

Nous versus *on*: Pronouns with first-person plural reference in synchronous French chat

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This article explores variation in the use of the pronouns *nous* and *on* for first-person plural reference in a substantial corpus of French-language Internet chat discourse. The results indicate that *on* is nearly categorically preferred to *nous*, which is in line with previous research on informal spoken French. A qualitative analysis of *nous* tokens suggests that the use of this variant is limited to certain contexts, such as jokes, imitations and role-plays, or in order to refer to a group “seen from the outside.” This research has implications for the study of discourse produced in electronic environments in relation to speech and writing. In concluding, the fate of *nous* is discussed and directions for future research on computer-mediated communication are advanced.

Cet article examine l’usage de *nous* et de *on* comme pronoms à la première personne du pluriel dans un corpus de clavardage synchrone. Les résultats indiquent que le pronom *on* est presque catégoriquement préféré à *nous*, comme l’indiquent les recherches antérieures sur le français parlé informel. Une analyse qualitative des occurrences de *nous* suggère que l’emploi de cette variante se limite à certains contextes (par exemple dans des blagues, des imitations et des jeux de rôle) ou sert à référer à un groupe « vu de l’extérieur. » Cette recherche a des implications pour l’étude du discours oral et écrit produit dans des environnements électroniques. En conclusion, le déclin du pronom *nous* est discuté et de nouvelles pistes de recherche sur la communication médiatisée par les technologies de l’information sont proposées.

Introduction

In contemporary French, two grammatical structures variably express first-person plural reference (i.e., the speaker + one or more individuals): the subject pronoun *nous* with a first-person plural verb form, as in (1), and the subject pronoun *on* with a third-person singular verb form, as in (2):

(1) *Nous allons* au cinéma.

‘We are going to the movies.’

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(2) *On va au cinéma.*

‘We are going to the movies.’

In reference grammars (e.g., Grevisse and Goosse, 1993) and learner textbooks, however, *nous* is usually presented as the default first-person plural subject pronoun, while *on* is portrayed as an indefinite third-person pronoun, as in (3), where *on* is used in a generalization:

(3) *On mange bien à Paris.*

‘One eats well in Paris.’

Coveney (2000) provides an extensive treatment of the use of *nous* versus *on* from an historical perspective, citing several early works that recognized the tendency to use *on* instead of *nous* as early as the beginning of the 20th century in European French (e.g., Grafström, 1969, pp. 270–275). Blondeau (2003) provides evidence that *nous* was already a vestigial variant in Quebec French as early as the 19th century.

Several recent sociolinguistic studies have included analyses of variation in the use of the pronouns *nous* and *on* in European and Canadian varieties of (informal, everyday, conversational) French (Laberge, 1977; Thibault, 1991; Coveney, 2000; Blondeau, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). It is generally accepted that, while *nous* remains strong in formal, public speech contexts and the standard written language, *on* is used nearly categorically for first-person plural reference in everyday conversational French. In addition, it is generally agreed that this trend is not limited to one region, variety of French, or social group. According to Laberge (1977), all speakers of French use *on* for first-person plural reference, but *nous* is a prestige variant, which speakers may use productively for stylistic effect (see also Coveney, 2000 and Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). This article explores the *nous/on* variable in a previously unexamined variety of French: synchronous text-based chat.

The findings with regard to the *nous/on* variable presented in this article are part of a larger research initiative that aims to explore sociolinguistic norms and variation in French-language computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments (e.g., chat, discussion fora, weblogs). One of the overarching goals of the program is to investigate the interaction between the written language and the spoken language in online, text-based communication contexts. As such, a comparison of the use of *nous*, which is associated with the standard written language, versus *on*, which is overwhelmingly preferred in everyday spoken French, should provide a clear indication of the level of discourse produced in chat environments in relation to the standard written language and everyday speech.

The opposition between speech and writing has been a central area of investigation in CMC research since communication in electronic environments “relies on characteristics belonging to both sides of the speech/writing divide”

(Crystal, 2001, p. 28). This is because most forms of existing CMC technologies are text-based (Herring, 2001), which has led at least some researchers to associate CMC with the written language. Herring (1996) notes, however, that CMC “manifests itself in different styles and genres, some determined by the available technologies . . . , others by human factors such as communicative purpose and group membership” (pp. 3–4; see also Herring, 2007). Indeed, (perceived) linguistic expectations and practices with regard to formality established by at least certain online communities prompt many CMC users to infuse the text-driven (therefore, predominately language-based) interaction with the flavor of the spoken language (van Compernelle and Williams, 2007).

While the term *chat community* is used in this article, it is uncertain what type of community, if any, participants in chatrooms actually belong to. Any number of terms could be, and have been, used to describe online communities, such as a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), a social network (Milroy and Milroy, 1992), a speech community (Gumperz, 1972; Labov, 1972), or a virtual (Rheingold, 2000) or online (Bishop, 2007) community. However, it should be noted that each of these terms is associated with various objectives and methodologies, some being primarily centered around social interaction, while others focus predominately on language use in specific contexts. In the case of the present study, a corpus-based analysis of the use of *nous versus on*, it seems appropriate to label chat communities as speech communities (or perhaps “discourse” or “linguistic” communities, given that chat participants do not actually “speak”), since linguistic data “is the prime locus of interest” (Davies, 2005, p. 559) within this framework. However, this is not to say that linguistic variation among members of chat communities cannot be analyzed within any of the other frameworks cited above. Paolillo (2001), for example, makes a convincing case for using Milroy and Milroy’s (1992) social network approach for exploring intra-individual variation, given that the focus of this framework is on the observable interaction (i.e., tie-strength) between individuals rather than social data, such as a speaker’s age, gender and social class, which is often difficult to obtain from CMC participants.

Following Bell’s (2001) revised framework of language style as audience/referee design, it seems reasonable to presume that chat communities should establish a norm with regard to the use of *nous versus on*. Discussing the influence of the group’s norms on intra-individual variation, Bell notes that “[b]ehind audience design lies a strong, general claim that the character of (intra-speaker) style-shift derives at an underlying level from the nature of (inter-speaker) language differences between people. It is a reflex of inter-speaker variation” (p. 142). In other words, Bell’s framework holds that group members, both individually and collectively, establish linguistic norms, not through some formal agreement but through interaction and the constant

evaluation and re-evaluation of the group's language. As group norms are established, recognized, and (re)evaluated by group members, individuals "shift relative to [the] group's language" (Bell, 2001, p. 142). While it is unclear whether all chat participants are long-time or vested members of the community, there is at least some evidence that recurring participants settle on one or a limited number of monikers that other regular participants recognize (Bechar-Israeli, 1995), which is aided by the option to register a particular screen name on at least some chat servers.¹ It therefore follows that these "regulars" should, at some point in time, begin to establish a set of linguistic norms for their community, which may or may not align with the norms found in other communication contexts. Even new members of chat communities should, at least after some time participating in chat discussions, conform to the norms of other members, since, as Bell (2001) argues, "[s]peakers design their style primarily for and in response to their audience" (p. 143).

