the listener to know what it is. At the same time, they feel they have to point it out because the listener has suppressed the implications of

⁸ This pronunciation is exclusive to the turn-initial position. The nature of the corpus for this study did not lend itself to the collection of examples of *ben* ending in a glottal stop.

⁹ My translation; the original French: « mon énoncé est entièrement dû à la réalité objective,...je le présente quand même comme un choix personnel. » (François 1998:20)

this information from their mental representation, regarding it as irrelevant (Hansen 1998a:248). The speaker has evaluated the message as irrelevant because it may be inaccurate, unimportant or already manifest.

Ben can also occur in a range of morphologically complex interjections: *ah ben, eh ben, oh ben, bon ben, ben là, ben ça* etc. Following François (1998), this is considered to be the pairing of two autonomous morphemes whose meaning can be explained by analysing each morpheme separately. This section specifies the meaning of *ben* taken in isolation, independent of all other morphemes with which it may occur and the various intonation patterns that it may carry.

This is not the first attempt to capture the meaning of *ben*. Both Hansen (1998a, 1998b) and François (1998) have made valuable contributions but they both succumbed to the pitfalls of obscurity and terminological ethnocentrism. Hansen (1998a:259) dubs *ben* a “marker of irrelevance”, glossing over its meaning. François (1998:20) summarises its meaning in the form of an elaborate and technical equation.¹⁰ In order to understand it, the reader must decode the formulation and then consult François’ commentary. The definition is couched in complex terms, *nécessairement* ‘necessarily’, *mon avis* ‘my opinion’. Moreover, contrary to what François claims, the discourse that follows *ben* is not simply the speaker’s opinion or view. This definition is inaccessible to anyone who does not have the list of abbreviations, not to mention anyone who does not understand French. The NSM provides an advantageous alternative to these problems through framing the semantics of *ben* in a self-contained and readily intelligible format. It also goes further beyond with its capacity for translatability across languages. My explication of *ben* is in a maximally transparent form, making it accessible to the French and non-French speakers alike.

¹⁰ The original French: {Puisque je dois nécessairement donner mon avis, JE dis que [nécessairement (on a **p**)]}, and my translation: {Because I have to give my opinion, I say that [necessarily (we have **p**)]}. The abbreviation **p**, stands for the propositional content of the utterance which is introduced by *ben*.

4.2. *Discussion and explication*

A semantic flavour often contained in *ben* in turn-initial position is pointed out by Vicher & Sankoff (1989:92) as “a distancing from the enunciative framework of the preceding speaker, implying that what he or she said was either irrelevant or too obvious.” However, this is only part of the story. As a turn-opener, *ben* comments on questions, some types of verbal interaction, or even non-verbal communication that has just eventuated. The key is that they must all be something that the speaker deems irrelevant or already obvious and something on which they feel compelled to comment. In the middle of a turn, *ben* is a reaction to something that the speaker has said himself. Here, *ben* marks that the utterance preceding it was incorrect, irrelevant or obvious, and the speaker feels obligated to explain this. There are cases where *ben* is not followed by verbal material. This is either because the speaker was interrupted by an interlocutor or because the particle has a falling intonation, signalling to hearers that they must figure out by themselves how the utterance would have continued (Hansen 1998a).¹¹

¹¹ It is important to note that as a turn-opener *ben* is not limited to remarking on verbal communication, but can be applied equally well to non-verbal communication. The nature of the corpus did not lend itself to the collection of this type of example sentence. However, one such example was elicited from a French informant. The following example could be heard in a supermarket queue when someone pushes ahead of their turn:

- (i) **Ben**, *qu'est-ce qu'elle fait celle-là ?*
 ‘Ben, what does she think she’s doing?’

A further example is taken from François (1998:17):

- (ii) **Ben !** *Il est où le bouquin que j’avais mis là tout à l’heure ?*
 ‘Ben! Where’s the book gone I put there a minute ago?’

