Eh bien: Marker of comparison and contrast

Maj-Britt Mosegaard Hansen
University of Copenhagen

1. Introduction

In the present paper, I shall investigate the function of the discourse connective *eh bien*, as it is used in spoken French.¹ My analysis is based on authentic examples drawn from taped verbal interactions of various kinds between native speakers only (in this case four debates and three spontaneous conversations), and it represents part of a larger-scale research project on the semantics of discourse markers in spoken French.²

Discourse markers of the type I am interested in (other examples include French *bon, ben, alors, puis, Hein* etc.) differ from the phenomena studied in the rest of this volume inasmuch as they cannot be integrated into the layered structure of the clause — they are “extra-clausal” constituents (cf. Dik 1989: 45). Hence, the information conveyed by such morphemes is not part of the propositional content of their host utterances, but serves, in my opinion, rather to indicate how this propositional content is to be manipulated with respect to both co- and context. Thus, it is related to the type of information conveyed by modal particles (Davidse-Nielsen, this volume) and sentence adverbials, but is less structured syntactically and semantically, as the latter both enter into the clause structure as described by Davidse-Nielsen (op. cit.) and Dik (op. cit.:250-261). The fact that sentence adverbials and modal particles can be located within the layers of the individual clause implies that their scope is definable in terms of grammatically describable constituents. In contrast, discourse markers such as *eh bien* apply to whole utterances, sometimes even extending beyond the host utterance, and influence relations between two or more messages, without belonging in any intra-clausal structural slot.

It is implicit in what I have said so far that discourse markers are perhaps those items which most clearly illustrate Givón’s (1984:239) observations that “human communication is multi-propositional” and that “information structure
in human language most commonly involves units larger than the proposition”. In fact, it is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to adequately describe their function without going beyond the utterance as a self-contained unit. Their particular contribution to linguistic structure is to be found, not on the level of the sentence, but on that of the discourse.

Now, some linguists (e.g. Gülich 1970; Aucelin 1981a, 1981b) have described _eh bien_ and other similar particles as constituting, in at least some of their uses, little more than what might be termed “oral punctuation marks”. I reject this view as a working hypothesis for two reasons: first, although such markers may often seem to be interchangeable when analyzed as part of isolated utterances, they may rarely be substituted for one another without a change of meaning when the utterances are considered in a wider context. This would seem to indicate that the markers are not without coded content. Indeed, I will argue that, similarly to semantically more “transparent” connectives such as English _after all or so_ (cf. Blakemore 1987), one may conceive of these markers as a kind of instruction given by the speaker to the hearer on how to construct a coherent mental model of the discourse. As such, they must be assumed to activate procedural rather than representational knowledge (cf. Blakemore 1987; Wilson & Sperber 1993), which incidentally would explain why, in many cases, native speakers have vague intuitions at best about their meaning and use.

My second reason for rejecting the “punctuation mark” analysis is the fact that it has been common since Saussure (1916) to consider linguistic signs as the union of a particular expression and a corresponding content. Now, it seems to me that there is no _a priori_ reason for understanding discourse markers as exceptions to this rule, but that is in fact precisely what the incriminated description does, inasmuch as it implies that these items have only an expression side, but no content.

We may now go on to consider the specific case of _eh bien_. I will begin by taking a relatively brief look at previous descriptions of the marker in section 2, and subsequently propose my own analysis in section 3.

2. Previous descriptions

To date, three in-depth analyses of _eh bien_ have been published.

Sirdar-Iskandar (1980), who is working within the theory of language-inherent argumentation formulated by J-C. Anscombre and O.Ducrot (Ducrot et al. 1980; Anscombre & Ducrot 1983), and whose analysis is based partly on examples from one 19th-century vaudeville, partly on constructed examples, describes _eh bien_ as an essentially argumentative marker of consecutive relations, such that prototypically this item would introduce an utterance _Q_ into a (linguistically or non-linguistically) given situation _S_, while signalling to the hearer that a particular conclusion _C_ should be drawn from this fact. _Q_, which may be alternatively the propositional content of the utterance, its illocutionary force, or the very act of uttering it, is to be understood as an unexpected result of _S_, while the expected one is termed _Q’_. Sirdar-Iskandar represents this by the formula (S - Q) -> C, where “-” represents a factual, causal relation, and “->” an argumentative one. The nature of _C_ and _Q’_ must be inferred by the hearer. Moreover, _S_ is interpreted as thematic, and _Q_ as schematic.