Of particular interest to the present study is Bell's (2001) general principle 4, which holds that "[a]udience design applies to all codes and levels of a language repertoire," including "features such as choice of personal pronouns or address terms" (p. 144). One recent study of French-language chat (Williams and van Compernelle, 2007) found that chat participants used familiar *tu* when addressing their interlocutors at nearly categorical rates when compared to the more formal *vous*-singular form. Of the few tokens of *vous*-singular, most occurred during stretches of ludic discourse (e.g., imitations of real or imaginary advertisements, role-playing, etc.). This type of style-shift, an initiative shift (i.e., referee design) in Bell's terms, functioned to effect changes in the tone of the conversation. Although the study was situated within the social indexicality framework (Morford, 1997), it could be argued that chat participants' choice of address pronoun was for and/or in response to other members of the group, which is one of the main tenants of Bell's (2001) framework. In addition, discursive-pragmatic use of *vous*-singular, the formal, polite variant, illustrates one way in which chat participants draw from the language repertoire of another group or communicative context to effect changes in the level of discourse, even if only for brief periods. If such is true for second-person pronoun use, a similar pattern might be expected to emerge in the use of the pronouns *nous* and *on*, whereby one pronoun is overwhelmingly preferred, while the other can function stylistically as an initiation of or a response to style-shift.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of recent shifts in the French pronoun paradigm, with a particular focus on the use of *on* at the expense of *nous* in everyday conversation. Then, the data are described and the analytical procedures for coding tokens of *nous* and *on* are explained before continuing to the presentation of the results. The overall distribution of *nous* and *on* is presented first and discussed

within the broader context of shifts in the French pronoun paradigm. The data demonstrate an overwhelming preference for *on* at the expense of *nous*, with rates approximately equal to those reported in similar sociolinguistic studies of everyday spoken French (Coveney, 2000; Blondeau, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). A qualitative analysis of tokens of *nous*-subject pronouns follows, in which the various stylistic or discursive-pragmatic effects of the use of this pronoun are described and enumerated. In concluding, the ultimate fate of *nous* as a subject pronoun in French is discussed and directions for future research are advanced.

Background

Changes in the French personal pronoun paradigm have been the object of numerous studies over the last thirty years or so, several of which have been situated within the variationist framework pioneered by William Labov (1966, 1972, 1994). Researchers have primarily focused on shifts in the use of the personal pronouns *tu*, *vous*, *nous* and *on* in everyday conversational French. As Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003) note, the portrayal of these pronouns as a monolithic, static system in reference grammars and learner textbooks is nothing less than mythical when compared to patterns of use and variation in informal speech. In fact, the presentation of these pronouns in most formal reference texts often reflects only an idealized standard, literary variety of French, with few — if any — discussions of variation within the French pronoun paradigm.

Changes in the use of one pronoun cannot be treated independently of others. One often-studied shift involves the use of the definite second-person pronouns *tu* and *vous* versus the indefinite third-person singular pronoun *on* as pronouns with indefinite reference (Laberge and Sankoff, 1980; Ashby, 1992; Coveney, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). While *tu* and *vous* are presented as definite address pronouns (i.e., designating one's interlocutor(s)) in most reference grammars (Grevisse and Goosse, 1993, p. 963) and learner textbooks, there are few, if any, mentions of their use as indefinite pronouns. Coveney (2003) cites one reference text for English-speaking learners of French offering a mild criticism of the use of second-person pronouns for indefinite reference: “‘*Vous* [and *tu*] should not be used in this general sense’ (Price 1993: 207)” (p. 168). Indeed, the pronoun *on* is generally portrayed as the indefinite pronoun *par excellence* in reference grammars. Nonetheless, several recent studies have shown that *tu/vous* account for approximately 50% (Laberge and Sankoff, 1980; Ashby, 1992; Coveney, 2003) and up to 70% (Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003) of indefinite references in several varieties of spoken French. In addition, Williams and van Compernelle (in press) have shown that this phenomenon exists in synchronous CMC as well.

One explanation for the increased use of *tu/vous* as pronouns with indefinite reference is that *on* has become “overloaded” in Modern French (Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). Although *on* was, perhaps at some point in time, the default indefinite pronoun (and this is definitely the case for explanations of this pronoun in reference grammars and textbooks), it possesses a wide range of other potential meanings and referents. (Coveney, 2000, 2003 provides detailed treatments of these pronouns from a formal, historical perspective.) Its primary alternative use is for first-person plural reference, in variation with the pronoun *nous* (although it can alternate with almost every other definite pronoun in French; see Peeters, 2006). Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003) argue that because *on* has become the default first-person plural pronoun in informal, everyday, conversational French, speakers call upon *tu* (and to some extent *vous*) to relieve some of the functional load of *on*. In their combined corpus of spoken French from Switzerland and France (\approx 194,000 words; late 1990s), there were only 13 occurrences of *nous* as a subject pronoun (less than 1% of first-person plural references). Most of these residual occurrences of *nous* were produced by “older, more conservative speakers, who [were] schoolteachers” (p. 229). Over three quarters of their tokens of *on* (76.3%) were used with definite reference in variation with *nous*, as opposed to generic, indefinite *on*.

Results reported by Coveney (2000) also provide a positive indication that *nous* has all but disappeared from everyday conversation. He reports a rate of *nous* use (in variation with *on* definite) of only 4.4% (49/1,108) in his corpus of spoken French from Picardy (northern France) collected in the mid 1980s. While this rate is somewhat higher than that reported by Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003), Coveney notes that 39 of the 49 tokens of *nous* were produced by only two speakers. He explains that these two speakers often used *nous* as a conscious marker of belonging to the institution (i.e., the *colonie de vacances* where Coveney did his fieldwork). In other words, *nous* might have been used when taking on the role of the institution’s voice. This is in accordance with Blanche-Benveniste’s (1985) suggestion that *nous* can be used in opposition to *on* definite (\sim *nous*) since “the former sometimes refers to a group seen from the outside” (Coveney, 2000, p. 467).

