

FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT

Attitudes and language use of international exchange students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2 French

Britta Thörle

ATHENA Visiting Researcher (AVR) Programme / LE STUDIUM, France

Laboratoire Ligérien de Linguistique (LLL) (UMR 7270, University of Orléans, University of Tours, CNRS, Bibliothèque Nationale de France), France

University of Siegen

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Fellow: **Professor Britta THÖRLE**
From University of Siegen
Host laboratory in region Centre-Val de Loire: Laboratoire Ligérien de Linguistique (LLL)
Host scientist: Dr Marie Skrovec
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ABSTRACT

The report presents the main issues, experimental details and first results of the project “Attitudes and language use of international students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2” (ESLO-L2), realized at the host laboratory “Laboratoire Ligérien de Linguistique” (LLL) between March and July 2023. The aim of the project was to apply the methodology of the corpus of oral French “Enquête SocioLinguistique à Orléans” (ESLO), conceived as a “city’s sound portrait” to the group of foreign exchange students at the University of Orléans. The research interest of the project was aimed at the questions of how the students’ perception of the city, its inhabitants and the French language changes during the first 5-6 months of their stay in Orléans and how the students’ language use in oral interaction develops during this period. The latter will be examined through the example of discourse marker use.

1- Introduction

With the ESLO corpus (Enquêtes SocioLinguistiques à Orléans), created in the 1960s and continued since 2008, the University of Orléans owns one of the most important sociolinguistic corpora of spoken French. ESLO is conceived as the “sound portrait of a city” through its residents, portraying different social identities, their language use and attitudes, as well as the diversity of urban communication situations and everyday practices. The aim of the ATHENA Visiting Researcher (AVR) project was to extend the methodology of the ESLO corpus to a group of residents that had not been considered before, namely the group of international exchange students who spend part of their studies in

Orléans. The research interest of the project is to investigate how the students’ perception of the city, its inhabitants and the French language changes during the first 5-6 months of their stay in Orléans and how their language use in oral interaction develops during this period. The latter is examined using the example of discourse marker (DM) acquisition. DMs are “small words” such as *bon, enfin, voilà, hein*, etc., which are often overheard as “superfluous”, but which fulfill a variety of conversational functions in oral interaction, including controlling and structuring turns and topics, argumentation, and formulation work (cf., e.g. Bazzanella 1995, 225). DMs are therefore an important prerequisite for the acquisition of communicative and interactional competence (e.g. Pekarek Doehler 2018, Thörle

B. Thorle. Schneeweile. Attitudes and language use of international exchange students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2 French, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2023, 7, 106-113

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2016, 2020). As Wierzbicka (2003, 341) puts it: “Their meaning is crucial to the interaction mediated by speech; [...] If learners of a language failed to master the meaning of its particles, their communicative competence would be drastically impaired.” Although interaction in the target language is considered an essential condition for the acquisition of discourse markers (Reaves 2023), there is still relatively little evidence on how the use of discourse markers develops while studying abroad. Existing studies suggest a correlation between strong input and high use of MDs (Thomas/Mitchell 2022) or between a relationship-rich social network and the development of the *variety* of marker-like expressions (Arvidsson 2019). Both observations make the study abroad context particularly interesting for the analysis of discourse marker acquisition. The AVR project therefore aimed to extend the state of the art by observing the development of DM use among international students in Orléans over a period of several months.

In the following we will present the experimental details of the AVR project and the results obtained during the stay in Orléans. We will also briefly report on the related project ESLO-FLEU (ESLO – Fle et Linguistique pour l’Enseignement Universitaire, 2022-23), which was partially conducted in parallel. ESLO-FLEU is an application project aimed at creating a corpus-based digital resource for the university teaching and learning of spoken French and French linguistics in the context of French as a foreign language (FLE) (see <http://eslo.huma-num.fr/index.php/pagelarecherche/projets-de-l-equipe-et-sous-corpus/eslo-fleu>).

2- Experimental details

¹ This corpus is the younger part of the complete ESLO-corpus, which contains two subcorpus: the “original” corpus compiled in the late 60s

B. Thorle. Schneeweile. Attitudes and language use of international exchange students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2 French, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2023, 7, 106-113
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The experimental implementation of the project was carried out according to the following steps:

