Discourse-pragmatic variation in Paris French and London English: Insights from general extenders

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of general extenders (GEs), such as *and stuff* in English and *et tout* in French, in Paris French and London English. We aim to compare the social and the linguistic conditioning of extender use in the two languages, discuss the different kinds of spread in the two cities and reflect on the specificity of discourse-pragmatic variation.

The study shows that GE forms as well as frequencies vary across factors such as gender, age and ethnicity, while some variants also appear to be grammaticalising and acquiring new pragmatic functions. The analysis includes a comparison of different age groups, and finds that different types of generational change may be occurring in both languages.

In London, forms such as *and stuff* and *and that* diverge along ethnic lines, whereas in Paris *et tout* is becoming the dominant variant across the board. While different variants in both languages are indirectly associated with different social categories, they perform similar pragmatic functions such as hedging, marking solidarity and appealing to common knowledge between the speaker and the interlocutor(s).
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1. Introduction

This article presents an analysis of general extenders in Paris French and London English, with a view to comparing their social and linguistic conditioning and identifying possible changes in the extender system. General extenders (hereafter abbreviated as 'GEs') are phrase- or clause-terminal expressions such as *et tout* and *and stuff* in the following examples. The item to which the GE is attached (its antecedent) usually consists of a word or a clause, which can be nominal (such as *potes* and *boys* below), but also verbal, adjectival and adverbial, as will be shown further.

(1) *tu sais qu'elles sont gentilles elles sont tranquilles* (...) *comme moi là genre mes potes **et tout.*** [Nizar, M19][1]
    ('You know they're nice they're cool (...) like me - like my mates and that')[2]
(2) *I've never been one to be distracted by boys **and stuff** but I was distracted by man.* [Aimy, F19]

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[1] The data was transcribed using the CHAT-Childes transcription conventions (http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/manuals/CHAT.pdf, pp. 41–80). The information in square brackets includes speaker pseudonym, gender and age, while round brackets represent different lengths of timed pause.

[2] The GE forms were translated using the authors' own intuition and checked by several reviewers. As there were fewer GE forms in French and some (especially *et tout*) were multifunctional, they were not always translated by the same form in English but rather by the closest functional equivalent in the given context.

In studies of GEs, a focus of recent research has been to explore their pragmatic functions and evolution in informal spoken language. Studies have increasingly begun to view them as discourse particles, rather than solely as expressions with a referential – or a ''set-marking'' – function (Dubois, 1992, 1993; Overstreet and Yule, 1997; Cheshire, 2007; Tagliamonte and Denis, 2010; Pichler and Levey, 2011; Palacios-Martinez, 2011; Aijmer, 2013; Overstreet, 2014). Despite the widespread recent interest, however, the GE literature has predominantly focused on varieties of English, with very few comparable studies in other world languages. Notable exceptions in French, which will be of interest here, include a quantitative study by Dubois (1993) examining the distribution and socio-demographic conditioning of extender variants in Québec. The majority of studies focusing on European French have been qualitative and descriptive (Andrews, 1989), although some included quantitative components (Secova, 2014). Large-scale comparative analyses involving languages other than English are still relatively rare (however, see Norrby and Winter, 2002; Overstreet, 2005; Cortés-Rodríguez, 2006; Terraschke and Holmes, 2007; Ruzaite, 2010; Parvaresh et al., 2012).

The present study aims to fill the gap in research by examining GE variants in a large-scale corpus of Paris French, both from a qualitative and quantitative perspective, and by drawing comparisons with the corpus of London English. In particular, it seeks to: (i) examine the distribution of GE forms in the Multicultural London English – Multicultural Paris French corpus; (ii) discuss the functions of GEs, focusing especially on the most prolific forms such as *et tout* and *and that/ and stuff*; (iii) compare the social and the linguistic conditioning of GE forms in English and French and consider whether some forms may be grammaticalising and acquiring new discourse functions.

GEs are discourse particles that occur in many languages and are especially widespread in spoken language (Aijmer, 2002; Cheshire, 2007; Overstreet, 2005, 2014). However, insufficient research has been done to determine what, if anything, they have in common, how they are used and how they evolve over time. In addition, due to their structural and functional similarities, GEs are an excellent site for studying variation and change in discourse pragmatic features, which has until recently been neglected. Looking at two languages will allow us to begin to see what general principles there may be in the processes and patterns of variation and change. Some studies also suggest that discourse functions can be partitioned very differently across languages (Maschler and Schiffrin, 2013). Examining GEs in two distinct languages is thus a step towards understanding the underlying cross-linguistic differences. Finally, recent studies have pointed to the emergence of multi-ethnolectal speech repertoires in Western capitals, which continue to be seen as important motors of variation and change (Cheshire et al., 2011; Wiese, 2009). Therefore, comparing such cities should provide important insights into how linguistic systems develop and what social factors underlie this development.

2. General extender functions and uses

GEs are expressions typical of informal speech in which they fulfil a range of pragmatic functions, one of which is to extend a set of referents (e.g. to implicate a more general category, as in ''ingredients'' the following example):

(3) *un peu de gingembre des oignons tout ça* [Bruno, M17]
   (''a bit of ginger some onions all that'')

For some GE forms, however, the set-extending function is shown to be recessive (see Cheshire, 2007; Pichler and Levey, 2011; Palacios-Martinez, 2011; Levey, 2012). The use of GEs is generally thought to be based on some common ground between speakers, albeit only assumed rather than actual (Overstreet, 1999). They express subjective, inter-subjective and textual functions, and they therefore are frequently likened to, or considered as a subcategory of discourse markers (Dubois, 1993; Aijmer, 2002; Lemieux et al., 1987; Overstreet, 1999). Like discourse markers, GEs are grammatically and semantically optional, but pragmatically purposeful. Discourse markers and GEs may, however, differ in their syntactic position. Compare the discourse markers (*genre*, *like*) and GEs (*et tout, and stuff* and *and stuff like that*) in (4) and (5) below. While discourse markers such as *like* and *genre* are generally mobile and can be used clause-initially, clause-internally as well as clause-finally, GEs tend to have a fixed, phrase- or clause-final position:

(4)   Altercation [Carla F14, Aimee F14]
CAR: *il est venu s'excuser mais Aude l'a encore rejeté il avait le seum*[3] *!*
AIM: *en fait (.) les filles elles venaient vers moi (..) et **genre** et **genre** je les ai vues arriver vers moi **et tout** (.) et après j'ai vu lui il arrivait (..) et **genre** je l'ai regardé comme ça (..) **genre en mode** ''tu veux quoi'' **et tout** (..) et après dès que j'ai vu qu'il allait ouvrir la bouche je fais ''casse toi'' !*

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[3] Avoir le *seum* (from Arabic, 'venom/poison'): to be angry.