Rates of *nous* use in Canadian French align closely with those reported by Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003) (and with those reported by Coveney, 2000, excluding the two speakers mentioned above). Laberge (1977), using a corpus of Montréal French, has demonstrated that *nous* is nearly absent from everyday speech, and this is true across age groups and social classes. Using additional Montréal corpora, other researchers have confirmed this trend (Thibault, 1991; Blondeau, 2003). Blondeau’s (2003) study is particularly interesting, as she compared *nous* versus *on* use in modern Québec French with a corpus of speech representative of 19th century Québec French (the *Récits du français québécois d’autrefois*, RFQ); for a full description of the RFQ and

its use for studying real-time changes (Labov, 1972, 1994) in Québec French, see Poplack and St-Amand, 2007. Blondeau (2003) concludes that *nous* subject pronoun was already a vestigial variant (Trudgill, 1999) in Québec as early as the 19th century, suggesting that this change began at a much earlier point in time.

The data and methodology

An overview of synchronous chat

Synchronous chat is an interactive form of CMC,² in which participants send and receive text-based messages via their computers in real time (see Garcia and Jacobs, 1999, however, for a discussion of variable levels of synchronicity in chat, including what they label as “quasi-synchronous” chat). This study draws from a corpus of one type of synchronous chat, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which is representative of public, many-to-many chat communication.³ On IRC, users send messages to appear in a public window. As such, messages are available to anyone logged on to the channel, except in case of “private” messages, which users can send using a specific IRC code or by starting a one-to-one chat with a particular person in a new window. However, since these private messages and one-to-one chats are not accessible, the analysis presented here focuses on messages appearing in the public, many-to-many chat window.

As is typical for all types of public, many-to-many chat, IRC participants must select a moniker (i.e., a pseudonym or screen name, referred to as *un nick* or *un pseudo* in French chat) prior to joining a channel. Upon entering the channel, the server produces a message signaling the arrival of a new participant (e.g., “User X has joined [channel name]”). Likewise, the server generates a parting message when a participant quits the channel (e.g., “User Y has quit [channel name]”). Participants can also change their online moniker during the discussion by typing the IRC command */nick [new pseudonym]*, which produces a server-generated message that reads *[old name] is now known as [new name]*.

The ability to change names, participant fluidity and the great deal of anonymity afforded by IRC makes gathering (credible) demographic information about participants very difficult, if not impossible (Paolillo, 2001). This is a limitation of sociolinguistic analyses of chat (and CMC more generally), in that background information about participants, such as a speaker’s age, gender, level of education and socioeconomic status, is central to most studies of language variation and change. In addition, given the global reach of the Internet, it is impossible to determine from which region of the Francophone world IRC participants come or if they are even native speakers of French. However, this level of anonymity also provides researchers with a methodological advan-

tage as pertains to data collection, since there is no intimidating influence of the observer, which may affect the level of discourse produced by informants (see Schilling-Estes, 1998; Bailey and Tillery, 1999; Wertheim, 2006). Thus, the data analyzed in this study most likely represent naturally occurring, relatively unmonitored style of discourse typical of this communication context.

Data collection

The data used in this study come from two different data sets, each originally its own corpus. Representative samples of these data have been used in several previous studies of French chat (van Compernelle, 2007, 2008; van Compernelle and Williams, 2007; Williams and van Compernelle, 2007, in press). Both data sets draw from the same source: four general discussion channels hosted by the French-language server *EpikNet*. The first data set was collected over the course of two non-consecutive days during late Fall 2004. Chat discussions were saved as text files using the transcript recording function included with the IRC client mIRC⁴ used to connect to the server. Data were collected for approximately four hours each time, totaling 32 hours of chat discourse (4 chatrooms × 4 hours × 2 days). Using a similar approach, the second data set was collected during Fall 2005. In order to include a wider range of topics and contributions from different participants, the Fall 2005 data set was collected over the course of four non-consecutive days, for a total of 64 hours of chat discourse.

Although this may seem like an exorbitant amount of data (approximately 96 hours of discourse) when compared with studies deriving their data from sociolinguistic interviews, many of which report analyzing anywhere from eight to 20 hours of speech, IRC participants do not produce the same number of words per minute as interview participants. This is because typing, as opposed to speaking, takes more time, and, in addition, there are long stretches (up to several minutes) in the IRC corpus where very few, if any, messages are sent. In order to establish the size of the present corpus in comparison with corpora of spoken French, each turn (i.e., message sent) and word was counted.

The corpus was analyzed with the aid of a concordancing software package. (For an overview, see van Compernelle, 2007, pp. 36–38.) Briefly put, the software analyzes text files and creates a “headword” list of each word present in the file, along with the frequency with which each word occurs. While this makes analyses of large corpora very efficient, a careful review of the head word list is necessary in order to account for various inconsistencies in spelling, especially in the case of chat data where non-traditional orthography and typographical errors are very common. For example, the form *paskon* (i.e., *parce qu'on*) was counted as one word. This was changed to two words (i.e., *parce que* and *on*) in the final word count. On the other hand, spacing and punctuation errors led the program to count certain words as two, as in the

case, for example, of *il s ont fait ça ?*, where *il s* was counted as two words. Following the review of the headword list and making the necessary changes, non-user-produced words were eliminated. This included, for the most part, removing the time stamp that appears before the message as well as the users' screen name when it was not part of a user-produced message. The number of turns and words for the two data sets (i.e., IRC 2004 and IRC 2005) is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of turns and words in the corpus

Data set	Turns	Number of words
IRC 2004	14,546	114,313
IRC 2005	23,741	216,069
Total	38,287	330,382

The combined data sets constitute a relatively substantial corpus when compared to similar studies of spoken French, which often report word counts ranging from 100,000 to 300,000 words. This is also the largest corpus of French-language chat data analyzed to date. Given that the data were collected from several different chat channels on several occasions during two different years, it is relatively certain that these data are representative of many-to-many chat discourse as a whole, and that the findings regarding *nous/on* use are not idiosyncratic in some way.

Coding tokens of nous and on and defining the variable context

Using the concordance, each token (i.e., occurrence) of *nous* and *on* present in the corpus was identified and copied into a Word document along with its context of occurrence (i.e., several lines of the chat transcript preceding and following the token). Since the object of variationist sociolinguistics is to analyze alternation between two or more variants that “mean the same thing” (Labov, 1972), each token of *nous* and *on* was reviewed in order to exclude cases that did not represent a variable context (i.e., when either pronoun could have been used). In the case of *nous* versus *on*, this meant identifying those tokens used as subject pronouns with first-person plural reference. Five categories were established for tokens of *nous*: 1. *nous*-subject pronoun, 2. *nous*-object pronoun, 3. *nous*-disjunctive pronoun, 4. *nous*-doubled subject and 5. *nous*-clefted structure. These five categories are illustrated in their respective order in examples (4)–(8), taken from the corpus analyzed in the present study. (Nicknames used in excerpts of data have been modified from the originals to avoid potentially identifying participants' identities.)

