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Listening Strategies in Sociolinguistic Interviews. Convergence and Divergence

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Résumé de l'article

Les signaux *Back-channel* peuvent être définis comme des marques tangibles d'écoute (« humhum », « oui », etc.) produites pendant une interaction verbale. En Occident au moins, dans les conversations à deux, la participation complètement silencieuse de l'écoutant est impensable. Dans cette étude, je tente de déterminer s'il existe des points de convergence dans les stratégies d'écoute entre les membres d'une même communauté, et d'évaluer la marge d'influence individuelle. À cette fin, je compare, dans une même situation — l'entrevue sociolinguistique— et dans le cadre d'un seul type de discours de la part de l'informateur —la narration— le comportement de plusieurs enquêteurs du corpus Montréal 1984, tant du point de vue de la fréquence de production d'éléments *back-channel* que celui des contextes de production de ces signaux.

Listening Strategies in Sociolinguistic Interviews. Convergence and Divergence[1]

Marty Laforest *

Back-channel can be defined as tangible listening markers ("humhum," "yes," etc.) throughout a verbal interaction. In the Occident at least, completely silent listener-participation is unthinkable in conversations implicating two persons. In this study, I attempt to determine if convergence points in listening strategies among members of the same community exist, and to evaluate the margin of individual influence. To do this, I compare, within the same situation — the sociolinguistic interview — and considering a single type of discourse on the part of the informant — the narrative — the behaviour of several interviewers of the corpus Montreal 1984 at the level of both back-channel production frequency and of the contexts of the production of these signals.

Les signaux Back-channel *peuvent être définis comme des marques tangibles d'écoute ("humhum", "oui", etc.) produites pendant une interaction verbale. En Occident au moins, dans les conversations à deux, la participation complètement silencieuse de l'écoutant est impensable. Dans cette étude, je tente de déterminer s'il existe des points de convergence dans les stratégies d'écoute entre les membres d'une même communauté, et d'évaluer la marge d'influence individuelle. À cette fin, je compare, dans une même situation — l'entrevue sociolinguistique — et dans le cadre d'un seul type de discours de la part de l'informateur —la narration— le comportement de plusieurs enquêteurs du corpus Montréal 1984, tant du point de vue de la fréquence de production d'éléments* back-channel *que celui des contextes de production de ces signaux.*

Ever since Victor Yngve's proposal in 1970, *back-channel* has been known as the "parallel channel" of communication by which listeners of speech, who never remain passive while waiting for their speech turn, comment on the quality of the communication in progress; back-channel signals, brief gestures (nodding the head, smiling, etc.), and sounds ("ok," "yes, yes," short repetitions and reformulations, etc.), constitute tangible listening markers throughout the conversation.

Vocal back-channel signals have interested me for several years, and I have previously tried to characterize the influence of the speaker on the behaviour of the listener by studying more precisely the vocal back-channel signals in sociolinguistic interviews.

In an extension of this project I am now trying to discover if different interviewers show similar listening behaviour. I present the general hypothesis that back-channel production by the listener of a conversation is, individual differences aside, culturally determined; in every linguistic community, there should be a register of acceptable frequencies of back-channel production, marked by upper and lower limits outside of which these production frequencies would be inadequate. We know that at least in the Occi-

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dent [2], completely silent listener-participation is unthinkable and even disrupts the course of verbal interaction —telephone conversations are perfect examples of this. Therefore, a minimal production of back-channel signals is essential. We also know that too great a production of back-channel signals can be disruptive, as is shown by several comparative studies on back-channel signals produced by speakers who speak the same language but come from different communities (Tottie, 1990; White, 1989; Maynard, 1986). Although these studies have brought forth behavioural differences between fellow speakers, to my knowledge no one as of yet has truly tested the convergence of listening strategies of a group of individuals who are members of the same community, nor has at least evaluated the margin of individual influence affecting these strategies.

In a preliminary investigative step I will therefore attempt to see if, in a comparable situation —the sociolinguistic interview— with the use of the same type of discourse by the informant —a narrative [3]— interviewers show similar behaviour with respect to the frequency of back-channel device production and to the choice of context for the production of these devices.

Data and Methodology

The Sankoff-Cedergren and the Montreal 1984 corpora of spoken French contain together 308 narratives. The criteria used for identifying the narratives are those of Labov and Waletzky (1967; Labov, 1972), for whom a narrative consists of a temporally- ordered recapitulation of a true-life experience, orientated around a central and non-iterative event [4]. Therefore, we are not concerned here with "life story" as usually understood by sociologists and anthropologists, but rather with a type of discourse to which we can oppose, for example, argumentative discourse or descriptive discourse. The following narrative belongs to the corpus.