There does exist a second argumentative use of _eh bien_, which may be represented as (non-(S - Q')) -> C. Here, the putative conclusion is to be drawn from the fact that _S_ has not had the expected consequence _Q’_. In this configuration, it would seem that _Q_ can no longer be analyzed as representing the propositional content of the utterance, but only its illocutionary force, or the act of utterance.

In a third and final use, termed “phatic”, _eh bien_ marks the obligation of the hearer to continue the discourse, this obligation being then the intended “conclusion”. In this use, the marker is found in interrogatives, and in answers to interrogatives. In the latter use it is claimed that _eh bien_ manifests an underlying performativé on the order of _I hereby answer that_... Quite apart from the fact that most of Sirdar-Iskandar’s examples are somewhat outdated, and that none are representative of spontaneous oral discourse, a number of things lead me to question the validity of her analysis, at least where this latter type of discourse is concerned (not having worked with written texts at all, I hesitate to deny that the argumentative analysis might be adequate here). First of all, the qualification of _Q_ as “unexpected” is unconvincing in the case of several examples, such as the following:

1. _A. moi je ferais trop confiance aux gens elle elle est peut-être trop méfiante mais elle A raison tu vois ce serait un peu le genre tu te rappelles quand on a été prendre le livre, Isabelle_  
   B. quel livre  
   A. on est entré à la fac et puis y avait des livres sur les étagères  
   B. oui  
   A. tu te souviens  
   B. oui
A. et puis le gars il le lui ai dit mais je vous l'achèterai demain et il a dit mais non moi je vous fais pas confiance, tu te souviens
B. oui
A. eh bien c'est l'attitude de Nadia (CT, p. 11)

Secondly, even in cases where an unexpected element is introduced into the discourse, pointing to a particular conclusion, eh bien may not mark the unexpected element Q, but rather the conclusion C, as in this example:

(2) A. [...] c'était pas un voyage simplement pour rester dans les piscines des hôtels comme ça hein non non on a beaucoup visité hein
B. c'était quel organisme
A. c'était le Club Méd
B. c'était le Club Méd
A. comme Evelyne Buchillot
B. eh bien comme quoi le Club Méd euh..., fait des choses qui sont finalement pas si euh (VE, p. 15)

In any case, one may ask oneself whether there is any reason to posit a specifically argumentative value for eh bien, when, in those cases where the analysis does work, similar results would probably follow directly from a maxim or principle of relevance (cf. Grice 1975; Sperber & Wilson 1986), that is to say that C would represent an implication to be drawn from Q.

As for the so-called "phatic" uses, it strikes me as redundant to signal the obligation to answer a question through the use of a discourse marker, since questions and answers are usually considered to form adjacency pairs, which is to say that questions "sequentially imply" answers, in and of themselves (Levinson 1983:303-308; Schegloff & Sacks 1974:238-239). Finally, the analysis of eh bien in answers would seem to be heir to at least some of the problems that plague the "performatif hypothesis" in general, and is therefore to be avoided (cf. Levinson 1983:251-263).

Métrich (1987), who again uses only written or constructed examples, rejects the argumentative interpretation, and retains only the function of marking a caesura between two elements of the discourse, one functioning as theme, the other as rhyme. Both of these may be more or less implicit. This, of course, raises the question of whether eh bien may meaningfully be said to mark a caesura, since it is difficult to interpret this as anything other than a strictly formal definition.

Finally, in an extremely short article, Hwang (1993) describes eh bien as being used by the speaker to signal his responsibility for the following utter-
Prague School, as well as that of Halliday (cf. Hjulmand 1983), I prefer not to use the technical terms theme and rheme about relations above the level of the sentence. Finally, and most importantly, if by "thematization" of the previous discourse, one means that the latter is being used as a point of departure for what will be said next, it would seem that this is, to some extent, a defining feature of coherent discourse, and that it cannot therefore be attributed to the presence of *eh bien*. Something similar may be said of Hwang's contention that *eh bien* marks the introduction of new elements into the discourse; any bit of discourse that does not contain such elements will ordinarily be totally uninformative and thus infelicitous (there are, of course, exceptions, cf. (3)).