- (4) [13:43] <David> Et puis je trouve ou il y a des trop jeunes gens pour nous *nous avons pas* les même centres interets

‘And then I find where there are people too young for us we don’t have the same interests’

- (5) [13:21] <Rappeur> tu *nous* connais pas
‘you don’t know us’
- (6) [16:02] <Soja> entre *nous* perso c pas a moi de me tair
‘between us personally I’m not the one who needs to shut up’
- (7) [22:19] <oiseau> *nous* on etait trop mal
‘us, we were too bad’
- (8) [15:25] <Lisette054> c pas *nous qui irons* te le dire lol
‘we’re not the ones who will tell you lol’

Example (4) represents the variable context, since *nous avons pas* could have been replaced by *on a pas*. The tokens of *nous* in examples (5)–(8) represent categorical contexts that cannot alternate with *on*. Example (7), in particular, is characteristic of many of the *nous/on* tokens in this corpus, in which the disjunctive (i.e., strong) pronoun *nous* is used for emphasis, while *on* is used as the grammatical subject pronoun. Example (8) is the only other example in which a first-person plural verb form is used. However, this is a categorical context in most varieties of French (although Laberge [1977] reports that the *-ons* verb form is sometimes replaced by a third-person plural form in clefted structures in Montréal French).

Although the pronoun *on* can only be used as a subject pronoun, it possesses a wide range of meanings and potential referents. While its traditional function is to express indefinite reference, it can also serve as a definite pronoun that varies with *nous* or any number of other definite clitic pronouns in at least certain stylistically marked contexts (Peeters, 2006). Four categories of *on* were established during the analysis of these data: 1. *on*-indefinite, 2. *on*-definite (\sim *nous*), 3. *on*-definite (\neq *nous*) and 4. *on*-ambiguous. Examples from the present corpus are provided in examples (9)–(12).

- (9) [14:57] <titi_09> *on ne fait pas* tjs comme *on* vt, d fois, *on fait* comme *on* pt
‘one does not always do as one wants, sometimes, one does as one can’
- (10) [14:11] <poupee> euhhhhhhh cody37 *on se connait*?
‘do we know each other?’
- (11) [12:39] <Moi_jeune> *on se calme* :p
‘calm down’
- (12) [14:29] <poupee> et pour être vraiment québécoise ici *on dit* d fraises a la guimauve
‘and to be really Quebecker here we(?)/one say(s) *fraises à la guimauve* (Tagada strawberry)’

In (9), <titi_09> uses *on* in its traditional function as a pronoun with indefinite reference when telling a general truth. Although this type of *on* can vary with other pronouns, primarily *tu* and *vous* (Ashby, 1992; Coveney, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003; Williams and van Compernelle, in press), it cannot vary with *nous*. The token in example (10), however, represents *on* that could vary with *nous*. Identification of *on*-definite (\sim *nous*) tokens was generally aided by the presence of another form of pronominal or nominal address. In this case, <poupee> identifies cody37 as her interlocutor, and asks if they know each other. This is a clear-cut example of when *on* is used in variation with *nous*. The instance of *on* in (11) illustrates another of the various functions of this pronoun: indirect imperatives (Peeters, 2006). Although <Moi_jeune> could have used an imperative form (i.e., *calme-toi* 'calm down') or a modal auxiliary structure (e.g., *tu devrais te calmer* 'you should calm down'), s/he chose *on*, perhaps in jest, since this style is typical of parents speaking to their children. The ludic nature of this turn is further signaled by <Moi_jeune>'s use of the emoticon :p symbolizing a smiling face with the tongue sticking out.

Finally, since the pronoun *on* can be used for such a wide range of functions, a number of tokens were classified as ambiguous, because there was not enough contextual information to say without a doubt whether *on* was used for definite or indefinite reference. In (12), for example, *on* was probably used as an indefinite pronoun when telling a general truth (i.e., *on dit* ...). However, since <poupee> is apparently from Québec, she could be including herself in this instance (i.e., *on* = <poupee> + all other Quebeckers). Since no other form of nominal or pronominal address clarifying the reference is present in this turn or in any of the preceding lines in the transcript, it had to be counted as ambiguous. This practice has been described elsewhere in the literature concerning the use of *on* (e.g., Coveney, 2000, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003).

Results and analysis of the *nous* versus *on* variable

Overall distribution of nous and on

The first level of analysis aims to determine how often and in what capacities each of the pronouns under investigation was used. In total, 169 tokens of *nous* and 805 tokens of *on* were found in the corpus. Table 2 provides the overall distribution of *nous* and *on* in the corpus. Just over one half of all *nous* tokens were object pronouns and over one quarter were disjunctive pronouns. In addition, by adding *nous* tokens occurring in doubled subject environments, which is more of a sub-category of disjunctive pronouns, *nous*-disjunctive accounts for approximately one third of all *nous* tokens. A mere 22 *nous*-subject pronoun tokens were found in the corpus (13% of all *nous* tokens). Only one clefted structure was used.

Table 2: Overall distribution of *nous* and *on*

<i>Nous</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Subject pronoun ($\sim on$)	22	13.0
Object pronoun	89	52.7
Disjunctive pronoun	47	27.8
Doubled subject	10	5.9
Clefted structure	1	0.6
<hr/>		
<i>On</i>		
Indefinite	267	33.2
Definite ($\sim nous$)	437	54.3
Definite ($\neq nous$)	29	3.6
Ambiguous	72	8.9
<hr/>		
The variable context		
<i>Nous</i> -subject pronoun	22	4.8
<i>On</i> -definite ($\sim nous$)	437	95.2
<hr/>		
Total	459	100

The pronoun *on* was used almost five times more frequently than *nous*, which is due, at least in part, to its multiple roles (e.g., pronoun with definite and indefinite reference). Approximately one third of *on* tokens were used for indefinite reference, its supposedly traditional function. Over one half of tokens of *on* were used as a substitute for *nous*. A comparison of *on*-indefinite and *on*-definite ($\sim nous$) reveals a clear pattern of usage, whereby *on* is used more frequently for definite first-person reference than for indefinite reference (*on*-definite = 437/704 or 62.1%). Even if tokens of *on*-ambiguous (i.e., cases in which it was not clear whether *on* had definite or indefinite reference) are included with indefinites, *on*-definite ($\sim nous$) tokens still make up nearly two thirds of *on* tokens. This finding corroborates results reported by Fonseca-Gerber and Waugh (2003), as well as those reported in a similar study of French chat (Williams and van Compernelle, in press) based on a corpus about half the size of the present one.