Example 1 (narr. no 135, 44'84):
"La voisine s'est fait voler" [5]

> [...] C'est des quartiers où il y en a eu cinq vols là la semaine passée là aux alentours là. Aussitôt qu'une maison est fermée là: vous êtes mieux de laisser des lumières ou des affaires [...]

"The neighbour got robbed."

> [...] It's the neighbourhoods where there were five break-ins last week in the surrounding area. As soon as you leave the house: it's better to leave the light on or leave things [...]

1 Aye mais ils étaient dans la maison quand le voleur a rentré ' année passée (avec beaucoup
2 d'emphase). **<ils étaient dans la maison?>** Aye puis elle était toute seule. Puis elle
3 couche dans le sous-sol. Puis quand: elle est arrivée: elle attendait des: des peintres, puis,
4 ils ont rentré par le petit châssis en arrière là. Elle avait juste laissé ça ils étaient après faire le
5 ménage, la peinture il y avait ce châssis là mais il y avait: il y avait un grillage. **<hum>** Ils
6 ont coupé le grillage il a rentré puis quand elle a entendu du bruit **<hum>** elle dit "C'est
7 peut-être le matelas qui a tombé à côté sur les tables de Fernande" elle dit "Je vas aller voir."
8 Aye elle arrive elle: monte puis elle dit "Comment ça se fait, tu arrives bien de bonne heure
9 à matin?"
10 Mais elle attendait son neveu qui venait faire sa peinture là.
11 Fait qu'elle monte deux trois marches là, puis elle voit des grands pieds dans les escaliers.
12 **<hum>**
13 Fait que là là la peur l'a: Bien elle dit "Sur le coup là tu as pas peur. C'est après que tu le
14 réalises. " **<hum>**
15 Là lui il s'est reviré,
16 elle dit "Qu'est-ce-que vous faites là?"
17 Il s'est reviré puis il est venu pour sortir par en arrière mais c'était trop barré.
18 Il y avait pas ces grillages là dans le temps.
19 Fait que: là elle a ouvert la porte,
20 en ouvrant la porte elle est face à face avec l'autre. Il s'en allait ouvrir à l'autre là lui
21 probablement.
22 Fait-que là là lui il a resté figé sur place
23 puis là c'est le voleur, qui a redescendu l'escalier qui a passé devant elle puis il a passé.
24 L'autre s'est décidé de revirer puis il a parti avec.
25 Ils sont partis à la course tous les deux,
26 pas un mot ils ont rien dit. Ils ont pas eu le temps de rien faire. **<oui>** Mais ils
27 auraient pu l'assommer là elle était toute seule. **<bien oui>** Puis elle était dans le sous-sol.
28 Parce ' sa chambre est dans le sous-sol elle.

1 *But they were in the house when the robber got in last year (said emphatically).* ***<they***

2 ***were in the house?>*** *Hey and she was all alone. And she sleeps in the basement.*

3 *Then when: she arrived: she was waiting for the: the painters. Then, they came in by*

4 *the window in back. She had just left it they were doing the cleaning, the painting there*

5 *was the window there but there was: there was a grate.* ***<hum>*** *They cut the grate he*

6 *came in and when she heard a noise* ***<hum>*** *she said "Maybe it's the mattress which*

7 *has fallen on the side on Fernande's tables" she said "I'll go see."*

8 *Well she gets there she: goes up and says "How's that, that you're back so early in the*

9 *morning?"*

10 *But she was expecting her nephew who was coming to do her painting.*

11 *So she went up two or three steps, then she saw these big feet on the stairs*

12 ***<hum>***

13 *So the fear: well she said "Right away you're not afraid. It's after that you realize it."*

14 ***<hum>***

15 *Then he did a U-turn,*

16 *she says "What are you doing there?"*

17 *He did a U-turn and went to leave by the back but it was too blocked.*

18 *There weren't these fences back then.*

19 *So: she opened the door,*

20 *And by opening the door she stood facing the other one. He probably went to open it*

21 *for the other one.*

22 *So he froze there*

23 *And it's the robber, who went down the stairway and went by her.*

24 *The other decided to do a U-turn then left with him.*

25 *They took off running the two of them,*

26 *not a word they said nothing. They didn't have the time to do anything.* ***<yeh>*** *But*

27 *they could have beat her up she was all alone.* ***<well sure>*** *And whe was in the*

