

Stress and accent in French television discourse

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ABSTRACT

A perceptive analysis of a selected corpus including French spoken actualizations (oralizations) of informational TV discourse reveals that one of the two typical manifestations of prosodic marking of syllables (lexical stress) is actually in functional deviation. Affecting systematically the first syllable of the lexical unit, its use has been observed as a routine proceeding in the structuring of media messages. The routine of such utilization leads to the fact that stress no longer figures exclusively as a feature of lexical level; it becomes gradually a prosodic property of the whole accent unit. Given the orientative function of the other accentual type in French (final syntagmatic accent), the accent unit is in these conditions prosodically marked on its both limits. Stressing the first syllable of the unit could therefore be explained as redundant. Its manifestation, however, seems to function as a phatic prosodic feature of a spoken message.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper's aim is to analyse some of the prosodic particularities as they appear in the specific nature and function of the French media (television) professional speech. The use of special accentual patterns is particularly interesting, mainly because of the obvious, automatic and self-evident actualizations of the accent (and virtual accent units) in spoken standard French.

The French accentual features are traditionally considered as a two-type prosodic system, providing two different communicative functions.

The *accent* (fr. *accent final*) is usually analysed as an inherent prosodic mark with a fixed position on the last syllable of the accent unit. The accent unit is defined in terms of syntactic sequences, not as a lexical unit. Its sense is thus limited (for the speaker as well as for the recipient) by the regular use of a final accent. It is therefore justified to say that the final accent in French is "meaningless": its systematical functioning has nothing to do with distinguishing meanings. It is reduced to delimitating uttered senses and forming orientation marks for the recipient in the complex meanings of the spoken utterance. The result of such functioning is the fact that many syntactical units not being able to conclude a syntactical sequence can never receive an accent mark. Such is the

case of different proclitics in the role of deixis markers, e.g. personal indicators *je, tu, il*, articles, demonstrative pronouns (*ce, cet, cette, ces*), etc.

The use of *stress* (fr. *accent d'insistance*) is normally based on a radically different strategic intentions. The stress is not considered as a syntagmatic, but as a lexical prosodic feature. It is generally not used as an automatical (system-inherent) strategic mean, but as a speaker's choice to actualize either emotional or distinctive (logical or explicit) value of a lexical unit. It is positioned systematically on the first syllable of the unit, except for the cases of vowel-initialized lexemes where the stress affects the second syllable. The stress is, in functional terms, one of the prosodic means for the speaker to point out explicitly and intentionally (i.e. with a conscious effort in uttering) the meaning of the targeted lexical unit.

2. CORPUS

A corpus of oral texts has been taped from several channels of French-spoken televisions (France, Belgium, Québec) and includes some 10500 analysed words. We observed particularly close the informational discourse by journalists, reporters in different roles, but also by guests, i.e. non-professional media speakers who were invited and presented in the news-editions.

The research is based on a hypothesis that journalists and reporters use the French language as a professional tool of normative discourse, appropriated to their basic communicative intention which is to organize the spoken messages clearly, to structure them in a simple and convincing way and make the utterances be understood as easily as possible by the largest segment of the public.

In order to expose graphically the concerned prosodic segments, we chose to mark the syllables with a final accent in *italics*, and those covered with a stress in **bold** characters. The comma (,) is used to define non-pausal syntactical limits between the accent units, and the slash (/) to translate silent pauses into the written text.

A sample of the corpus:

Journal France 3

27/4 1998, 12.30

(journalist 1) **En** Allemagne, le parti du chancelier **Helmut Kohl**, vient de *subir* une **nouvelle** défaite, tandis que celui

de son adversaire, **Gerhard Schroeder**, poursuit sa progression. A **cinq** mois des élections fédérales, ce scrutin régional / de **Sachse Anhalt**, est un **avertissement** pour le chancelier, mais ce scrutin / *marque* aussi surtout la **montée** / **des communistes** / et des **néo-nazis** dans cette région sinistrée de l'**ex-RDA**. **Jean-Paul G rouard**.