Relatively few tokens of *on* were classified as ambiguous (8.9%) in comparison with rates of ambiguous *on* reported in previous studies of spoken French (Coveney, 2000, 2003; Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). One reason for this may be that, since there exist few prosodic and extra-linguistic features in chat communication, chat participants make definite and indefinite references more explicit, through the use of additional forms of nominal and pronominal address or other contextual clues (e.g., emoticons, punctuation, capitalization), in order to ensure that there is little ambiguity or potential for misunderstanding. This reasoning is only speculative, of course, and it deserves further investigation in future research since it is clear in these data

that many chat participants create new ways of expressing and representing prosodic features and extra-linguistic information in this text-based communication environment (such also seems to be true of other forms of CMC, such as discussion fora, weblogs and e-mail, among others). Another reason for the relatively low number of ambiguous tokens of *on* relates to the small number of indefinite references in chat. Figures for indefinite reference reported by Williams and van Compernelle (in press) clearly show that indefinite *on* (and *tulvous*) is used approximately five times less frequently in chat than in informal speech, thus lowering the chance for the use of *on* to be ambiguous.

Turning to the results for the variable context itself (i.e., *nous*-subject pronoun versus *on*-definite \sim *nous*), which is presented at the bottom of Table 2, there is a clear pattern in the use of these pronouns, whereby *on*-definite (\sim *nous*) is overwhelmingly preferred over *nous*-subject. *Nous* is used in only 4.8% of variable contexts ($n = 22/459$). This rate is nearly identical to that reported by Coveney (2000) for his Picardy corpus of spoken French (from the mid 1980s), and it is only marginally higher than those reported by Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003) for a mixed corpus of spoken French from France and Switzerland (from the late 1990s) and in studies based on various corpora of Québec French (Laberge, 1977; Thibault, 1991; Blondeau, 2003).

The distribution of the *nous/on* variable in this corpus indicates that, on at least one level, patterns of variation in IRC discourse align with those attested in informal, everyday, conversational French. This suggests that chat discourse is heavily influenced by the spoken language, rather than the standard written language, despite the fact that chat is a form of written/typed discourse. This finding also corroborates results reported in previous studies of other types of grammatical variation in French chat (van Compernelle, 2007, 2008; van Compernelle and Williams, 2007; Williams and van Compernelle, in press). Although there are most certainly other types of linguistic variation in chat that operate independently of the spoken language (e.g., certain types of orthographic variation), it is clear that chat participants have established sociolinguistic norms for at least certain features of discourse that transcend communication modalities (Herring, 2007). In other words, chat discourse does not appear to exist independently of the spoken and/or written language; rather, the norms established by online groups, such as chat communities, are extensions of the norms found in groups in offline contexts.

Given the overwhelming preference for *on* at the expense of *nous* for first-person plural reference in chat communication, it seems reasonable to presume that chat represents a communicative context in which an informal discourse style is expected. It is important to remember that style is relative, since it “derives its meaning from the association of linguistic features with particular social groups” (Bell, 2001, p. 142). In the case of the *nous/on* variable, it is clear that *on* is the stylistic norm; however, a few tenacious tokens of *nous*

persist. How can this be explained? Were these rare tokens produced by new members of the chat community who were not yet familiar with the stylistic norms established by the group? Or, were tokens of *nous* used as a response to or an initiation of style-shift, as was the case for instances of formal *vous*-singular use in Williams and van Compernelle's (2007) study of second-person pronouns?

Analysis of nous-subject tokens

In order to understand better in what contexts *nous*-subject was used in the IRC corpus, each token of the pronoun was examined in its context of occurrence. Since so few tokens of *nous* occurred in the corpus relative to *on*, it would be impossible to attempt any type of variable rule analysis, which is common for other types of grammatical variables. Therefore, this analysis considers only *nous*-subject tokens and the turns preceding and following them. This practice is described elsewhere in the literature as a means of analyzing “vestigial” variants in French, including, for example, *nous* (Coveney, 2000) and *ne* (Fonseca-Greber, 2007; Poplack and St-Amand, 2007).

Given the lack of interactional coherency, turn adjacency and prosodic features and other extra-linguistic information in the corpus, it was often difficult to determine the context (e.g., topic of conversation, addressees, etc.) in which tokens of *nous* occurred. It was often necessary to review several dozen lines preceding and following the turn in which *nous* was present to understand which messages referred to which, and if there were any contextual clues as to why *nous* was used. In the following excerpts of chat discussions, non-essential turns (e.g., those messages belonging to other conversations or having no bearing on the topic of discussion) have been deleted for ease of reading.

During this phase of the analysis, it became apparent that four of the 22 tokens of *nous*-subject actually occurred during the same pre-scripted message. A pre-scripted message, often referred to as “flooding” in chat (the nominal form *le flood* or the verb *flooder* is used in French chat), is a non-spontaneous, and often very long (relative to “normal” chat turns), message that a user prepares in advance and copies and pastes into the message window. This particular message was observed on four separate occasions on several different chat channels:

- (13) [21:48] <Paul> Le monde dans lequel *nous vivons* présentement, n'est pas le monde que les médias nous montre du tout. Des sociétés secrètes contrôle les Nations Unis, et sont des cartels criminels qui veulent dominer la planète. Depuis 400 ans, ils complotent pour contrôler la terre. Les Skull&Bones sont des criminels qui travaillent avec les Illuminati à la tête des Nations Unions. Depuis les années 60, ils se sont attaqués à tous les pays du monde et ont to [automatic server cut-off]

‘The world in which we live presently is not the world the media show us at all. Secret societies control the United Nations and are criminal cartels who want to dominate the planet. For 400 years, they have plotted to control the Earth. The Skull & Bones are criminals who work with the Illuminati at the head of the United Nations. For 60 years, they have attacked all the countries on Earth and have’ [automatic server cut-off]

Because the token in example (13) is a non-spontaneous, or non-productive, instance of *nous*, it can be discounted from the figures. By excluding these four examples (this message appeared on four separate occasions), *nous* accounts for a mere 3.9% of first-person plural subject pronouns when compared to *on*-definite ($n = 18/455$), down from the rate of 4.8% shown in Table 2.