28 *basement. 'Cause her bedroom, it is in the basement.*

For this study, I have retained 87 of the 308 narratives. These 87 narratives were collected by eight different interviewers, producing the distribution illustrated in Table 1 (the interviewers are identifed by their initials). The only interviewers retained are those who had collected at least 10 narratives. In order to neutralize the effect of the specific relationship which is established between the two partners in an interview, I have tried where possible to choose, for each interviewer, narratives produced by the greatest possible number of informants. The atypical behaviour of the interviewer D. S. during certain narratives statistically distorted the results of the study; the addition of more narrative passages neutralized the effect of this behaviour, which explains that 17 narratives were finally considered in this case, instead of 10 passages which is the case for each of the other interviewers.

Interviewer	Number of narratives	Number of interviews
S.T.	10	6
H.B.	10	3
D.S.	17	7
N.M.	10	7
N.E.	10	7
T.C.	10	3
N.P.	10	7
T.M.	10	6
Tot.: 8	87	46

Table 1: *Number of narratives collected by each interviewer and the number of informants producing the narratives.*

Production Frequency of Back-Channel Signals

Each narrative was timed [6] and all of the vocal back-channel signals were extracted. The lengths of the narratives and the number of back-channel signals were then totalled for each interviewer.

The narratives collected are obviously of varied lengths (from 13 to 416 seconds) and, of course, result in the production of an equally varied number of back-channel signals on the part of the interviewer. Therefore, in order to obtain comparable data, I have calculated the number of back-channel signals pro-

duced by the interviewer for each minute of narrative by the informant. I refer to the result of this calculation when I speak of the production frequency of back-channel signals (see Table 2).

Inter-viewer	Number of BC.	Total length of narr. (sec.)	Frequency BC/min.
S.T.	16	498.86	1.92
H.B.	22	662.99	1.99
D.S.	69	910.42	4.55
N.M.	62	926.58	4.01
N.E.	41	514.69	4.78
T.C.	45	445.94	6.05
N.P.	54	417.19	6.26
T.M.	38	318.98	7.15
TOT:	313	4497.26	4.18

Table 2: *Production frequency of back-channel signals/ minute of informant narrative speech, for each of the interviewers.*

Important differences are observed between the eight interviewers; their production frequency of back-channel signals varies from 1.92 to 7.15 signals/minute, almost a four-fold increase. However, the frequencies form three quite distinct groups within this interval: high frequencies (T.C., N.P., and T.M.), medium frequencies (D.S., N.M., and N.E.), and weak frequencies (S.T. and H.B.).

These frequencies by themselves are too global to give a precise idea as to the behaviour of the interviewer-listener of a narrative; it quickly becomes obvious to any observer that the back-channel signals are not evenly distributed throughout the narrative. It seems that the different parts of the narrative structure call for an adjustment on the part of the listener, and that the back-channel signals are produced in greater number in certain strategic places during the narrative.

According to Labov and Waletzky (1967; Labov, 1972: 362-370), the six parts of the narrative structure are as follows:

1) Abstract: what is the narrative about?
2) Orientation: Who? When? What? Where? Elements which give information about the situation, the characters, the place and the time of the story.
3) Evaluation: So what? Indications as to the intent of the story, its reason for existence.
4) Complicating action (narrative clauses): And then what? What happened next?
5) Result or resolution: How did it end?
6) Coda: Annuls any other question. A procedure by which the narrator signals that the narrative is finished. It has as function to "[bring] the narrator and the listener back to the point at which they entered the narrative" (Labov, 1972: 365).

By using this narrative structure, it is possible to calculate the production frequency of the back-channel signals in each of the six parts constituting the narrative. These results (see Laforest, 1994), however, are unsatisfactory. First of all, it is difficult to precisely break down the narrative into its different parts. In addition, this breakdown can vary from one analyst to another, as the formal indications furnished by Labov and Waletzky are not sufficient for the identification of the boundaries of each part without calling upon a personal interpretation of the discourse. Another difficulty arises when the different parts of the narrative intersect within certain segments, particularly in the case of no. 3, the evaluation, which subtly threads itself through and permeates most of the narrative.

In fact, with the exception of no. 2, the orientation, which provides indispensable details for understanding the action, it can be said that the narrative is essentially articulated around narrative clauses, or the actions themselves, and around evaluations or commentaries on the actions. The function of the evaluation is to show the pertinence of the narrative —to render unthinkable, say Labov and Waletzky, any remark of the type, "So what?" on the part of the listener. It indicates, through various devices, the reason for the narrative's existence.

