

**LISTENING COMPREHENSION IN AN
ACADEMIC CONTEXT**

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Résumé

Assister à des cours magistraux en langue étrangère peut se révéler une expérience assez pénible pour beaucoup d'étudiants. Ils peuvent éprouver des difficultés à distinguer l'essentiel de l'accessoire dans les propos qu'ils entendent. Une des raisons qui expliquent cette difficulté peut se trouver dans leur incapacité à traiter certaines dimensions rhétorico-sémantiques du discours universitaire telles que les modalités axiologiques, épistémiques et déontiques, auxquelles s'ajoute le recours à la fonction conative par l'enseignant. Cette conférence fournira des exemples de ces phénomènes discursifs puisés dans des cours magistraux en anglais et en français. Des activités de sensibilisation pour les étudiants seront présentées. Les dimensions rhétorico-sémantiques signalées ci-dessus ne sont pas caractéristiques du seul discours universitaire bien entendu, elles sont observables dans toutes sortes de discours écrits et oraux. Cependant, la longueur et la relative complexité des cours magistraux sont telles que les dimensions modales de ceux-ci peuvent entraver la capacité de l'étudiant à les traiter de façon satisfaisante.

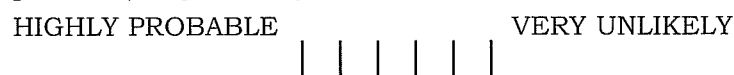
This paper was read at the "Colloque International: Le Discours Scientifique à l'Université", University of Blida, Algeria, May 2000.

Understanding lectures in a foreign language is not always a simple, easy, problem-free communicative event. I lectured to third-year French students of English at the University of Nancy and on three occasions in the past I have asked them whether they would prefer me to lecture in English or in French. Unsurprisingly, English lost out by quite a large margin each time, so linguistically insecure did the students feel! Obviously that feeling of insecurity was based on the students' impression that their lexical/syntactic proficiency would not be up to the job. They quite rightly positioned lexis high up the scale of features of spoken discourse that will contribute to unease among listeners in a communicative event such as an academic lecture. In this paper I will suggest that some other pragmatic/semantic features of oral interactional discourse can contribute to complicating matters for the listeners.

But before going on to expand on these features, I must stress that despite the importance of this sub-section of listening comprehension there are only two published courses, as far as I know, geared towards explicit training in Listening Comprehension in English in an academic context: Tony Lynch's excellent *Study Listening* (Lynch 1983) and *Academic Listening Encounters* (Espeseth 1999). There are none in French.

I am going to examine several kinds of *modality* (see Palmer 1990) and one of Jakobson's *functions*. These include:

Epistemic modality which corresponds to a "highly probable/very unlikely" cline or scale:



Axiological modality (C.Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1977), which corresponds to a "good/bad, worthwhile/useless" cline:



Deontic modality which specifies what should or shouldn't be done:



And finally the **conative function** (R. Jakobson), whereby the speaker addresses the audience directly.

My concern, then, is to what extent the audience are aware that the speaker

- a) is somewhat hesitant about the truth-value of what s/he is saying
- b) is suggesting that some procedure is better or worse than another
- c) is addressing the audience directly
- d) is suggesting that the audience do something (not necessarily physically of course)

I will apply a blanket definition of the conative function, i.e. all forms of address to the audience irrespective of illocutionary intent will be considered conative. It follows that the deontic modality will often feature among those forms of address:

e.g. *"C'est pas la peine de..."* = *"there's no need to..."* = *"you don't need to..."* = *"vous n'avez pas besoin de..."*

Let us look at samples of these modalities and the conative function in French and English. French excerpts are from a course on "soil mechanics" at the Ecole des Mines in Nancy by M. Causero. English excerpts are from a lecture about "speech" by Pr John Sparks, Open University.

Epistemic modality

"Oui probablement hein.....(Cette classification) n'est pas toujours rigoureusement scientifique..."

C'est un peu la même chose.....dépend bien souvent.....Il est possible que certains d'entre vous...que vous connaissez probablement..... je crois qu'il faut que euh vous reteniez au moins que euh la classification géotechnique se fait à partir de..."

"Variation in the pitch of the vocal cords does convey some meaning... The first example is one most of you have probably heard... Evidently... there must be a great deal of redundancy in speech...I suspect many of you failed to hear..."