3. The function of *eh bien* in spoken discourse

I shall now attempt to show that there are, in my opinion, essentially two simultaneous aspects to the use of *eh bien* in spontaneous oral discourse. Primarily, it marks the introduction of a comparison or contrast (the latter being a particular form of comparison). This is compatible with Sirdar-Iskandar's analysis, to the extent that comparisons/contrasts may of course be more rhetorically effectful, and thus more likely to be used, if they are unexpected. As noted above, this postulated unexpectedness does, however, fail to generalize to all examples. It may also account for Hwang's notion of a consensus break, since her work seems to be based mainly on debates, where comparisons/contrasts are likely to be used in refuting the adversary's views.7

Secondarily, *eh bien* may work within the negotiation of common ground, either to signal that the following utterance is to be interpreted only in the light of something which has just been introduced into the discourse, and which must therefore be at least temporarily accepted in order for the following to be at all relevant, or else to question the validity (and thus, the relevance) of what was thus previously introduced. In both cases, speakers using *eh bien* are to some extent restricting the domain of their discourse by explicitly grounding it in the immediately preceding utterance(s), but rather than speaking of theme vs. rheme, I shall argue that the utterances preceding and following this connective are marked as interdependent.

The speaker may thus be seen to be constraining the hearer's manipulation of the propositional content of the utterance in two ways at once, thereby diminishing the cognitive effort needed to arrive at an interpretation of the utterance.

3.1 Intra-sentential *eh bien*

In my corpora, *eh bien* occurs intra-sententially in essentially three environments: between a preposed conditional clause and its main clause; between a preposed temporal clause and its main clause; and between a left-dislocated topic and the sentence "proper". The following are typical examples:

(4) [...] si on devait lui transmettre les heures du lever du coucher du soleil pendant les vingt dernières années *eh bien* il serait facile de trouver une courbe mathématique une fonction mathématique qui a qui est contenue dans un nombre de bits d'information qui est beaucoup plus faible (NN, my transcription)

(5) [...] moi j'ai appris avec délice que quand une certain Jean-Paul Sarrre lui a apporié Mélancholia qu'il a trouvé un peu triste *eh bien* il a dit on va appeler ça La Nausée et puis ça a marché (MP, p. 20)

(6) [...] dans notre débat avec le Parti Communiste, *eh bien* je crois que c’est aussi un débat extrêmement sérieux (VS1, p. 5)

Now there are a number of similarities between these constructions. First of all, neither conditional clauses, preposed temporal clauses, nor topics can meaningfully be said to be asserted, and they thus illustrate Hwang’s (1993) claim that responsibility for the utterance preceding *eh bien* is attributed to someone other than the speaker. Contrary to what Hwang seems to imply, however, I am not claiming that this comes about as a result of the presence of *eh bien*. It is clear that the relation between the utterances would be the same even without the marker, but once such a relation exists, the speaker may choose to emphasize it through the use of *eh bien*.

It is widely accepted, following Frege (1892/1993:36), that preposed temporal clauses are presupposed (cf. also Levinson 1983:182). As for topics (in fact, themes, in the text quoted), they are, in the words of Nolke (1989):

[...] presented as the thing that the utterance "is about", that is, as something which typically has some form of existence independently of the particular utterance. Therefore, λ cannot be held responsible for the theme.

(Nolke 1989:22, my translation)

If this is the case for themes, it should a fortiori be true of topics, to the extent that a distinction is made between the two. Lambrecht (1981:67) likewise speaks of the "presuppositional status of topics".


Conditionals, on the other hand, are obviously not presupposed in the traditional sense. However, Ducrot (1972) writes as follows:

[Avec si p, q ] l’auditeur est clairement sollicité de faire une hypothèse, présentée
comme hypothèse, et dont l'annulation éventuelle est de ce fait envisagée au
moment même où le si est prononcé. [...] L’hypothèse de la proposition conditionnelle,
bién qu’elle ne soit pas présentée à la manière des présuppositions [...] est
traitée, une fois qu'elle est présentée, comme une présupposition ordinaire.

(Ducrot 1972:168)

Now, other scholars have already noted similarities between topics and conditionals on the one hand (Haiman 1978), and between conditionals and temporal clauses on the other (Rijkebran 1986), in that all three, in Haiman's words “constitute the frame of reference with respect to which the main clause is either true [...], or felicitous” (Haiman 1978:564). Inspired by Roberts (1989), who consider the consequent of a conditional to be semantically (her term is “modally”) subordinate to the antecedent, because the truth of the consequent may only be evaluated relative to a world in which the antecedent is also true, I would like to claim that an analogous relationship holds between left-dislocated topics and the sentence “proper”, as well as between presupposed temporal clauses and their main clause. In fact, Rijkebran (1986), working within the framework of Functional Grammar, argues for essentially the same thing, when he proposes that conditional and temporal clauses be considered, not as satellites, but as themes:

[Conditional and temporal clauses] do not additionally specify the nuclear predic
If anything, the nuclear predication rather gives additional information which
is relevant for the state of affairs designed by the conditional or temporal clause.