Labov shows quite well that the evaluation "forms a secondary structure which is concentrated in the evaluation section but may be found in various forms throughout the narrative. [...] that penetration is accomplished through the internal structure of

narrative clauses as well as the ordering of those clauses." (Labov, 1972: 369-370). Therefore, evaluative elements can be found throughout the narrative, within narrative clauses as well as in the result or the presentation, and not only in the section specifically identified as "evaluation". In this section, the action is suspended in order to allow a demonstration of interest in the narrative, generally by emotions expressed by the narrator with regard to the narrated events ("I mean it was really: difficult, you know"; "and well that really scared me"...). The evaluative components of the other parts of the narrative, however, cannot be studied on their own.

This last factor adds to the difficulty of initiating both a precise and reliable breakdown of the different parts of the narrative. For this reason, an examination of the contexts of the production of back-channel signals seems preferable to a comparison of the production frequencies of these signals for each part of the narrative. Therefore, in the following section I will use the central notion of evaluation to characterize these contexts, that is I will oppose the evaluation to the rest of the narrative.

Contexts of the Production of Back-channel Signals

Labov notes that the syntax of the narrative clause is characterized by its very great simplicity, thus setting it apart from non-narrative discourse (as well as from other parts of the narrative). He concludes from this that "departures from the basic narrative syntax have a marked evaluative force" (Labov, 1972: 378). I believe that this conclusion is too extreme; in the narratives that I have been able to observe, the setting up of the context, the explanation of certain details necessary to the understanding of the events as well as connecting the narrative with the discourse in which it is inserted often call for a complex syntactic structure, but do not necessarily concern evaluation. The tie that he establishes between syntactic complication and evaluation leads Labov to distinguish between several types of processes which have an evaluative function (the use of all types of exclamation, modalization, negation, explicative subordinate clauses, the use of certain verbal moods and tenses, etc.), which one can find indiscriminately in any part of the narrative structure (Labov, 1972: 378-393).

This identification grid, however, is not applicable to my corpus, simply due to the reservation mentioned beforehand. Even if a large part of the evaluation is identifiable by one of the formal factors presented by Labov, it cannot be concluded that every use of one of these factors definitely signals an evaluative segment[7].

It certainly remains that any narrative, in order to be socially or at least interactionally acceptable (thus justifying the narrator's occupation of the interactional ground by means of a narrative), must indicate its reason for existence, so the interlocutor may know the speaker's intention. I have therefore considered, in this study, that the evaluation consists of a commentary on the action, in the largest sense. This implies forcibly a trace of the presence of the speaker in his own speech, and can serve to show the uncommon character of the situation, to "dramatize" it (in the sense of "build-up"), to bring about a judgement on certain details or events in such a way as to pull them out, put them into perspective, analyze them or show their possible consequences.

1) Adjectives and evaluative adverbs

They possess the features [affective], [modalizing], [axiologic], and their denotative class is a vague set (see Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1980: 71-72). Certain substantives could have been added to this category (Kerbrat-Orecchioni gives as an example "it's a beauty"); however, none were found.

Example 2 (narr. 238, 88'84) :

"L'enfant et l'ordinateur"

> il dit "regarde", il dit "pareil comme toi" il dit "je suis capable". Fait que: tu sais c'est: c'est: à trois ans c'est d'être **réveillé ça**. <bien oui>

"The kid and the computer"

> *he says "look", he says "same as you" he says "I can". So: you know it's: at three years old that's* ***pretty quick****. <well sure>*

See also example 1, line 17: "it was **too** blocked."

2) Expressive phonology and exclamatives

As Labov (1972: 379), I mean by "expressive phonology" any prosodic intensifier mode (vowel lengthening, change in tone or intensity, etc.).

Example 3 (narr. 55, 7'71) :

"Comment j'ai rencontré mon mari"

> [...] Fait que une fois elle: elle m'avait présenté un Espagnol, un instant. <( )> On avait été dans une discothèque 'avais jamais été là-dedans moi. Fait que: c'était pas mon genre pantoute hein. **Olé! (rire)** <humhum> Fait que finalement [...]

"How I met my husband"

[...] So once she: she introduced me to a Spaniard, one second. <( )> We were in a discotheque 'd never been inside one myself. So: he wasn't my type at all eh. ***Ole! (laugh)*** *<humhum> So finally [...])*

See also example 1, line 1: words are pronounced slowly and very emphatically.