2.1 Data collection

The aim of the data collection was a) to create a learner language subcorpus to the ESLO-corpus based on the ESLO methodology (cf. Baude 2015) and b) to document the development of learners’ language use during their stay abroad in Orléans. For these purposes, we decided to copy the design of the guided interviews in the ESLO2-corpus¹ and to record interviews with international students enrolled in French language courses at the *Institut de Français* (IDF) of the University of Orléans during the academic year 2022/23. The interviews follow the questionnaire designed for the original interviews in the ESLO2-corpus, which has been slightly adapted to the situation of the international students. The questions cover topics such as housing in Orléans, studies/part-time job, leisure time, Orléans as an urban living space in the region, the inhabitants of the city and their language. The interviews were recorded at two points in time (T): at the beginning of the academic year in October 2022 (=T1) and after 5-6 months of residence (=T2) in March 2023. They were conducted by native French-speaking master’s students in order to minimize the social distance between interviewers and interviewees. In total, 28 interviews were conducted, and ~16,5 hours of interview material were collected. 10 students participated in both interviews (T1 and T2), 8 students participated in only one interview (T1 or T2). Table 1 gives an overview of the collected corpus:

Interviews T1	Interviews T2	“Matches” (Interviews with the same student at T1 and T2)
14	14	10
Length: 08:04:17	Length: 08:22:33	Length: 11:30:44

(=ESLO1) and a kind of “remake” of the first corpus collected from 2008 on in order to supplement the first corpus with new and partially more diversified data (=ESLO2).

Table 1: Corpus

2.2 Transcription

During the course of the project, 14 of the interviews were transcribed by an intern at the LLL and a student assistant at the University of Siegen using the transcription system TRJS (cf. <<https://ct3.ortolang.fr/trjs/>>) according to the ESLO transcription guide which has been minimally adapted to the peculiarities of learner language. The transcription of further interviews is continued after the stay and is still in progress at the time of writing this report.

2.3 Annotation in MAXQDA

After a preliminary review of the transcribed data available up to this point in time, four participants were selected for case studies (=EI-1 to EI-4). The interviews were transferred to the tool MAXQDA (VERBI Software 2022), a software program for computer-assisted qualitative text and multimedia analysis, where they were annotated in three steps:

- 1) thematic annotation according to the topics of the interview guide
- 2) annotation of DMs and related expressions used with discourse marking function
- 3) annotation of selected discourse functions (e.g. turn opening, closing, reformulation, word search, acknowledgement etc.) and their linguistic realization

As a small preliminary control corpus, an excerpt from a native speaker interview from ESLO2 (ESLO2_ENT_1003), which is roughly comparable in length to the average of the learner interviews, was also annotated for 2).

2.4 Analysis

These annotations allow the following analysis:

Frequencies

- a. total frequency of DM usage per 100 words (phw) in each of the interviews
- b. frequency of a specific DM
- c. comparison regarding a. and b. between the first (T1) and the second interview (T2) of a given student

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- d. comparison regarding a. and b. between the student's interviews and the excerpt from the native speaker's interview.

Inventories

- a. inventories of DMs and DM-like expressions used in the interviews
- b. comparison regarding a. between the first (T1) and the second (T2) interview of a given student
- c. comparison regarding a. between the students' interviews and the excerpt of the native speaker's interview

Form-function relations

- a. linguistic means used to realize certain discourse functions
- b. comparison between the first (T1) and the second (T2) interview of a given student with regard to a.

Furthermore, the thematic annotation of the interviews will allow for a content analysis concerning the (changes in the) attitudes towards the city of Orléans, its inhabitants and linguistic particularities. This analysis has not yet been carried out at the time of writing this report.

2.5 ESLO-FLEU

During the research stay at the LLL, it was possible to continue working on the ESLO-FLEU cooperation project (2022/23), which has been running since spring 2022, and thus to generate synergy effects between the two projects. Among other things, the author was involved in the development of an annotation system for discourse markers and syntactic dislocation constructions as well as in the development of proposals for the didactic implementation of the ESLO-FLEU resource in academic teaching-learning contexts.

3- Results and discussion

In the following, we will first give a brief overview of the general observations made in the four case studies (EI-1 to EI-4) regarding frequencies and inventories. We then briefly

consider one functional domain in which particularly striking changes were observed between T1 and T2, namely the realization of word searches.

EI-1	EI-2	EI-3	EI-4
Students enrolled in French language courses at the Institut de Français (IDF)			
Arrival in Orléans/France in Sept 2022			
Other languages (than French L2):			
Arabic English	Japanese English	German English	German Greek English Spanish
French proficiency level (CEFR)			
(not indicated)	A2 (in progress)	B2 (in progress)	B2 (in progress)

Table 2: Case studies

The overall frequencies of DMs in the students' interviews range from 6.26 (EI-1, T1) to 14.80 (EI-4, T2) DMs per 100 words (phw). None of the interviews reaches the frequency of the native control interview from ESLO2 (16.47 DMs phw). While EI-1 and EI-2 show an increase in DM frequency from the first to the second interview, EI-2 and EI-3 show a decrease from T1 to T2.

