

The meanings of *je pense* and *je crois* in French interaction

This talk focuses on the French constructions *je pense* (“I think”) and *je crois* (“I believe”). By examining their occurrences in social interaction, the aim is to account for their complex meaning so as to understand how they differ. Indeed, the semantic difference that sets them apart may at first sight appear abstruse, especially when they are used in the same context, as illustrated in (1).

- (1) Je pense/crois que Paul est dans la cuisine
I think/believe that Paul is in the kitchen

In previous studies, *je pense* and *je crois* have been explored together from various perspectives, e.g. in studies of modality, as parentheticals or as discourse markers (Schneider, 2007; Avanzi & Glikman, 2009). However, the semantic difference between the two verbs has thus far been granted limited attention (Dendale & Van Bogaert, 2007; Mullan, 2010; Gosselin, 2018). Moreover, preexisting studies have not examined the constructions in interaction, apart from Mullan (2010). Using Conversation Analysis, the present study investigates *je pense* and *je crois* in conversational interaction, thus underscoring the importance of the context of occurrence in order to highlight their difference.

The data consist in three hours of spontaneous conversation, including 66 and 51 occurrences of *je pense* and *je crois*, respectively. They involve eight native speakers of French. The analytical model applied here considers *je pense* and *je crois* in terms of the foregrounding or backgrounding of two interrelated meanings. First, an epistemic meaning derived from the verb *penser* or *croire*, forming a contrastive pair with *savoir* (“to know”) (Levinson, 2000). Secondly, a subjective meaning anchored in both the first person *je* and the opinion verb. The data show that one meaning usually dominates the other: one meaning is thus foregrounded at the expense of the other, which recedes into the background. The dual function of *je pense* and *je crois* is illustrated in (2): in (2a), *je pense* is predominantly subjective, while (2b) is used as an epistemic marker.

- (2) a. je pense que c’est culturel
I think it is cultural
b. il m’en a parlé je crois
He talked to me about it I think (lit. believe)

Following this model, two main differences between *je pense* and *je crois* can be observed:

- (a) First, the predominant function is dependent on the context of occurrence. *Je pense* is predominantly subjective when it is associated with statements that are grounded on subjective opinions (see (2a)). But when it appears in factual contexts that are verifiable (cf. (2b)), it behaves as an epistemic marker. In the database, *je crois* only occurs in factual contexts, and its use is therefore restricted to the epistemic function.
- (b) Secondly, when comparing the (predominantly) epistemic uses of *je pense* with *je crois*, we observe a difference as regards the nature of the state of affairs. On the

one hand, *je crois* occurs in contexts where the memory of the speaker is faulty (e.g. recollection of a past event), as illustrated in (2b); on the other hand, *je pense* signals that the attitude towards knowledge is based on a guess, as illustrated in (2a).

These results provide additional evidence in support of a semantic distinction that can be explained in terms of source of information (Dendale & Van Bogaert, 2007; Gosselin, 2018). Thus, this study shows that *je crois* and *je pense* can both be considered evidential markers, and that their use generates distinct inferences.

References

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