3) *Quantifiers*

Example 4 (narr. 214, 79'84):

"J'ai perdu ma carrière"

Elle m'a dit "Prenez un nom d'emprunt, on vous fera un chèque sous un autre nom." On a essayé **tous** les trucs possibles pour <humhum> le tenter, [...]

"I lost my career"

She told me "Go under another name, they'll write you a cheque under another name." We tried ***everything*** *possible to <humhum> convince him, [...]*

Example 5 (narr. 193, 68'84):

"Pris dans une tempête"

[...] Alors, ' rentre dans un rang en arrière de: Châteauguay, oh: oh: il y en avait comme on dit, une poudrerie, à **rien** voir. <humhum> Je me dis "je vas aller: [...]

"Stuck in a storm"

[...] So, ' went down a concession on the other side of: Châteauguay, oh: oh: there was like they say, a blizzard, ***nothing*** *to see. <humhum> I said to myself "I'm going to go: [...]*

4) *Immediate or delayed repetition of a segment*

(Repetitions due to hesitations or reformulations, etc., of the speaker are not taken into account.)

Example 6 (narr. 108, 32'84):

"Les vieux camions"

[...] Puis ça ces vieux trucks là **c'était fort, c'était fort** <oui> ça a pas d'allure.

"The old trucks"

So these trucks ***they were tough, they were tough*** *<yeh> it was incredible.*

Example 7 (narr. 296, 126'84):

"Accident en bicyclette"

[...] j'ai: tombé en bas du bicycle puis **le bicycle est rentré en-dessous du char**. <en> Une chance: le char bougeait pas il était arrêté tu sais. Mais **le bicycle est quand même rentré en-dessous** tu sais. <une chance que tu étais tombé avant> J'ai roulé puis [...]

"Bike accident"

[...] I: fell down from the bicycle then ***the bike went underneath the car.*** *<un:> It was lucky: the car didn't move it was stopped y'know. but* ***the bike still went underneath the car*** *y'know. <lucky you fell forward> I rolled then [...]*

5) *Imagery, metaphor, comparatives, superlatives*

Example 8 (narr. 140, 44'84):

"La mort de ma soeur"

ça me fait drôle **c'est pareil comme si elle était partie en voyage tu sais; puis que je la vois pas**. <humhum> Là là: j'ai été chez eux [...]

"My sister's death"

it makes me feel strange ***it's the same as if she was gone on a trip y'know; and then I don't see her.*** *<humhum> There: I was at their place [...])*

See also example 1, line 11-12: "then she saw **these big feet on the stairs**. <hum>"

6) *Negation with an expressive or comparative value*

Negation is said to be comparative by Labov when "[it] provide[s] a way of evaluating events by placing them against the background of other events which might have happened" (Labov, 1972: 381).

Example 9 (narr. 308, 126'84):

"Casser le bras de quelqu'un"

Je lui (y) ai cassé le bras. <eul:> **Pas le choix**. <hum> Je veux dire: c'était ça, puis c'était surtout pour: le championnat de la ville de Montréal ' fallait pas' je me trompe, c'était en finale.

"To break someone's arm"

I broke his arm. <euw:> ***Didn't have a choice.*** *<hum> I mean: that's it, it was for: the championship of the City of Montreal ' couldn't make a mistake, it was the finals.*

See also example 1, line 26: **They didn't have the time to do anything**. <yeh>

7) *Verbs expressing emotion and modality*

(Think, feel, realize, become aware,...)

Example 10 (narr. 97, 30'84):

"L'histoire de mon infarctus"

[...] L'estomac est tout' vidé hein. <oui> là après ça **je me suis senti** bien tu sais. <humhum> Mais si ça avait pas sorti [...]

"The story of my coronary"

[...] My stomach was completely empty eh. <yes> after that ***I felt*** *good y'know. <humhum> But if it didn't come out [...]*

See also example 1, line 13-14: "It's after that **you realize** it. **<hum>**"

8) Clauses separated by "ou" (or)

They are evaluative because they mark supposition.

Example 11 (narr. 201, 72'84):

"L'oiseau"

[...] Puis elle dit "Elle: a été te le porter chez vous". [un oiseau] J'ai dit "bien oui". Puis elle vient de temps en temps la petite fille tu sais on dirait **je le sais pas si elle s'en ennuie ou bien pour voir si elle est partie**. <humhum>

"The bird"

[...] Then she says "She: was for you to bring home". [a bird] I said "Well yes". So she comes from time to time the little girl y'know I guess I ***don't know if she misses it or well to see if it has left.*** *<humhum>*

9) The use of the present (non-historic), of the conditional, or of the future, but not in reported speech [8]

See example 1, line 27 (conditional following some French past tense forms): "But they **could have** beat her up she was all alone. <well sure>"

10) Search for discursive approbation

It includes interrogations directed towards the interlocutor.