Notice that the epistemic modality here appears to contribute to pragmatic politeness of a sort:

"...vous connaissez probablement.....most of you have probably heard..."

the speaker meaning in fact "you may not/probably don't know or have heard about...so I am going to tell you".

Axiological modality:

"C'est bien plus important que le.....X a l'avantage de...C'est pas la peine de....Mais c'est pas très important je dirais, hein, euh, ce qui est très important c'est..."

"this is quite false.... One key factor....I'd like to demonstrate the importance of spectra....it appears much too thin to be natural speech...(we can) suffer very little degradation.... the quality of the speech is very far from that associated with the idea of high fidelity....Rather surprisingly....the first sentence is only barely comprehensible.....but the easiest way is simply to ... Surprisingly...."

Deontic modality

"je crois qu'il faut que euh vous reteniez au moins que euh la classification géotechnique se fait à partir deVous devez savoir...Moi je vous demande de retenir que le principe de classification."

"I want you to get the distinction... See if you can understand it."

Conative function

Vous voyez le principe ?..... Vous voyez donc... L'exercice que je vous ai donné sur la courbe granulométrique... D'accord?...je crois qu'il faut que vous reteniez au moins....Vous devez savoir...Moi je vous demande de retenir que le principe de classification...Il est possible que certains d'entre vous...que vous connaissez probablement"

"In this programme I want to tell you.... You should recall I want you to get the distinction.... you can hear that the voice ... Remember that the vocal cords.....you will hear that speech remains highly comprehensible...The first example is one most of you have probably heard...Notice that the first sen-

tence...I suspect many of you failedyou'll hear it played back....See if you can understand it."

Notice that some phrases correspond to at least two modalities or a combination of modality and the conative function:

Deontic modality/conative function

"I want you to get the distinction... See if you can understand it..."

"Moi je vous demande de retenir que le principe de classification..."

Epistemic modality/conative function

"I suspect many of you failed to hear..."

Epistemic/axiological modalities

"This is quite false"

Epistemic/Deontic modalities/conative function

"je crois qu'il faut que vous reteniez au moins..."

What techniques or procedures might one use to sensitize the students to these discursive features ? As in *Study Listening*, there is probably a case for getting the students to read transcripts of lectures in order to spot occurrences of the phenomena under consideration. Admittedly this will turn the exercise into a reading comprehension activity, but it is no doubt the price to pay to sensitize the students.

A second stage would involve using sound or video recordings. Content of the excerpts would be provided in the Target Language in order to diminish the Listening Comprehension burden proper, as far as propositional content goes, thereby helping the students concentrate on modal features of the lecture.

Other features of scientific discourse need to be taken into account such as the use of metaphors or similes, such as

"un nuage en forme de patatoïde" i.e. "a potato-shaped scattergram"

which I can recall confused a number of overseas engineers in a lecture at the School of Mines in Nancy.

In the recorded lectures used in *Study Listening* (Lynch 1983) the following appear:

"(the microchip) is small enough to pass through the eye of a needle....(pocket calculators) can be almost the size of your finger your thumbnail....people buy them almost as toys /at Christmas time... the trade recession that has dogged us in the 1970s... the underdeveloped country stands little chance in this race...the term (third world) is a blanket term....people generally resort to some sort of useful er convenient form for assessing the relative rank of countries in a sort of football league table... population control doesn't operate in a vacuum ... the sorts of resources I'm talking about boil down to...there seem to be two basic philosophies/one has been called the trickle down theory" (Lynch 1983: 85-92).

Finally, lecturers use various kinds of speech acts, some of which may not be easy to identify and overseas students might end up wondering "What is s/he saying?":

Directives:

The lecturer is telling us what to do.

S/he is telling us how to do it.

S/he is telling us what *not* to do.

Explanations:

S/he is explaining why we should be doing something.

S/he is explaining why/how people proceed the way they do.

Assessments:

S/he is assessing the validity of a given procedure.

Argumentation:

Hypothesising, providing the terms of a problem, the solution to a problem, providing a formula, defining.

Recall:

Reminding us of what s/he said earlier on in the lecture, in another lecture

Programming:

What s/he is going to talk about next/do next ?

Given the increasing number of students attending lectures in languages which are not their own, there is an obvious need for the development of training materials geared toward listening comprehension in an academic context. In fact it would appear that there is a dearth of appropriate materials for developing listening skills generally, especially in French and German. The inherent difficulties of that particular skill still seem to be somewhat underestimated by a broad section of the teaching profession.

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