The 15 most frequent expressions in the four case studies are (all together and in descending order of frequency): *oui, mais, et, ah, aussi, alors, je crois (que), parce que, ouais, donc, ok, par exemple, je pense (que), peut-être, je sais pas*². In the excerpt of the native speaker's interview from ESLO2 they are: *ouais, et, donc, bah, mais, après, quoi, bon, puis, enfin, en fait, non, aussi, voilà, parce que*. Some of the 15 most frequent DMs of the native speaker interview are also present in the learner interviews, but occur less frequently there (*bah, après, bon, non*). Interestingly, four of the most frequent DMs in the native speaker interview, which are very common DMs in French, are not used at all in the ESLO-L2 corpus analyzed so far (*voilà, quoi, puis, enfin*).

² It should be noted that the annotation was based on a very broad concept of discourse markers. In order to do justice to possible peculiarities of learner language, expressions that are not

B. Thorle. Schneeweile. Attitudes and language use of international exchange students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2 French, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2023, 7, 106-113
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While the inventories of expressions in EI-1 and EI-3 increase slightly from the first to the second interview, EI-2 and EI-4 show a decrease of DM types from T1 to T2. At first glance, the decrease in the frequency of DMs (tokens) and in the number of different DM forms (types) seem counterintuitive, as one would associate learning progress with an increase in DM use and an expansion of the inventory of forms. However, a closer look at the data reveals that the decrease in frequency often concerns expressions that are possibly overused, such as *oui* and *ah* (EI-2). Furthermore, in some cases the reduction in the inventory at the second interview concerns non-idiomatic ad-hoc formulations or highly idiosyncratic forms that are no longer used at T2. Therefore, it is not yet possible to draw any conclusions about the development of language skills from the pure frequencies.

In addition to the developments in the frequency and range of the overall inventory, interesting functional shifts can be observed within individual interviews, namely in functionally similar discourse markers. The following changes have been observed:

1. "Replacement" of a form used at T1 by a functionally similar one at T2. For example, in EI-4 the DM *alors* is the fourth most common DM at T1 while *donc* (whose functional range overlaps with *alors*) is not used at all at T1. At T2, however, the same student uses almost exclusively *donc* (with the exception of a single occurrence of *alors*). The same holds for the functionally similar pair of *je crois (que)* and *je pense (que)*. *Je crois (que)* is the fifth most frequent DM in the first interview. In contrast, this expression is not used at T2. For *je pense (que)*, the development is reversed. In both cases, the use of one form seems to suppress the use of the functionally similar expression (see also Pellet 2005).

established as discourse markers in spoken French, some of which are idiosyncratic, were also taken into account, namely when they fulfilled discourse marker-like functions.

2. Decrease in the frequency of non-specific DM expressions with simultaneous increase in the frequency of DMs with a more specific function. In EI-2, for example, the use of *oui* decreases while *donc, et, parce que* and *par exemple* become more frequent. In a qualitative analysis, it needs to be examined more closely whether more specific markers are used at T2 for functions that were expressed by (overgeneralized) *oui* at T1.

3. Reduction of variants between T1 and T2, partly combined with an increased recourse to pragmatized routine forms at T2 compared to T1: In EI-1 and in EI-3, the frequency of *ouais* decreases significantly from T1 to T2, while the frequency of *oui* phw increases. In EI-2, EI-3 and EI-4, we can observe the decrease – and in some cases even the disappearance – of ad hoc and often idiosyncratic formulations for the metalinguistic display of non-understanding or word search, such as *encore une fois s'il vous plait, attends* (EI-2), *je (ne) sais pas le mot* (EI-3), *j'ai oublié le mot, comment s'appelle* (EI-4), among others. In the second interview, these expressions partially disappear in favor of more routinized expressions such as *comment dire* (especially in EI-3 and EI-4).

These observations call for further research. Qualitative analyses are needed in order to better understand the systematicity of these shifts within the repertoire. In view of the striking changes observed in different learners in the above-mentioned metalinguistic expressions, a study on word searches (see e.g. Brouwer 2003, Koch/Thörle 2021) was initiated. This study has been presented at the RALL conference on “Residence abroad and language learning: Where are we now?” (Nice, 5-6 Oct 2023) (see also Skrovec/Thörle in prep.). It examines the different strategies used by learners to indicate a comprehension problem, to call for help with word searches or to express uncertainty about lexical choice, to display that word search is in progress, and so on. The cases of EI-2, EI-3 and EI-4 show that the explicit thematization of word searches and comprehension difficulties, which in some excerpts extend over several turns and therefore

B. Thorle. Schneeweile. Attitudes and language use of international exchange students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2 French, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2023, 7, 106-113
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seem time-consuming and laborious, is partially reduced at T2 in favor of routinized procedures using pragmatic expressions. The processes of accessing the lexicon and ensuring comprehension thus seem to become smoother over time (see also Pekarek Doehler/Skogmyr Marian 2022). These qualitative differences should be investigated in further case studies in order to determine possible developmental paths across different proficiency levels in more detail.