Example 12 (narr. 193, 68'84):

"Pris dans une tempête"

[...] Alors finalement bien: j'avais: le camion: la remorque est arrivée, puis il s'est: il s'est pris lui aussi, alors il **fallait sortir hein?** <oui> On: ça: je dis ça vite, mais: [...]

"Stuck in a storm"

[...] So finally well: I had: the truck: the tow truck finally came, then it: it got stuck too, so ***it had to get out eh?*** *<yeh> We: that: I'm telling this a bit fast, but: [...]*

11) Evaluative ellipse

It includes utterances that are more or less elliptical and for which the evaluative character seems at first signaled by a marker of attack ("tu sais" or "tu sais moi").

Example 13 (narr. 198, 72'84):

"La mort de la blonde de mon père"

[...] je lui (y) dis "Pour moi grand-mère elle est morte" puis j'ai dit "elle: elle veut pas me le dire". **Tu sais, moi** <humhum> tout de suite mon: [...]

"My father's girlfriend's death"

([...] I say to him "For me grandma is dead" then I said "she: she doesn't want to tell me" ***You know,*** *<humhum> right away my: [...])*

Example 14 (narr 297, 126'84):

"Jacinthe"

[...] J'étais allé chercher un verre d'eau je lui avais pitché dans la face (rire) puis ça l'avait réveillée. **Tu sais à sept ans tu sais sept huit ans**. <oui oui> Tu penses: n'importe quoi de [...]

"Jacinthe"

[...] I went to get a glass of water I threw it in her face (laugh) and it woke her up. ***Geez seven years old geez seven eight years old.*** *<yep yep> You think: no matter what [...]*

12) Explicative subordinate clauses, but not in reported speech

I have taken into account restrictives, introduced by "bien que" (although), "alors que" (while), and causals —"parce que" (because), "rapport à ce que" (concerning). Both explain ou evaluate the principal clauses on which they depend.

Example 15 (narr. 55, 7'71):

"Comment j'ai rencontré mon mari"

[...] J'ai dit "Je vas demander à mes parents" **parce que je savais que tout de même ' fallait revenir tard**. <c'est ça> Mes parents [...]

"How I met my husband"

[...] I said "I'm going to ask my parents" ***because I knew just the same ' had to come back late.*** *<that's it> My parents [...]*

This is not a closed list: it only contains indicators that I was able to observe. Other indicators, such as double attributives (mentioned by Labov), are definitely intensification markers of evaluative character as well, but none were found in my corpus. On the other hand, very often a segment or an evaluative passage is marked by the combination of several

indicators, as can be seen in, among others, example 1 (see lines 26-27) and 6.

Once these categories of evaluative processes were determined, all of the back-channel signals produced in the narratives of the corpus were examined and classified according to whether they appeared in evaluative contexts, that is, immediately following the use of one of the described processes, or in non-evaluative contexts. Obviously, as is shown by the examples, the length of the segment preceding the back-channel signal varies, as a function of the evaluative process used: the back-channel signal frequently adjoins an evaluative adjective but generally only intervenes at the end of a causal clause. The results of this classification appear in Table 3.

Interviewer	Total # of BC produced	# of BC in evaluative contexts	% of BC in evaluative contexts
S. T.	16	11	68.7
H. B.	22	17	77.3
D. S.	69	29	42.0
N. M.	62	36	58.1
N. E.	41	24	58,5
T. C.	45	20	44.4
N. P.	54	32	59.3
T. M.	38	15	39.5

Table 3: *Percentage of back-channel signals produced in evaluative contexts for the total number of signals produced, for each interviewer.*

An intuitive observation of the distribution of the back-channel signals in the narratives gave the impression of a clean concentration in the evaluative segments of the narratives. However, as was the case in the calculation of the frequency of back-channel signals, important differences are observed from one interviewer to another, the proportion of back-channel signals produced in evaluative contexts varying from 39.5% to 77.3% of the total number of back-channel signals. It is therefore difficult to consider convergence. However, comparing the production frequency of back-channel signals (Table 2) with the percentage of these signals produced in evaluative contexts (Table 3) is interesting (see Table 4); a statistical analysis[9] shows the existence of a correlation between these two results (see Graphic 1).