(Rijkebran 1986:7)

The important thing here is that in Functional Grammar, themes have an
independent status, whereas satellites do not (Dik 1989:264-265). Similarly, Lambricht (1981) notes that:

[since the non-topical part of the sentence [...] is “about” the topic, all information
presented in it, whether in main or in embedded clauses, is in some sense sub
ordinate to the topic.


My claim is therefore that the two parts of the sentence types in question are,
in fact, interdependent, to the extent that one is syntactically, and the other semantically, superordinate.11 Hence, it is impossible for eh bien to mark a syntactically subordinate clause. The following utterance is distinctly odd:

(4’)

*il serait facile de trouver une courbe mathématique une fonction
mathématique qui a qui est contenue dans un nombre de bits d’in
formation qui est beaucoup plus faible eh bien si on devait lui
transmettre les heures du lever du coucher du soleil pendant les
vingt dernières années

This does not entail that eh bien is necessarily also infelicitous before a proposed subordinate clause, but in such an environment, it will, however, be understood as marking the entire complex sentence, rather than just the clause in question:

(4’’)

eh bien si on devait lui transmettre les heures du lever du cou-
cher du soleil pendant les vingt dernières années il serait facile
de trouver une courbe mathématique une fonction mathématique
qui a qui est contenue dans un nombre de bits d’information qui
est beaucoup plus faible

The utterance will, in this case, presuppose a preceding one, e.g. a question, on which it may be seen as dependent (cf. section 3.3 on turn-initial eh bien). In what follows, I shall demonstrate that eh bien usually marks some sort of semantic or pragmatic interdependence between what precedes and follows it.

In two examples, the structure seems a little different:

(7) [...] ce qu’a dit Rocard c’est que dans la mesure où aucun ac
cord n’était intervenu à Athènes eh bien, il n’y avait pas d’ac
cord au sein de la Communauté sur ce problème (VS2, p. 6)

Dans la mesure does not, of course, have a conditional meaning here, but the propositional content of the clause it introduces is presupposed, and this connective may in other contexts mark a hypothesis. Moreover, in the context of the discussion from which (7) is extracted, the evaluation of the truth of the main clause depends crucially on the frame posited by the subordinate clause.

(8) A. [...] mais en tous cas je t’ai dit elle voilà ce qu’elle m’a dit elle
m’a dit, par rapport à toutes les filles que j’ai connues que tu
connaissait, eh bien Enfin c’est pas trop tôt voilà
B. eh bien c’est gentil (CT, p. 16)

The adverbial beginning par rapport à… does not constitute a normal extra
posed topic, but as B’s response shows, the reported utterance is, in fact, a
compliment on her personality, she herself being a “subset” of all the girl-
friends of A that A’s sister (whose words are being reported) knows of. Thus, the anaphoric ce in the clause following eh bien would seem to point back to an implicit celle-là or B, requiring a “bridging inference” on the part of the addressee (cf. Haviland & Clark 1974).

In order to show how eh bien may mark comparisons/contrasts, let us return to the examples above.

(4') [...] si par exemple on devait transmettre à quelqu’un d’autre qui n’est pas dans le pays par exemple tous les résultats des matchs de football qui ont eu lieu pendant les vingt dernières années, il est clair que on ne trouverait aucun algorithme qui permette de simplifier le contenu d’information de cette suite alors que si on devait lui transmettre les heures du lever du couche du soleil pendant les vingt dernières années eh bien il serait facile de trouver une courbe mathématique une fonction mathématique qui a qui est contenue dans un nombre de bits d’information qui est beaucoup plus faible et qui permette de résumer la quantité d’informations contenue de déduire une quantité d’informations beaucoup plus faible (NN, my transcription)

Here, the speaker is comparing the outcomes of two possible scenarios. There is a clear contrast (further indicated by alors que) between the first case, where no algorithm could possibly be found, and the second, where this could easily be done.

(5) [...] moi j’ai appris avec délice que quand un certain Jean-Paul Sartre lui a apporté Melancholia qu’il a trouvé un peu triste eh bien il a dit on va appeler ça La Nausée et puis ça a marché (MP, p. 20)

In this example, there is a contrast between the original title of the novel, and that imposed by the publisher. Moreover, it may be inferred from the fact that the publisher thought the original title a bit sad or perhaps even boring, that the book might not have been a great success, had this title not been changed, whereas thanks to the new title it managed to achieve its well-known state of fame.