Other instances of *nous*-subject pronoun occurred during marked stretches of discourse. Shifts in the choice of personal pronouns can often signal style-shift in chat, as has previously been demonstrated for the use of the second-person pronouns *tu* and *vous* (Williams and van Compernelle, 2007). Several tokens of *nous* appeared to occur during “ludic” stretches of discourse. One such example, which was produced during a role-play, is given in (14):

- (14) [14:19] <Dis_non> BRAVOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO
 ‘BRAVOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO’
 [14:19] <Dis_non> WOOHOO289 VOUS ETES LA NOUVELLE GAGNANTE
 ‘WOOHOO289 YOU ARE THE NEW WINNER’
 [14:19] <kenny> *nous avons* une gagnante !
 ‘we have a winner!’

In this case, it is obvious that <Dis_non> is imitating a game show host, yelling “BRAVO” and the winner’s name (in chat, capital letters indicate a raised voice or shouting). <Dis_non> also addresses Woohoo289, the winner, with *vous*-singular. The use of *vous*-singular is rare in chat, except in the case of role-playing, jokes, or otherwise ludic stretches of discourse (Williams and van Compernelle, 2007). In the turns preceding and following this excerpt, <Dis_non> and <Whispy> maintain a reciprocal *tu* relationship. Thus, the shift from reciprocal *tu* to *vous*-singular on the part of <Dis_non> in imitation of a game show host, who would naturally use *vous*-singular with contestants (at least for scripted speech), signals a change in the tone of discourse. Picking up on the role-play, <kenny> uses *nous*, perhaps in imitation of a game show assistant or announcer. The use of *nous* here is a type of “responsive shift” (Bell, 2001), whereby <kenny> shifts his language in response to another shift. (This was the only example of *nous*-subject pronoun produced by this participant.)

In addition to role-play, *nous* was used in other types of ludic discourse. In (15), which comes from a data set collected just before the beginning of the Fall 2005 academic semester, <legende> greets and attempts to get to know some of the other chat participants upon entering the channel:

- (15) [14:15] <legende> vous êtes tous étudiant là ?
 ‘are you all students?’
 [14:16] <Henri4> *Nous sommes vacanciers*
 ‘We are vacationers’
 [14:16] <Salisbury> Oui, et moi Vacancier à plein temps vu que je suis en L^^
 ‘Yes, and me, a full time vacationer since I’m in literature’
 [14:16] <Henri4> Et futur chomeur vu qu il est en L^^
 ‘and a future unemployed person since he’s in literature’

In the turns preceding this excerpt, several participants, including <Henri4> and <Salisbury>, are discussing the beginning of the new academic semester. <legende>, who appears not to be a regular on the channel, asks the others whether they are all students preparing for the beginning of the year. <Henri4> initiates a shift in the tone of the discussion by responding, jokingly, that they are “vacationers” (it was still summer vacation at the time of data collection). While this is not to say that *nous* itself changes the tone of the discussion, it co-occurs with the shift, and it is uncharacteristic of <Henri4>, who used *on* in every other first-person reference he produced. <Salisbury> continues the playful style of discourse, commenting that he is a “full-time vacationer,” referencing the *baccalauréat littéraire* (i.e., “je suis en L^^”), one of many pre-university tracks offered to high school students in France (similar to a concentration in liberal arts in the US, UK or Canada). In jest, <Henri4> adds that, because of his choice to pursue a *baccalauréat littéraire*, as opposed to a more “vocational” track, <Salisbury> is destined to be unemployed.⁵ The “raised eyebrow” emoticons (i.e., ^^), which express surprise and/or laughter (Pierozak, 2003, 2007; Marcoccia and Gauducheu, 2007), further reinforce the ludic nature of this excerpt.

Other ludic instances of *nous* occurred when one participant adopted a religious-style discourse. In (16), <Chu007> recites his “Beer’s Prayer”:

- (16) [12:33] Chu007 récite sa prière : Notre Bière qui êtes au frais, Que Ta Chope soit sanctifiée, Que Ton Ivresse vienne, Que Ta Volonté soit faite au bar comme au comptoir, Donne-nous aujourd’hui notre houblon quotidien, Pardonne-nous nos gueule de bois comme *nous pardonnons* à ceux qui boivent du COCA, Soumet-nous au demi-pression Et délivre-nous de la Soif, Car c’est à Toi qu’appartiennent l’ivresse, le plaisir et la fête Pour les siècles des siècles. Amen.
 ‘Chu007 recites his prayer: Our Beer, who art in the fridge, hallowed be thy foam, thy drunkenness come, thy will be done, at the bar as it is at the check-out, Give us this day our daily barley, and forgive us our hangovers as we forgive those who drink Coca-Cola, lead us to the tap, and deliver us from thirst, for thine is drunkenness, pleasure and partying, for ever and ever. Amen.’

Given the context of a modified version of the Lord’s Prayer, this example of *nous*-subject pronoun is obviously ludic in nature. In addition, it is not an entirely productive use of *nous*, since *nous* + first-person plural verb form is used

in the French Lord's Prayer and other religious writings. (The use of formal, literary and archaic variants in religious texts is, of course, very common.) Incidentally, the opportunity for language play such as this appears to be one of the reasons for the immense popularity of online chat communication (Herring, 1999).

Another similar function of *nous* involves the adoption of "institutional" talk. As Coveney (2000, pp. 467–470) suggests, *nous* use can be associated with group belonging (Coveney refers to those speakers in his corpus who were "associated with their [summer vacation camps] on a more or less permanent, year-round basis," p. 467). Such may also be true for those chat participants who are "regular" participants, especially in the case of *ops* or *opérateurs* (i.e., long-time participants charged with enforcing the channel's netiquette⁶). One such example is given in (17):

- (17) [11:37] <jimmy> Anonyme875127 un petit pseudo serait bien sympa de ta part, tapes : /nick tonpseudo + ton age ou ton dept, si tu veux l'enregistrer *nous sommes* à ta disposition pour t'aider
 'a nick would be nice, type: /nick yourname + your age or department, if you want to register it we are here to help you'

The default nick given to an unregistered user on IRC begins with Anonyme and is followed by a randomly generated number. However, adopting a more descriptive or unique nick is generally appreciated by other members. <jimmy>, acting on behalf of the chat channel, instructs <Anonyme875127> to select an original pseudonym, even including the IRC script necessary for such a change. Adopting a discourse style similar to that of a customer service representative, <jimmy> informs <Anonyme875127> that the chat channel, the members and himself included, are available to help him if he should wish to register his pseudonym. The use of *nous* here therefore implicates <jimmy>'s role as the spokesperson of the chat channel.