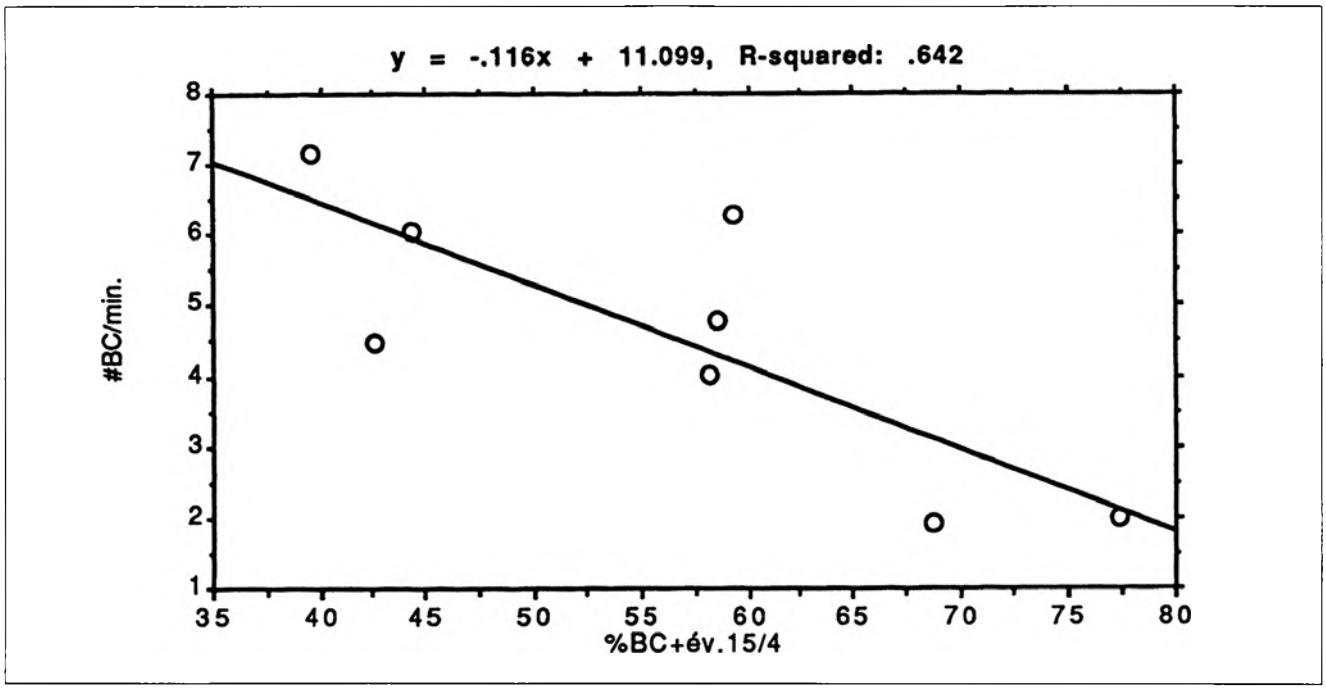
Interviewer	% of BC in evaluative contexts	Frequency BC/ minute
S.T.	68.7	1.92
H.B.	77.3	1.99
D.S.	42.0	4.55
N.M.	58.1	4.01
N.E.	58.5	4.78
T.C.	44.4	6.05
N.P.	59.3	6.26
T.M.	39.5	7.15

Table 4: *Percentage of back-channel signals produced in evaluative contexts for the total number of signals produced and the global production frequency of these signals in the narratives, for each interviewer.*

As back-channel signals produced in the narrative decreased (which corresponds with a weak production frequency), the proportion of back-channel signals in evaluative contexts increased and vice versa ($p = .0168$). In other words, the less frequent use of listening devices by the interviewer coincides with a greater concentration of these devices in the evaluative segments. It seems reasonable to interpret this correlation as the expression of a type of rule —more instigative than coercive— leading the speakers to acknowledge first and foremost the evaluative contexts. Individual freedom, then, would apply to non-evaluative contexts, which would only be acknowledged optionally by back-channel signals, and only after the saturation of evaluative contexts.