(6') [...] le Parti Socialiste a un débat interne parce que c’est un parti démocratique l’issue de ce débat interne apparaîtra au dernier jour de notre congrès mais le débat est un débat clair qui porte sur un certain nombre de points précis et qui ont été déjà évoqués au cours de cette journée d’aujourd’hui mais le débat avec les autres c’est d’abord et je tiens à souligner cela c’est d’abord le débat avec la Droite car nous sommes ici pour définir une politique qui est une politique qui nous oppose à la Droite et non au Parti Communiste [...] dans notre débat avec le Parti Communiste, eh bien je crois que c’est aussi un débat extrêmement sérieux et qui ne doit pas sombrer dans les affabulations j’emploie le même mot que Roland Leroy parce que j’ai pris connaissance de cet article du Monde et je crois véritablement que ce n’est pas très sérieux de traiter les problèmes de l’apparition du Parti Communiste au gouvernement de cette façon-là (VS1, p. 5)

Here, we see a three-way comparison between a debate that is internal to the Socialist Party, a debate between the Socialists and the right-wing political parties, and finally one between the two parties forming the government at the time. All three debates are being described by the speaker as equally serious ones, in contrast to what may be inferred from a newspaper article invoked at the beginning of the debate.

It should be noted that, while in (5), a comparison is made between something mentioned in the bits of discourse immediately preceding and following eh bien, (4') and (6') show that this is not necessarily the case: the first part of the comparison may have occurred some time before, or may even be implicit. A further example may serve to demonstrate this latter possibility:

(9) A. [...] il avait compris qu’il fallait tout simplement voler les auteurs au voisin c’est lui qui a débauché Marcel Proust à Grasset d’ailleurs y a une scène qui est très cocasse puisque après avoir obtenu donc les droits de Marcel Proust qui avait été publié chez Grasset à compte & d’auteur &
B. & débauchage quoi &&
C. & à compte && d’auteur
A. tout le monde le sait, eh bien on a vu un coursier de chez Gallimard aller prendre le restant des ouvrages de Proust chez Grasset avec une charette à bras [...] (MP, p. 19)²

Here, there is an implicit contrast between the character and actions of Gàton Gallimard, and those of others publishers of his time. Note also that A, in his first turn, points out that Gallimard had understood the importance of a certain type of conduct, this having presumably escaped his competitors.
3.2 *Eh bien* between two utterances by the same speaker

When *eh bien* occurs between two semantically complete utterances within one turn at talk, it is typically used to introduce a statement which summarizes the point of an anecdote or a quote:

(1) A. moi je ferais trop confiance aux gens elle elle est peut-être trop méfiant mais elle A raison tu vois ce serait un peu le genre tu te rappelles quand on a été prendre le livre,, Isabelle
   B. quel livre
   A. on est entré à la fac et puis y avait des livres sur les étagères
   B. oui
   A. tu te souviens
   B. oui
   A. et puis le gars il je lui ai dit mais je vous l’achèterai demain et il a dit mais non moi je vous fais pas confiance, tu te souviens
   B. oui
   A. *eh bien* c’est l’attitude de Nadia (CT, p. 11)\(^{13}\)

(10) [...] y avait une phrase que j’aimais beaucoup de Sanguinetti et dont je regrette vraiment qu’il manque au débat politique et on pourrait la retourner contre Mitterrand il disait la grande réussite de Giscard d’Estaing c’est d’avoir été Président de la République en faisant croire qu’il venait d’arriver de sa campagne alors que ça faisait onze ans qu’il était Ministre des Finances, *eh bien* c’est exactement ça Mitterrand il a été quatorze fois ministre et il est apparu comme un homme neuf en 1981 [...] (MP, p. 6-7)

Although the syntactic distinction between main and subordinate clauses is not relevant here, both examples show a semantic/pragmatic interdependency analogous to the one mentioned above. Neither of the utterances introduced by *eh bien* can be interpreted without knowledge of the immediately preceding bits of discourse, and are thus dependent on the latter. At the same time, neither the mini-narrative in (1), nor the quote in (10) would seem relevant to the current topic without the evaluative statement following *eh bien*. As a matter of fact, it clearly transpires from B’s hesitation at the beginning of (1) that she is somewhat unsure about what is going on. Both the story of the bookseller and the quote by Sanguinetti are related, not for their own sake, but in order to make a particular point which is relevant to a different topic currently under discussion.

The element of comparison should be self-evident in both cases: in (1), the bookseller’s distrustful attitude is compared to that of Nadia, and in (10), the quote about Giscard d’Estaing is claimed to be equally applicable to Mitterrand. Note in the latter example the *exactement* in *c’est exactement ça*. Adverbs of this type (also *précisément*, *justement*...), which make the comparison explicit, are found in several of my examples.