(reporter 1) **Dimanche noir, catastrophe, signal d'alarme, ce matin, les journaux allemands rivalisent de titres choc.** Le r sultat des  lections dans le lander de **Sachse Anhalt** est effectivement un v ritable **coup** de tonnerre **politique**. Le parti chr tien d mocrate d'Helmut **Kohl** perd **douze points**, la **gauche** progresse **moins** que pr vu, **mais** surtout **l'extr me droite** fait une perc e **totallement inattendue**. Avec / **douze** virgule neuf pourcent des **voix**, le parti n o-nazi, le **DVU**, fait son **entr e** dans le **parlement** de lander de l'ancienne Allemagne de l'**Est** pour la **premi re fois**. Dirig  depuis **Munich** par un **milliardaire**, il a men  une campagne / **ultra x nophobe** / avec de **gros** moyens **financiers**, on ne l'attendait **tout** de m me **pas**   un **tel** niveau, puisque le lander de **Sachse Anhalt** / compte **moins** de **deux** pourcent d'immigr s. Aujourd'hui, les analystes s'accordent pour expliquer cette perc e par le **malaise** et la **pr carisation sociale** dans l'**ex-RDA**, le taux de **ch mage** / en **Sachse Anhalt** / atteint d sormais / **vingt-deux** virgule **six** pourcent. Cette  lection constitue de toutes fa ons un **nouveau fiasco** pour **Helmut Kohl**, **ce** matin, la presse s'interroge sur sa **capacit **   **mener** son parti pour les **prochaines  lections l gislatives**, dans **cinq** mois.

(journalist 2) **Un** mois / apr s l'arrestation du tueur en s rie de l'**Est** parisien **Guy Georges**, l'instruction se trouve / **totallement paralys e**. Au total, **trois** juges / **instruisent** / les dossiers, **aucun** d'entre eux / ne veut se d saisir, les familles des victimes sont v ritablement  coeur es par cette **bataille** qui dessert la recherche de la v rit , car le **meurtrier pr sum ** / refuse d' tre entendu / par / les **trois** magistrats.

(reporter 2) A pr sent, on d couvre / pour la **premi re fois** / le **billet** / qui nous ouvrira / les **portes** / de la Coupe du monde de football, **Michel Platini** l'a **pr sent **   la presse ce matin, comme l'**affiche**, ce **billet** est **plut t color **, **Didier Balaise**.

(weather forecast) Eh bien **pas** d'am lioration en **vue**, on peut dire que la **perturbation**, qui traverse la **France** depuis **trois jours**, va encore persister sur l'**est** du pays, elle donne des pluies **consid rables**, M t oFrance dit **m me** qu'on risque des **cruels** dans le Massif central, toutes les r gions du **Cantal**, du **centre**, avec des **pr cipitations** tr s **importantes** // depuis plusieurs jours donc **prudence** // nous avons encore un petit peu de **neige** sur les **Alpes**, les **Pyr n es** et surtout un caract re tr s **orageux** / sur la **moiti ** sud du pays o  **l **, on attend encore des **pluies**, donc un caract re **orageux**, heu, tr s / cons quent aujourd'hui, puisque les // effectivement, les **pr cipitations** sont **tr s nombreuses** depuis **plusieurs jours**.

3. CORPUS ANALYSIS

The analysis observed a total of 2618 accent units which include exactly one delimitative final accent. All the other accentual types are (resulting obviously from the different uses of lexical stress) are represented in 1072 accent units. This roughly means that 40,9% of accent units are marked by a prosodic feature (stress) affecting a non-final syllable. Given that stress is a strategic option in structuring spoken messages, the high amount of its occurrences is due to the specificity of the media uttering. The situation is even clearer in the messages uttered specifically by the reporters: an extraordinary proportion of 47,1% of reporters' accent units contain at least one stressed syllable which means that using this kind of prosodic feature is no longer an original tool for creating an effective speech strategy, but is becoming a routine operation in the professionally structured utterances.