Discussion and conclusion

The examination of production frequency of back-channel signals and of the number of these signals produced following an evaluative segment in a narrative told in an interview has shown great behaviour differences between the interviewers. However, this study has shown that these two aspects of listening bahaviour are related and vary as a function of each other. The interviewers who, for reasons we do not presently know, produce few



Graphic 1: *Production frequency of back-channel signals in narratives as a function of the percentage of back-channel signals produced in evaluative contexts.*

vocal back-channel signals place the majority of them in evaluative contexts; those who vocally mark their listening more frequently tend to do so less often in evaluative contexts. This comparison —based on a limited corpus— of the behaviour of several listeners of narratives does not allow us to show their convergence, but, more indirectly, demonstrates where divergence is possible, and where the margin of individual freedom can play a role. As different as the behaviour of the studied interviewers may be, back-channel signal production nevertheless seems to be governed by certain rules.

I have interpreted the obtained results as the demonstration of a sort of priority scale of the two possible places for back-channel signal production. Evaluative contexts, that is, the times when the speaker expresses his attitudes regarding the events which he is relating, are those which "elicit" more than any other a back-channel signal; the interviewer frequently intervenes in another context only when his production frequency is great enough, which brings to mind the notion of saturation (of evaluative contexts). It is necessary to verify this eventual saturation by extracting all occurrences of evaluative processes and by calculating how many of these occurrences lead to back-channel signal production.

However, should a future study prove this hypothesis for a fixed register of production frequencies in a given community, the results of my study of these narratives could contribute to the evaluation of that portion of characteristics which can be attributed to idiosyncrasies and to linguistic/extralinguistic constraints on back-channel signal production, as well as to the evaluation of the way each of these interact.

Furthermore, it seems to me that the evaluative devices itemized are not found only in the narrative, and that the processes used in this study could effectively be applied to other "types" of discourse (informative discourse, argumentative discourse, etc.), in a more global attempt to update the listening strategies in Quebec French.

Notes

1. This study has been made possible through subsidies granted by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I am greatly indebted to the judicious commentaries of Martina Drescher (University of Bielefeld), of Richard Patry (University of Montreal), of Michelle Daveluy (St. Mary's University) and of Diane Vincent (Laval University), the latter with whom I am associated in the framework of the subsidized project. Thank you also to Troy Heisler,

who helped me carry out the timing of the narrations, and who has assured the translation of the text into English.

2. It is obviously not possible, in the current state of our knowledge, to postulate the universality of this characteristic of interactional behaviour. The majority of studies carried out in this area were done on occidental languages, but we have confirmation that vocal back-channel signals exist equally in Japanese (see Maynard, 1986 and White, 1989), and in the Bouroucho community, in the north of Pakistan (I thank Richard Patry, from the University of Montreal, who has furnished me with this last piece of information).

3. Interactional situation and discourse type (argumentation or description vs narrative, for example) are in fact likely to modify the listening strategies of the interlocutor. It is therefore necessary to neutralize these variables.

4. This rather minimalist definition of a narrative has been retained because it is quasi-canonical. Despite (and perhaps because of) the criticism which it has received, it is an inescapable reference for specialists in oral narrative.

5. Transcription conventions: the colon indicates lengthening (hesitation); underlined passages overlap; back-channel signals are enclosed by chevrons. The reference of the example contains the number of the narrative, the interview number and the year of recording (1971 or 1984).

6. For each narrative, four timings (in 100/ths of a second) were carried out by two researchers, each working independantly and each measuring the length twice. When the difference between the lowest measure and the greatest measure exceded 0.5 seconds, the timing was redone. It seems difficult to reduce this margin of error of one-half second, considering the technique used; this difference is all the same acceptable, considering the length of the majority of the narratives. The length which finally appears in the results presented here is the average of the four timings.

7. Another of my reservations stems from the fact that, in my opinion, reported speech modifies the eventual evaluative value of a formal indicator. For Labov, the occurrence of one of the indicators of syntactic complication in reported speech does not change the evaluative character of the segment where this indicator appears, but simply marks the capacity of the narrator to embed the evaluation in such a way as to not "exit from" his story. In this way Labov considers that negation, the imperative, the conditional, the future and the interrogative, when they appear in reported speech, are evaluative because they can be *interpreted* as threats, which signal the seriousness of the situation —and consequently assures the tellability of the narrative. However, this interpretation is only valid for stories composed of exceptionally dangerous events, which exclude the more "ordinary" narratives comprising the gist of my corpus.

8. As mentioned by Labov, the past progressive, used following a narrative tense (composed past or historic present) suspends the action too and often accompanies an evaluation. But as an action suspended by a verb in the past progressive can have a purely "orientative" value (in a passage carrying necessary details for the understanding of the events), it has not been retained as an indicator of an evaluation. The evaluative passages which contain past progressive forms can however, in the majority of cases, be identified by the presence of another indicator.

9. Analysis performed with Statview 512+™ software.

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