However, other types of structures may be found within this category of uses of *eh bien*.

(11) [...] ce qu’il ne faut quand même pas perdre de vue c’est qu’une agression de ce genre contribue à aggraver les tensions internationales si on laisse faire l’agressivité de Reagan si les peuples laissaient faire l’agressivité par malheur laissaient faire l’agressivité de Reagan cela nous conduirait au plus grand risque de guerre *eh bien* je le dis, la guerre n’est pas fatale, Georges Marochais l’a déclaré en Afrique ce matin, il est possible de passer la canisse de force comme on dit à Reagan (VS1, p. 26)

The speaker utters a conditional in the potentialis mode, only to refute the consequence of his own hypothesis. To the extent that natural language conditionals are like material implication,\(^{14}\) a refutation of the antecedent may be inferred as well, since *modus tollens* allows us to infer ~p whenever p ~ q is asserted, followed by the assertion of ~q. In this case, the speaker is therefore implying that “les peuples ne laisseront pas faire l’agressivité de Rehan”, which is, of course, made explicit in what follows. Now, in order for this inference to be derivable, the relationship expressed in the conditional preceding *eh bien* must be known to the hearer, and the utterance following *eh bien* is thus again dependent on the one preceding it. The inverse relationship holds, too, insofar as the speaker would have been conveying rather the wrong impression, if he had not added the *eh bien* je le dis... The comparison being made is between a state of affairs where the aggressivity of Ronald Reagan is given free reign vs. one where it is held in check by the international community.

(12) A. Françoise en attendant de lire le deuxième tome
   B. *eh ben* toujours mes petites notes, puisque tout à l’heure c’était le crayon du Président, y a des par exemple ça ne m’étonne pas du tout mais je tombe dans le détail *eh bien* De Gaulle jeune savait par cœur L’Aiglon et Cyrano ce qui est toute une image (MP, p. 14)\(^{15}\)
This example needs some explanation in order to be understood: the occasion of utterance is a weekly radio program featuring a number of literary critics, and the topic of the week is biographies. After having discussed a biography of President Mitterrand, they have now moved on to one on General de Gaulle. Speaker B has stated early on that she does not intend to give a general critique of any of the works discussed, but will rather single out revealing anecdotes about the "biographes". This is what is meant by petites notes. Earlier she has mentioned an occurrence from the school days of Mitterrand, involving a pencil: this is referred to by "le crayon du Président". Now, the fact that the young De Gaulle knew the two plays mentioned by heart contributes to her view as much to an understanding of the General's character as the anecdote about Mitterrand did to the understanding of his. This is where the element of comparison comes in.

Moreover, the De Gaulle story has little meaning as it stands, unless seen in the context of the previous anecdote and an on-going discussion for or against "petites notes", as opposed to "vision d'ensemble". This dependency is explicitly marked by the speaker with puisque, which according to Groupe λ-l (1975) presents what follows it as:

[...] déjà admis par l’auditeur [...] le locuteur fait comme si cette admission était liée à la situation de discours où le dialogue prend place. Soit que l’auditeur ait implicitement ou explicitement reconnu q, soit que les conditions mêmes du dialogue rendent q évident.

(Groupe λ-l 1975:276)

These authors also feel that puisque is closer to being a coordinating conjunction than a subordinator (ibid.), which, if correct, would fit my hypothesis that eh bien marks the interdependence of two utterances or utterance parts, although the clause introduced is always either syntactically independent, or the main clause of a complex construction.

The following example seems at first sight to pose some problems for my analysis:

(13) A. [...] elle nous a montré dans un temple plus vers le Sud je sais plus si c’est à Esna ou après on a vu des hiéroglyphes qui ne sont pas comme les autres et qu’on & ne sait encore pas
B. & oui
A. actuellement & interpréter &
B. & déchiffrer &
A. oui
B. du tout

3.3 Eh bien introducing a turn at talk

In this group of examples, where the marker occurs at the very beginning of a turn, the connection must, of course, exist between utterances by two different speakers. This structure is often found in cases of contradiction and/or disagreement. According to Schiffrin (1987:234), "disagreement is a particular mode of comparison because it juxtaposes what the speaker claims with what the hearer claims". I would add that, over and above this interactional fact, disagreement also juxtaposes and compares two possible worlds: one in which a state of affairs p obtains, and one in which it does not.