These two examples show that *ben* is compatible with situations in which the speaker may experience surprise or indignation, and not necessarily because someone said something. The speaker has witnessed something that drives them to say something because they want to and because they feel they have to. Explication [B] is not compatible with this particular usage of *ben* because it

In the corpus, the majority of turn-initial occurrences of *ben* are question-and-answer adjacency pairs. The following two examples fit Hansen's (1998a:256) criteria as replies to "stupid" questions. In (12), the reporter (A) is interviewing an insomniac about his sleeping habits. The interviewee (B) considers this to be a "stupid question" because the answer should be obvious to the interviewer. (B) uses *ben* to signal that they know they are expected to respond to the question, but that they want the interviewer to realise at the same time that the answer to that question is self-evident.

(10) A: *Vous ne pouvez pas vous endormir ?*

A: 'You can't go to sleep?'

B: ***Ben**, non, je peux pas.*

B: '**Ben**, no, I can't.'

Example (11) is a question to a young girl who had just been released after being held hostage in her primary school by her teacher. The interviewer (A) asks a question which has an obvious answer. This is not lost on the young girl; she marks her answer with *ben*, thus letting the reporter know she wants to give him an answer, but also that this is something she must do – he is seeking out something he appears not to know, but really should.

(11) A: *Vous aviez peur ?*

A: 'Were you scared?'

B: ***Ben**, oui.*

B: '**Ben**, yes.'

Even in occurrences of turn-initial *ben* that are not responses to questions, speakers always express that they feel a desire and a compulsion to say something, but also that

represents the semantics of *ben* in response to speech. Whilst acknowledging this particular usage of *ben*, it will not be studied further in this paper.

they think that what they are going to say is obvious. The following example illustrates this point:

(12) A: *Je pense qu'ils ne sont pas très stricts.*

A: 'I don't think they're that strict.'

B: **Ben**, *si. Mais en France, non. T'as une valise de quarante-deux kilos, ils te disent, ça va quoi. Mais il faut faire attention, quoi.*

B: '**Ben**, yes. But in France, no. You've got a bag weighing forty-two kilos, and they'll say, alright, *quoi*. But you've got to be careful, *quoi*.'

(B) prefaces her disagreement with *ben*. This shows (A) that (B) feels a simultaneous desire and compulsion to correct her. What (A) said has made (B) feel something. While it is difficult to pinpoint what this emotion is, it could be imagined to be mild surprise. Using *ben* here softens the utterance that follows, in this case, an outright rejection of (A)'s understanding of the baggage weight restrictions of Australian airlines, it places some distance between the speaker and their utterance.

It is tempting to assume that *ben* is associated with negative emotions. However, the following example reveals that this assumption is fuelled by contextual inferences. In (15), a photographer retells the events that led up to a photo he took of Ray Charles:

(13) *Il s'est maquillé en noir, je me suis dit il faut faire venir un piano, et donc, **ben**, je me suis débrouillé à Salt Lake City, j'ai trouvé cette société qui m'a amené ce piano, j'attendais pendant deux jours et quand il est arrivé, **ben**, je me suis dit bon **ben**, c'est ça, quoi.*

'He was made up in black and I said to myself we've got to get a piano, and so, **ben**, I sorted it out in Salt Lake City, I found this company that brought me the piano, I waited for two days and when it arrived, **ben**, I said to myself, well, that's it, *quoi*.'

It would be very difficult to associate this example with any negative emotions, with or without taking into account its prosodic features. In (10) and (11), indignation or

irritation at having to spell something out for someone, are clearly negative responses. It is already more difficult to link the *ben* in (12) to any negative feelings. In (13), the photographer appears to use *ben* just because he wants to add more to what he has just said. He knows he has to add more because without the supplementary information his utterance is lacking.

Below I present my semantic explication of discourse particle *ben*:

Explication for discourse particle *ben*

[B] *ben...*

- (a) someone said something now
- (b) I feel something because of it
- (c) I want to say more about it
- (d) I can't not say more about it
- (e) at the same time, I know that someone can know what I want to say about it
if this someone thinks about it for a short time

[B1] *ben...*

- (a) quelqu'un a dit quelque chose maintenant
- (b) je sens quelque chose à cause de ça
- (c) je veux en dire quelque chose de plus
- (d) je ne peux pas ne pas dire quelque chose de plus au sujet de ça
- (e) en même temps, je sais que quelqu'un peut savoir ce que je veux en dire
si ce quelqu'un y pense pendant un peu de temps