Relatedly, other tokens of *nous* functioned as a mark of exclusivity. As Coveney (2000) pointed out, citing Blanche-Benveniste (1985, p. 208), *nous* can be used "to refer to a group 'seen from the outside' and facing or, confronted with, others external to this group, whereas *on* is used for the group 'seen from within' " (p. 465). Several participants used *nous* in this way, as illustrated in (18):

- (18) [10:20] <Pilule_bleue> on peux aprendre le francais la??
 'can one learn French here?'
 [10:20] <Pas_yu> notre prof est po la
 'our professor isn't here'
 [10:21] <Pilule_bleue> elle sappele comment??
 'what's her name?'
 [10:21] <Pilule_bleue> la prof

‘the professor’
 [10:21] <Pas_vu> titecarrotte
 ‘titecarrotte’
 [10:22] <Pilule_bleue> jolie Nom lol
 ‘pretty name’
 [10:22] <Pas_vu> mais *nous sommes pas* ici pour apprendre
 ‘but we are not here to learn’

In this case, *nous* appears to represent the chat community seen from the outside (i.e., <Pas_vu> + other members). <Pilule_bleue> is the “outsider,” who wishes to participate in the chat in order to learn French. Speaking on behalf of the group, <Pas_vu> informs <Pilule_bleue> that they (i.e., the group) are not there to learn French. As such, *nous* may function to exclude <Pilule_bleue> from the utterance, in an attempt to draw a clear line between the “group” and new arrivals (especially those who do not conform to the group’s expectations regarding participation and/or topic of discussion). (In the turns preceding this excerpt, it is clear that <Pilule_bleue> does not actually wish to “learn” French. The messages sent by this participant are meta-linguistic in nature, as s/he comments on the “poor” spelling and grammar on the part of other participants.)

Another possible explanation, of course, is that the use of *on* could have caused ambiguity, since *on est pas ici pour apprendre* could/would be interpreted as a generalization, which, by extension, would include <Pilule_bleue>. Thus, it appears that the use of *nous* in this type of sentence functions to ensure that there is little ambiguity or potential for misinterpretation. Incidentally, this token of *nous* does not appear to be linked to a shift in formality, as the negative particle *ne* does not co-occur with *nous* in this negated sentence. Consistent with the “principle of accountability,” a review of tokens of all first-person plural pronouns (i.e., all tokens of *nous*-subject and *on*-definite) did not reveal any correlation between *ne* retention and *nous* use.⁷

Along the same lines, other instances of *nous* occurred in order to avoid linguistic ambiguity, given that *on* possesses such a wide range of referents and meanings. In example (19), *nous* is used where *on* presence might have led other participants to interpret the message as a generalization (i.e., *on*-indefinite):

- (19) [15:41] <Hypercol> *Nous savions* que la publicité ciblait les imbéciles. Je découvre que ça marche aussi auprès des abrutis profonds.
 ‘We knew that advertising targeted imbeciles. I’m finding out that it works on total idiots too’

In this example, <Hypercol> uses *nous* in an apparent attempt to ensure the correct interpretation of the utterance. If *on* had been used (i.e., *on savait*),

other participants, including <Hypercol>'s *abruti* interlocutor, might have interpreted the message as a generalization.

Given the analysis of *nous* tokens presented above, it is clear that many instances in which chat participants used *nous* were motivated by pragmatic and/or semantic factors. Thus, it is necessary to reinterpret the figures previously reported in Table 2. Table 3 provides the distribution of *nous*-subject pronoun tokens by three categories: ludic, exclusive and other. Ludic refers to all those tokens of *nous* used in joking, jest and imitations. Exclusive collapses tokens of *nous* functioning to exclude outside parties (i.e., the *nous* = the group seen from outside) and to avoid linguistic ambiguity, as well as those used during the adoption of institutional talk, since most of these types of *nous* seemed to have two or all three of these roles. Other tokens of *nous* appear to be standard, "run of the mill" examples, in which there was no clear indication that *nous* was used productively in response to or in initiation of style-shift or as a means of excluding one or more parties.

Table 3: Distribution of *nous*-subject tokens^a

<i>Nous</i> type	<i>n</i>	%
Ludic	7	38.9
Exclusive	8	44.4
Other	3	16.7
Total	18	100.0

^aThese figures exclude the four tokens of non-productive *nous*-subject pronoun shown in example (13).

The data clearly show that non-ludic, non-exclusive *nous* account for the smallest percentage of *nous*-subject pronoun tokens. These tokens could not be categorized by any specific function, although it is possible that they were intended to convey humor or exclusivity. As Bell (1999) notes, however, it must be recognized that not all occurrences of a variant can be explained. This seems especially true when the object of analysis is a seldom occurring vestigial variant such as *nous*. In the case of the three tokens of non-ludic, non-exclusive *nous*, it seems reasonable to conclude that chat participants still use the vestigial variant *nous* for first-person plural reference. However, this type of *nous* accounts for a mere 0.7% of first-person plural references in comparison with tokens of *on* with the same meaning (*n* = 3/440). This rate is nearly identical to those reported by Fonseca-Greber and Waugh (2003) and in studies of everyday Canadian French (Laberge, 1977; Thibault, 1991; Blondeau, 2003).

Conclusion

The analysis presented above provides an additional piece of evidence for the relation between informal, everyday, conversational French and the discourse produced in online chat environments. These data clearly align with previous studies of informal speech, where *nous* has all but disappeared in favour of *on*-definite. In this way, the present article contributes not only to our understanding of on-going shifts in the French pronoun paradigm but to our understanding of the sociolinguistic norms established by online communities as well. To date, only limited attention has been paid to analyses of sociolinguistic and pragmatic variation in synchronous French-language computer-mediated communication, but these few studies have provided clear indications of the level of discourse produced in chat environments, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Overview of sociolinguistic norms in French-language chat

Study	Summary of findings
Williams and van Compernelle (2007)	Familiar <i>tu</i> is the preferred pronoun of address at the expense of the more formal <i>vous</i> -singular.
van Compernelle (2007, in press)	Chat participants delete <i>ne</i> at rates similar to those reported in studies of informal speech; many of the same constraining variables are influential in chat.
Williams and van Compernelle (in press)	2nd person pronouns <i>tu/vous</i> used as substitutes for <i>on</i> for indefinite reference at similar rates and in the same contexts as reported in studies of informal speech.
Present study	<i>On</i> -definite overwhelmingly preferred to <i>nous</i> -subject pronoun; <i>nous</i> used in specific pragmatic contexts.