(14) [Voice-over] [...] débat animé par Bernard Valette réalisation Victor Auvray
[Female reporter chairing the debate] *eh bien* bonsoir, au risque de décevoir les admirateurs et les supporters de Bernard Valette ce n’est pas lui qui anime l’émission ce soir (VSI, p. 1)

The second speaker is here explicitly negating the assertion of the first. Now, according to Givón (1984:324), the discourse-pragmatic function of negation is “to deny P against the background of the hearer’s presumed inclination to believe in P, believe in the likelihood of P or be familiar with P” (cf. also Ducrot 1973, and Moeschler 1982:30-31, who, as is common in the French tradition, make a distinction between “polemic” and “descriptive” negation, where only the former corresponds to Givón’s analysis). The utterance introduced by *eh bien* may thus be said to presuppose the previous assertion, in a weak pragmatic (i.e. not a logico-semantic) sense (Givón 1984:328). As Moeschler (1982:71) puts it, “[l]a réfutation est […] un acte réactif (vs. initiatif). [Elle] prédétermine donc toujours un acte d’assertion préalable auquel elle s’oppose”.

It does not really matter that the first speaker is not the addressee in this example: evidently, the actual addressees, namely the people listening to the radio show, would be just as inclined to believe the proposition that is being negated. It is interesting that an explicit negation occurs not immediately following *eh bien*, but only after a neutral greeting, which in itself, being spoken by a female rather than a male voice, is bound to alert listeners to a contrast between what was expected and what is actually the case.

(15) A. [...] sans mentir hein à huit heures et demie je savais que Kiki était la sœur de Patrick
B. oui mais ça c’est je te jure que ça influençait pas parce que Kiki je sais pas si t’as vu mais quand elle veut faire un truc & ça c’est
A. & *eh ben* & et moi JUSTEMENT je me suis vachement étonné parce que j’ai trouvé qu’elle avait PAS tellement de punch justement, sur certains angles (CV, p. 15)

Both speakers have worked as summer camp counsellors in the same place. They are discussing the (de-)merits of another counsellor Kiki, who was, according to B, held in great respect by the children. A’s claim is that this respect was due to Kiki’s being the sister of the director of the camp, rather than to her forceful personality.

As in the previous example, we have negation, but this time the contradiction is more or less implicit, mainly because B is not allowed to finish his utterance. A, however, has inferred what he was going to say, and takes that as the background presupposition of her own utterance. Not only does she emphatically contradict what she expects will be the content of B’s turn, she also manages once again indirectly to convey her previous claim that Kiki was obeyed merely because of her brother, since it may be inferred from her observations that there is no other plausible explanation. We therefore, in fact, have a double contrast here.

The fact that an utterance may connect to information that is merely implicit shows that discourse coherence is essentially not a linguistic matter, but depends crucially on the nature of the mental models constructed on the basis of the component utterances (although it may of course be enhanced through the use of certain linguistic elements). According to Givón (1995:346), “text comprehension is synonymous with the construction of structured mental representation of the text”. Berrendonner (1983) speaks of a “discursive memory” containing not only information carried by the explicit co-text, but also information that may be deduced from the former type. (I would add to this any information necessary to fully comprehend the co-text.) Connexion (and anaphoric reference) may be made to both types (op. cit.:235-236). Such a view of comprehension and coherence is also argued for within the framework of Relevance Theory by Blass (1990).

(16) A. [...] du point de vue orthographique y a eu une période où Chéphren & ou enfin ou Chéops &
B. & ou mm Chéphren oul &
A. c’était ça été c h puis on a eu un & k
B. & k ouï
A. et à nouveau on est revenu à c h
B. *eh ben* nous on a eu droit au k là-bas
A. *alors bon euh* (VE, pp. 18-19)

The two speakers are discussing B’s recent journey to Egypt. It is probably relevant to add that A is a teacher of history.

This may not seem like a clear example of (implicit) contradiction. I have chosen to include it in this section, because the initation on A’s following *alors bon euh* indicates that she interprets it as such, rather than as merely a comment. This analysis is further corroborated by the fact that immediately preceding this exchange, there is a bit of an argument about the proper way to pronounce the place name Giza in French. There is also a contrast between the general *en est revenu à c h* used by A, and B’s personal *nous, on (a eu droit*
(17) A. vous voulez persuader les gens que le socialisme ça marche  
B. non non non & pas du tout & & 
A. & malheureusement & & ça ne marche pas 
B. nous considérons et c'est une forme d'autocritique que nous faisons que nous avons laissé un peu trop le terrain des idées à la Droite et nous voulons reprendre l'offensive sur le terrain des idées voilà ce que nous voulons dire ce n'est pas du tout la constatation d'un échec 
A. eh bien j'attends vos idées avec intérêt mais pour l'instant je vais m'en tenir aux faits (VS1, pp. 13-14)

This is another example of indirect contradiction. There is a contrast between idées and faits, and the speaker is implying that the latter contradict the former, which are moreover irrelevant to the present discussion. The anaphoric vos idées presupposes the previous utterance.