In the vast majority of cases, the so-called "lexical stress" affects the first syllable of the accent unit, but not necessarily of the lexical unit. The analysis aims to observe the nature and the functions of the prosodic features with stress properties, affecting one of the non-final syllables of a unit.

	accent units	stressed syllables
journalists	1232	516 (41,9%)
reporters	938	442 (47,1%)

Figure 1: stressing in accent units by type of speaker

Journalists and reporters are obviously the main and the most representative producers of the spoken messages that are specific in realizing the communicative intentions and using special strategies in order to make the content of their utterances comprehensible and attractive for the television audience. It is also important to point out that the media create a particular type of communication which is undoubtedly a unilateral one, including at the same time one active speaker and a mass of unidentified, communicatively passive and silent recipients. The use of lexical stress in its logical (explicit) form is therefore an obvious way for the speakers to be as explicit as possible and to call a maximum of attention.

The proportions in Figure 1 make clear that stressing became in the media type of speech an automatic prosodic feature which loses its original strategic function of intentionally pointing out particular meanings.

	stressed syllables	non-stress
journalists	516	49 (9,5%)
reporters	442	45 (10,2%)

Figure 2: routine stresses losing their standard function

The upper statistics (Figure 2) show that a rough average of 10% accent units which include a final accent and another accentual type, present a prosodic feature that can no longer be defined as lexical stress. It is the routine in stressing first syllables of lexical units that transfers the use of this accentual procedure to the syllables which normally could not even be accentuated nor stressed. The first sentence of the example *reporter 1* (**D**imanche **n**oir, **c**atastrophe, **s**ignal d'**a**larme, **c**e **m**atin, **l**es journaux **a**llemands **r**ivalisent de **t**itres **c**hoc.) presents accentual marking on the demonstrative pronoun (*ce*) and on the article (*les*) which means that the stress is not given by the speaker to the first syllable of the lexical unit to underline its importance in creating the coherence and the intelligibility of the whole utterance. Its operational field is now extended to the whole accent unit and marks prosodically the beginning of this unit. Since the "stressing" here has no explicit or distinctive semantical function and since the limit of the accent unit is already designated by the final accent, this type of accentual marking should be seen as linguistically redundant. It is though possible to conclude that this kind of automatical intervention of a prosodic feature is functioning here as a phatic marker, merely pointing out the presence of a particular intention and of the message as such.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Prosodic features as they are actualized by professional speakers in French electronic media (and especially in news programmes) present some specific functional characteristics. As the television speech has a wide social influence on the development of the linguistic competence in general, these specifics may globally affect the prosodic image of the speech performances within French language communities.

A perceptive research of a selected corpus including spoken actualisations (oralizations) of informational TV discourse is based on a preliminary supposition that the French accentual system has been, through democratization of the spoken standard in the last decades, entering a process of restructuration. The analysis reveals, in fact, that one of the two typical manifestations of prosodic marking of syllables in French, i.e. lexical stressing, is actually in deviation - compared to traditional descriptions of its functioning. French lexical stress is traditionally described as a prosodic feature realizing the individual speech strategy in terms of concentrating

lexical meaning of the chosen unit. Affecting systematically the first syllable of the lexical unit, its use has been revealed as a routine proceeding in the structuring of informational media messages. The routine of such utilization leads to the observed and analysed fact that this stress no longer figures exclusively as a feature of lexical level; it becomes gradually and (in the media discourse) systematically a prosodic property of the whole accent unit, which in French utterances is a virtual category depending on communicative intention and on the speech rate. This means that - in specific types of speech - the stress regularly affects the first syllable (regardless of its accentuability, e.g. articles or personal indicators *je, tu, il*) of a relatively large segment in the speech chain.

Given the delimitative and orientative function of the other accentual type in French, i.e. the final syntagmatic accent, the accent unit is in these conditions being prosodically marked on its both limits: at the beginning (stress) and at the end (final accent). Stressing the first syllable of the unit can therefore be explained as functionally redundant and lacking any structural motivation. Its undoubtedly perceived manifestation can however be interpreted as an intervention of a prosodic feature carrying out the phatic functioning of the specific utterances and speech itself.

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