The explication heading *ben...* reflects this particle's two possible positions: turn-initial and opening one or more intonation units in a series. Component (a) explicitly expresses that *ben* indicates a recognition that someone has said something. Who that person is, is not specified and as such it can be the speaker or another interlocutor. Component (b) reflects the emotional response that is encapsulated in *ben*. The

emotion remains deliberately unqualified in order to represent the particle's compatibility with a range of feelings. Component (c) shows the speaker's desire to contribute more on the subject of the preceding discourse. The feeling of obligation is represented in (d), the speaker knows that they have to say something; they do not have a choice 'can't not say more'. Component (e) expresses the idea of mutual manifestness, that is to say, what the speaker is about to say should be already clear from the context (Hansen 1998a:257). The speaker is aware of the obviousness of what they are about to say, but says it nonetheless. Again, the 'someone' in component (e) is defined in a non-specific way and can apply to the speaker or another interlocutor. The explicit mention of 'for a short time' in (e) is also compatible with the idea that *ben* buys time for the speaker "if I have a bit of a think, it will come to me". At the same time as the feeling, wanting and obligation is happening, the speaker knows that someone could arrive at a similar conclusion with a little thought.

The data set shows there is a two-part constraint at the core of *ben*. A speaker uses *ben* to signal that they regard whatever material follows as something they want to say, something they have chosen to say, but also as something that they have to say. This complex message is bound up within a single morpheme, often written off as a "filler", a word that functions only to pad out discourse.

Ben contains a complex set of instructions for interlocutors. Far from doing nothing, it guides listeners as to how to interpret the speaker's discourse contribution. This section has acknowledged and broken down the semantic complexity of *ben* revealing its meaning and describing the role it plays in discourse construction.

5. Concluding remarks

From a French normative point of view, neither *quoi* nor *ben* is highly regarded. Nevertheless, they remain salient features of spoken French. Their frequency is a testament to their importance to discourse construction. Both contain semantically complex information about the attitude a speaker has towards their discourse contribution. This has been articulated in the NSM explications presented here for *quoi*

SOPHIA WATERS

and *ben*, which are recognisable to French native speakers and are consistent with their range of use. The translatability of the natural semantic metalanguage makes the meaning of these particles accessible to cultural insiders and outsiders alike. Although space limitations do not permit further discussion here, a future direction of research in this area could be to investigate implications that *quoi* and *ben* carry for the French interactional style and the ways in which they are linked to French cultural values.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Cliff Goddard and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments they made on an earlier version of this article. Thank you also to the Boissier family who inspired this study.

Bibliography

- Aijmer, Karin. 2002. *English discourse particles: Evidence from a corpus*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ameka, Felix. 1992. Interjections: The universal yet neglected part of speech. *Journal of Pragmatics (Special Issues on Interjections)* 18(2-3). 101-118.
- Andrews, Barry. 1989. Terminating devices in Spoken French. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching* 27(3). 193-216.
- Arnould, Antoine & Pierre Nicole. 1996. *Logic, or, the art of thinking: Containing, besides common rules, several new observations appropriate for forming judgement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Béal, Christine. 1992. Did you have a good weekend? Or why there is no such thing as a simple question in cross-cultural encounters. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 15(1). 23-52.
- Béal, Christine. 1993. Les stratégies conversationnelles en français et en anglais: conventions ou reflet de divergences culturelles profondes? *Langue Française* 98. 79-106.
- Beeching, Kate. 2001. Repair strategies and social interaction in spontaneous Spoken French: The pragmatic particle *enfin*. *French Language Studies* 11(1). 23-40.
- Beeching, Kate. 2002. *Gender, politeness and pragmatic particles in French*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