Given the obvious preference for informal or “non-standard” usage in French chat, it seems reasonable to presume that, sociolinguistically at least, chat discourse is in line with the everyday spoken language, much more so than with the standard, written variety of French. However, other types of variation exist in chat that rely more heavily on the written side of the language. For example, non-standard orthography is widespread in French chat, although some of these variations are mimetic of spontaneous oral production (see Pierozak, 2003; van Compernelle and Williams, 2007).

The very low rate of *nous* in the present study may lead the reader to wonder whether *nous* is disappearing from the French language, given that chat is a form of written discourse where *nous* might be expected to occur rather

frequently. The answer to this question is a resounding *no*. In comparison to rates of *nous* use in spoken French, the results of this study do not indicate an on-going change, whereby *nous* would be expected to disappear in the future. The strongest evidence for a leveling off of *nous* rates is provided by Blondeau (2003), who found that *on*-definite was used at near-categorical rates in 19th century Québec, yet *nous* has persisted at minuscule rates into the late 20th century (a similar pattern has been found with regard to *ne* presence; see Poplack and St-Amand, 2007).

In addition, recent studies of European French indicate that *nous* rates in the mid 1980s (Coveney, 2000) were approximately the same as those found in the late 1990s (Fonseca-Greber and Waugh, 2003). Thus, it appears as though no change has occurred with regard to rates of *nous* use. Instead, *nous* occurs in particular contexts, such as jokes and role-plays, or when the use of *on* could lead to linguistic ambiguity, even if such examples seldom occur in many communicative environments. As further support for the continued presence of *nous* in the French language, informal observations of other types of electronic discourse reveal that *nous* use remains strong, especially in asynchronous online communication where the discourse moves in the direction of the standard written language (van Compernelle and Williams, 2007). In addition, since *nous* is still taught in formal, structured, educational settings, speakers of French will most likely continue to produce at least occasional examples of the *nous* + *-ons* verb structure in informal communication contexts for the foreseeable future, even if this is limited to certain stylistically marked contexts.

Still relatively little is known about the discourse produced in online communication contexts. While there is a growing body of literature on sociolinguistic variation in French chat, other forms of CMC (e.g., discussion fora, weblogs, etc.) have received less attention. Because of this, most studies of linguistic variation in chat have focused on comparisons with studies of everyday, conversational French. Cross-type analyses (e.g., van Compernelle and Williams, 2007) considering two or several forms of CMC could prove rather insightful and may be able to provide a baseline for comparison that does not necessarily call for comparisons with spoken French and the standard written language. In addition, analyses of other types of chat (e.g., one-to-one instant messaging) would certainly offer researchers insight into similar types of communication produced in different social contexts.

With regard to the French personal pronoun paradigm, more research providing a comprehensive panorama of pronoun use and address forms in CMC could prove rather insightful. For example, the corpus used in the present study included only 459 tokens of first-person plural pronouns (*nous* and *on* combined). This is a relatively low figure for such a large corpus (over 330,000 words) in comparison with similar studies of speech, which often report over

1,000 occurrences of first-person plural pronouns (i.e., *nous* and *on*-definite combined). A review of these data revealed that the two most common pronouns were *je* and *tu* (over 3,500 and 2,500 occurrences, respectively). Since these data do not come from sociolinguistic interviews in which a fieldworker can elicit tokens of the variable, variation must be observed during the course of naturally occurring conversation, which may or may not call for the use of the variable under consideration. Future studies analyzing discourse stance (i.e., references to person) could prove to be rather insightful.

More also needs to be known about online participants' offline identities. Since only limited information about chat community members is available, most of which is only known through participants' own disclosure of personal information, studies of linguistic variation in online contexts are limited to observable features of discourse. While analyses operating within Bell's (1984, 2001) audience design framework can inform scholarship on the sociolinguistic norms established by online discourse communities, information about participants offline identities (e.g., age, social class, gender) could help to establish more concrete comparisons of patterns of variation observed in online and offline contexts. Relatedly, more research is needed on inter- and intra-individual variation within and across different types of CMC, including, perhaps, analyses of intra-individual variation in online versus offline communication contexts.

Notes

- ¹ In these data, there is ample evidence of a limited number of recurring participants who know each other relatively well, at least by their online monikers (i.e., screen names).
- ² Interactive, of course, refers to what is observable from chat transcripts. Indeed, any number of peripheral participants may be following the chat discussion. In these data, there were anywhere from 10 to 30 or more participants logged on at any given point in time. However, only four to ten of them were actively engaged in (public) discussions on average.
- ³ Other types of public, many-to-many chat include Web-based chat, which participants can access through a website usually hosted by a search engine or other type of Web portal (e.g., www.voila.fr/, www.orange.fr and www.toile.com). In contrast to IRC and Web-based chat, instant messaging (IM) services offer private, one-to-one chat communication, such as *Microsoft IM*, *AIM (America On-line Instant Messenger)* and *Yahoo! IM*, among others.
- ⁴ Freely available software, called an IRC client, is needed in order to connect to an IRC server. More information about mIRC, the client used for data collection in this study, can be found at the following URL: www.mirc.com/.
- ⁵ The *baccalauréat littéraire*, with its focus on literature, foreign languages and social sciences, is one of the most difficult tracks in the French national education system. However, it is perceived by many students as a non-vocational track, which leads

either to a career in teaching, provided they pass the CAPES (the national teaching certification examination), or unemployment.

- ⁶ Netiquette is the set of rules and behaviours deemed appropriate on the Internet. Each chat channel, discussion forum, etc. has its own list of rules. While these may vary to some degree, it is generally agreed that vulgar language, “shouting” (i.e., the use of all capital letters) and other anti-social behaviours are not appropriate. For a treatment of netiquette in French chat, see Norén and Lindgren (2007).
- ⁷ Although space does not permit a full discussion of co-occurrence rules (Ervin-Tripp, 1972) in the present article, it is worth noting variation in pronoun choice appears to operate somewhat independently of the variable use of *ne* (van Compernelle, 2007, p. 56). However, van Compernelle (2007, pp. 62–71) reports that, in addition to various internal linguistic factors, *ne* retention is determined to a large extent by the style adopted by individual participants for brief stretches of discourse. He found that negated sentences in ludic and proverbial stretches of discourse had rates of *ne* retention as high as 38.98 and 50%, respectively, while this rate fell as low as 1.79% in pragmatically unmarked contexts. Thus, while there was no correlation between *nous* use and *ne* retention in this study, both variants (i.e., *nous* and *ne* presence) appear to be constrained by similar pragmatic factors.

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