Fragmented adverbial clauses as resources for negotiating alignment: concessive repair patterns in French talk-in-interaction

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ABSTRACT

The study presented in this paper aims at investigating the French adverbial conjunction *mais* 'but'/'although' by means of a recently compiled corpus of World French. The study will describe and analyze two types of turn-final *mais* used in concessive repair constructions which have not been described in research on French syntax so far. These two uses of concessive *mais* exhibit subtle differences in their syntactic make-up but also in their sequential behavior in interaction (other-initiated down-toning of an overstatement vs. self-initiated down-toning of the relevance of an argument). Both the constructional and the sequential characteristics of the two patterns with turn-final *mais* will be discussed against the backdrop of a cross-linguistic comparison with English *but* and Finnish *mutta* 'but', with regard to similarities and differences between the uses of this lexical item in different languages. Both the analysis of French *mais* and its comparison with its English and Finnish counterparts support the conclusion that fragmented adverbial clauses can be used as resources for negotiating alignment in talk-in-interaction.

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1. Prologue: fragmented adverbial clauses – an interactional linguistics approach

1.1. Adverbials: the case of mais 'but'/'although'

The pertinent literature on adverbial clauses has it that prototypical adverbials in European languages are subordinated and introduced by a conjunction such as *because*, *while* or *although*. The conjunction *but* is not in this list, as it is classified as coordinative and thus not an adverbial subordinator, at least not a prototypical one (cf. Raible, 2001). The question thus arises why a contribution on the uses and functions of a pattern with the conjunction *mais* should be included in a special issue on adverbial patterns in interaction?

There are two complementary answers to this question. Firstly, from an empirical perspective informed by analyses of large corpora of spoken French, we find that many of the occurrences of *mais* have a concessive function in oral discourse and thus replace *bien que* 'although' and *quoique* 'although'. About half of the 9,732 instances of *mais* in our corpus can be classified as concessive uses (cf. Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2000; Barth-Weingarten, 2003). In other words, *mais* fulfills similar functions as *bien que* and *quoique* (Blanche-Benveniste, 2010; Morel, 1996). The latter two 'prototypical' adverbial subordinators, which occur frequently in written corpora, reach a meager total of 27 occurrences in our corpus. The second

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answer to this question is more theoretical in nature. Over the past two decades, research on spoken language has shown that notions like 'sentence', 'subordination' or 'conjunction' do not always provide an adequate tool for the description of spoken interaction (cf. Auer, 2009; Günthner, 2007 among many others).

Both types of *mais* under investigation in the present contribution help to organize or structure discourse in interaction. This suggests that *mais* functions as a particle. In this use it also has a prosodic contour with properties markedly different from the intonational properties of a prototypical conjunction. On the other hand, *mais* also exhibits semantic and syntactic properties clearly reminiscent of its use as a conjunction. Its semantics are contrastive-concessive. Syntactically, it projects an adverbial clause, which is then omitted on purpose (cf. Imo, 2011). Contrary to Australian English *but* (Mulder and Thompson, 2008), *mais* has not yet grammaticalized into a full-fledged particle (in the sense of Auer and Günthner, 2003), but does show clear tendencies towards this option and thus seems to be best analyzed as a case of incipient grammaticalization in the sense of Hopper and Traugott (2003). Establishing the exact status of *mais*, however, is not on the agenda of the present contribution and would well warrant an article of its own. The main aim here is to describe and delineate two different types of *mais* from a strictly synchronic and interactional perspective.

Thus, including a contribution on French *mais* in this special issue is warranted, both from an empirical and a theoretical perspective.

1.2. Interactional linguistics – the theoretical framework

The present paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research in interactional linguistics by (a) identifying syntactic and/or prosodic routines that facilitate the processing of prior and/or upcoming discourse (Hopper, 1998, 2011; Günthner, 2011; Günthner et al., 2015) and (b) by pinpointing different types of manifestations of understanding in talk-in-interaction (Deppermann, 2015; Imo, 2011). Although these adverbials seem to be "broken off" or "fragmented" (cf. Hopper, 1998 for the use of the term *fragmented* here), the present contribution reveals how participants work together to construct turns-at-talk using them.

Interactional Linguistics aims to conceptualize language along the following assumptions (cf. Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2000):

- Interdependence between language structure and interaction: First and foremost, Interactional Linguistics postulates that the structure of a language and the properties of interaction are interrelated and feed into each other (Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2000).
- Linguistic structures as joint (and not individual) products: Linguistic structures are not produced in isolation by individual speakers but jointly by (all) the participants of a conversation – this follows from the previous claim.
- Grammatical structures are incremental phenomena: Grammatical structures are produced by the participants of a conversation *online*, i.e. in 'real time'. While the conventionality of the linguistic sign has received ample attention in the literature, the second property postulated by Saussure, linearity, has largely been taken for granted (cf. Auer, 2015 for details). The focus here will be on the incremental realization of linearity in speech, where linguistic structures are produced little by little (cf. Pekarek Doehler et al., 2015).
- Linguistic structures are highly adaptable entities: Linguistic structures produced incrementally very often turn out to be flexible and adaptable. Within the linguistic theory of interaction still to be written, the conceptualization of language as a highly flexible system will take center stage. The notion of language as a flexible system will be replacing the traditional view of language as a stable system.
- Refutation of the dichotomy between *langue* and *parole*: Within a theory of interactional linguistics, the traditional dichotomy between competence and performance, or between *langue* and *parole*, can no longer be sustained. A radically and consistently empirical analysis of language produced in situated and authentic interaction shows that linguistic structures are used as resources and always adapted to the specific context of interaction and change during interaction.
- Research on authentic linguistic data has the choice between two approaches:
  - it may start with a particular interactional task and then proceed to look for the grammatical constructions used as resources to carry out the respective task.
  - it may also start with a particular grammatical construction and then proceed to investigate which interactional task(s) can be carried out using the respective construction.

2. Working hypothesis, data and collection

2.1. Working hypothesis

I will argue that giving up a syntactic project[1] right after *mais* is part of a larger pattern of concessive repair (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson, 2005) and thus does not occur by accident, as in an unsuccessful attempt at structuring one's ideas (anacoluthon). Rather, aborting the project right after 'but' seems to be an instance of aposiopesis (Imo, 2011; cf. Raymond, 2004), done by design and following a constructional discourse pattern that includes an intentional abortion of the syntactic project in

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[1] The term *syntactic project* is used in the sense of Auer (2009) here.