- Besemeres, Mary & Anna Wierzbicka. 2003. The meaning of the particle *lah* in Singapore English. *Pragmatics and Cognition* 11(1). 3-38.
- Bruxelles, Sylvie & Véronique Traverso. 2001. *Ben*: Apport de la description d'un « petit mot » du discours à l'étude des polylogues. *Marges linguistiques* 2. <http://www.marges-linguistiques.com> (accessed 17 June 2006).
- Chanet, Catherine. 2001. 1700 occurrences de la particule *quoi* en français parlé contemporain: approche de la « distribution » et des fonctions en discours. *Marges linguistiques* 2. <http://www.marges-linguistiques.com> (accessed 17 June 2006).
- Chappell, Hilary. 1991. Strategies for the assertion of obviousness and disagreement in Mandarin Chinese: A semantic study of the modal particle *me*. *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 11(1). 39-65.
- Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*. 1992. Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert.
- Fernandez-Vest, Jocelyne Marie-Madelaine. 1994. *Les particules énonciatives dans la construction du discours*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- François, Alexandre. 1998. *Ben* en français oral, l'énonciateur (dés)engagé. In Bernard Caron (ed.), *16th International Congress of Linguists*, 1-24. Oxford: Pergamon.
- Fraser, Bruce. 1990. An approach to discourse markers. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14. 383-395.
- Goddard, Cliff. 1994. The meaning of *lah*: Understanding “emphasis” in Malay (Bahasa Melayu). *Oceanic Linguistics* 33(1). 145-165.
- Goddard, Cliff. 1998. *Semantic analysis: A practical introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goddard, Cliff (ed.). 2006. *Ethnopragmatics: Understanding discourse in cultural context*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Goddard, Cliff & Anna Wierzbicka. (eds.). 2002. *Meaning and universal grammar: Theory and universal findings*. Vol. I & II. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hansen, Maj-Britt Mosegaard. 1998a. *The function of discourse particles: A study with special reference to spoken standard French*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Hansen, Maj-Britt Mosegaard. 1998b. The semantic status of discourse markers. *Lingua* 104(3-4). 235-260.
- Harkins, Jean. 1986. Semantics and the language learner: Walpiri particles. *Journal of Pragmatics* 10(5). 559-574.
- Le Nouveau Petit Robert: Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française*. 2006. Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert.

SOPHIA WATERS

- Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm. 1981 [1765].** *New essays on human understanding*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Locke, John. 1894 [1690].** *An essay concerning human understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Müller, Simone. 2005.** *Discourse markers in native and non-native English discourse*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Peeters, Bert (ed.). 2006.** *Semantic primes and universal grammar: Empirical evidence from the Romance languages*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Peeters, Bert. 2009.** Tu ou vous? In Nathalie Ramière (ed.), *Tu ou vous. L'embarras du choix*, 9-39. Limoges: Lambert-Lucas.
- Peeters, Bert 2010.** La métalangue sémantique naturelle: acquis et défis. In Jacques François (ed.), *Grandes voies et chemins de traverse de la sémantique cognitive* (Mémoires de la Société de linguistique de Paris, N.S., 18), 75-101. Leuven: Peeters.
- Schiffrin, Deborah. 1987.** *Discourse markers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Collins Robert French Dictionary. 5th edn. 1998.*** Glasgow: HarperCollins.
- Travis, Catherine. 2005.** *Discourse markers in Colombian Spanish: A study in polysemy*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Travis, Catherine. 2006.** The natural semantic metalanguage approach to discourse markers. In Kerstin Fischer (ed.), *Approaches to discourse particles*, 219-241. Oxford: Elsevier.
- Vicher, Anne & David Sankoff. 1989.** The emergent syntax of pre-sentential turn openings. *Journal of Pragmatics* 13. 81-97.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1972.** *Semantic primitives*. Frankfurt: Athenäum.
- Wierzbicka, Anna. 1996.** *Semantics: Primes and universals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

List of Examples

- (1) Le Journal, SBS, 29 July 2006
- (2) Collins Robert Dictionary, 1998
- (3) Le Nouveau Petit Robert, 2006
- (4) Le Nouveau Petit Robert, 2006
- (5) Le Journal, SBS, 26 July 2006
- (6) M. Péry, 1 June 2006
- (7) Le Journal, SBS, 5 August 2006

- (8) N. Boureau & S. Waters, 5 June 2006
- (9) Le Journal, SBS, 28 July 2006
- (10) Le Journal, SBS, n.d. 2006
- (11) Le Journal, SBS, n.d. 2006
- (12) N. Boureau & S. Waters, 5 June 2006
- (13) Le Journal, SBS, n.d. 2006

Footnote (11)

- (i) E. Lépinay, 27 June 2009
- (ii) François (1998:17)