The results of the ESLO-FLEU project were presented at the international workshop on Spoken Language Corpora as a Teaching-Learning Resource for French as a Foreign Language (29-30 June 2023, Hôtel Dupanloup Orléans) funded by the Le Studium Loire Valley Institute for Advanced Studies and the Franco-German University. The members of the Franco-German project group (Flora Badin, Céline Duga, Britta Gemmeke, Chloé Tahar, Benoît Vezin) presented the annotation principles applied to the modules of the ESLO corpus designed for the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language as well as didactic suggestions and their exploration in French linguistics and language practice courses at the University of Siegen. This project was also presented at the seminar on “Pratiques Langagières, Construction des Savoirs – Littéracies et Oralité” (CNRS-Institute Laboratoire Ligérien de Linguistique, Online, 12 April 2023, by Skrovec & Thörle) and at the “11e Journées internationales de la Linguistique de Corpus” (Grenoble, 3-7 July 2023, see also Skrovec/Tahar/Badin/Thörle 2023 and Skrovec/Thörle/Tahar/Badin 2023).

4- Conclusion

Discourse markers and their mastery are an essential prerequisite for the acquisition of linguistic fluency and interactional competence. Even more than expected, the case studies show that after only a few months in the target language country, changes in the use of DMs become apparent, some of which – as in the case of word searches – clearly go hand in hand with a routinization of conversational tasks, but the

systematic nature of which still needs to be investigated further. In this respect, the project is the starting point for further work on the topic, including further case studies on the corpus already compiled and the extension of the still limited comparative analyses to a larger part of the ESLO2 control corpus.

From an application point of view, the question arises as to the learning and teaching of typical phenomena of spoken French, which also include discourse markers. In this context, foreign language didactics emphasizes the importance of teaching and learning materials based on authentic language data. The ESLO-FLEU project, carried out by the two partners together with a Franco-German project group in 2022-2023, provides a possible basis for this.

5- Perspectives of future collaborations with the host laboratory

The collaboration with the host continued after the end of the research stay:

The project data (recordings, transcriptions, metadata) have been transferred to the ESLO team of the LLL, which will gradually integrate the data into the corpus and publish it.

The first results of the projects were presented at the RALL conference in Nice in October. An extended version of the paper will be submitted for publication in a special issue of the journal *Langue française* in 2024 (eds. Edmonds/Howards).

In the future, a joint application (LLL Orléans and Department of Romance Studies Siegen) to the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the French National Research Agency (ANR) is planned for an in-depth study of the ESLO-L2 project presented here.

Concerning the ESLO-FLEU project, a publication on the topic of the June workshop has been submitted to the journal "Corpus" as a proposal for a special issue (the response is still pending), and joint conference participations in Paderborn and Passau are planned for 2024 in order to network the project more closely in Germany.

B. Thorle. Schneeweile. Attitudes and language use of international exchange students during their stay in Orléans: the example of discourse markers in L2 French, *LE STUDIUM Multidisciplinary Journal*, 2023, 7, 106-113
<https://doi.org/10.34846/le-studium.254.05.fr.05-2023>

From 27 November to 2 December 2023, Marie Skrovec was a fellow of the Comenius International Partnership Program for Ambassadors at the University of Siegen, where possibilities for cooperation on other levels (language center, master's programs) were explored.

6- Articles published in the framework of the fellowship

Skrovec, Marie/Tahar, Chloé/Badin, Flora/Thörle, Britta (2023). Rendre un grand corpus oral accessible pour la didactique du FLE : le projet ESLO-FLEU. In: Actes des 11e Journées internationales de la Linguistique de Corpus », Grenoble, 3-7 juillet 2023.

https://jlc2023.sciencesconf.org/data/page/s/abstracts_JLC_2023.pdf.

Skrovec, Marie/Thörle, Britta/Tahar, Chloé/Badin, Flora (2023). Le corpus oral ESLO comme ressource didactique pour la formation universitaire en FLE et sciences du langage : l'exemple d'un module sur les mots du discours. In: Actes des 11e Journées internationales de la Linguistique de Corpus », Grenoble, 3-7 juillet 2023.

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Thörle, Britta/Skrovec, Marie (eds.) (in prep.): Spoken language corpora as a teaching-learning resource for French as a foreign language. Proposal submitted to *Corpus*. <https://journals.openedition.org/corpus/> (pending answer)

Thörle, Britta/Skrovec, Marie (in prep.): Pragmaticalisation des ressources linguistiques chez les étudiants du français L2 pendant leur séjour à l'étranger : observations sur les marqueurs discursifs. (abstract submitted for *Langue française*, numéro spécial sur la mobilité internationale et l'apprentissage langagier : les dimensions socio-acquisitionnelles, ed. by Amanda Edmonds & Martin Howard)

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