It should be noted in this context that I would not speak of actual inter-dependence between two utterances in these examples. There is, of course, no sense in which the “presupposed” assertion may be said to require the reactive act. On the other hand, there is explicit negotiation as to what should and should not be considered part of the common ground by the participants.

Eh bien in turn-initial position does not always co-occur with disagreement. Some examples show the marker introducing the second part of an adjacency pair:

(18) A. [...] tu sais il travaille il a un café 
B. ah il tient un café 
A. un café hôtel alors il y a les clients et tout ils doivent rester avec eux et comme c'est lui qui doit fermer le café donc il ferme le café quand il y plus de clients tu comprends 
B. ouais 
A. voilà quand tout le monde doit aller se coucher et voilà 
B. et ça fait à peu près quelle heure 
A. eh bien ça dépend des jours des fois c'est une heure du matin des fois c'est huit heures et demie des fois c'est neuf heures moins le quart des fois c'est dix heures on sait jamais à quelle heure il rentre c'est marrant hein (CT, p. 17)

Here we have a question-answer sequence. In this type of structure the two utterances are interdependent, as the first part of an adjacency pair is interactively incomplete without the second, which if it does not occur is considered to be “officially absent” (cf. Schegloff 1972:364), while the latter is clearly what Moeschler (1982) calls a reactive act, and thus presupposes a first pair part. The comparison is explicitly marked in this example by the repeated des fois.

Now, it seems entirely possible that A might equally well have given an answer on the following lines:

(18') B. et ça fait à peu près quelle heure 
A. eh bien une heure du matin à peu près

In this sequence, there is no explicit comparison, and, indeed one often seems to find eh bien introducing such answers to questions.

The element of comparison/contrast is not, however, absent in such cases, insofar as the person asking a wh-question presupposes a paradigm of entities/concepts that might be substituted for the question word. Thus, the speaker who marks his answer with eh bien may be understood to emphasize that it is the completion by this particular entity or concept, rather than any other conceivable one, that makes the proposition true (cf. also the definition of contrastiveness in Chafe 1976:33-34). Similarly, in the case of yes/no-questions, two possible states of affairs are always envisaged, and an answer introduced by eh bien would then emphasize either the truth or the falsity of the proposition by contrasting it with the possible alternative state of affairs.

Earlier in the same conversation we find a compliment-response sequence:

(8') A. [...] c'est vrai qu'elle est très franche hein ça on peut pas lui retirer ça quand elle a envie de dire quelque chose elle le dit elle bon des fois elle se tait parce que si elle parlait ce serait pire tu vois mais c'est vrai qu'elle est très franche et quand elle commence à être franche avec quelqu'un qu'elle aime pas je te jure que ça fait mal hein 
B. il en voit de toutes les couleurs celui qui en est face 
A. elle lui dit deux mots elle dit jamais beaucoup de choses elle dit deux mots et puis ça suffit l'autre il comprend rien que d'abord par son attitude et en plus par les deux mots qu'elle dit alors là et voilà c'est tout mais en tout cas je t'ai dit elle a voilà ce qu'elle m'a dit e, par rapport à toutes les filles que j'ai connues que tu connaissais eh ben Enfin c'est pas trop tôt voilà 
B. eh ben c'est gentil (CT, p. 16)
A contrast may be inferred here between B’s positive evaluation of the talk-
ed-about girl’s friendly attitude with respect to B herself, and how one might feel about her unfriendly attitude towards people in general.

Apart from the adjacency pair structure, one may consider that there is some negotiation of common ground going on here. Conversation analysts usually speak of “preference organization” in connexion with certain types of adjacency pairs, whereby there are two possible second part pairs, one being preferred over the other. While such preferences must ultimately be based on face considerations (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987), they also have structural correlates, insofar as “preferred” responses are linguistically unmarked, whereas “dispreferred” ones are normally marked in some way (cf. Levinson 1983:332ff.). Now, a compliment is a type of assessment. Generally speaking, the preferred reaction to an assessment is agreement, but compliment responses put the speaker in a bit of a bind, because there is at the same time a constraint on self-praise in conversation, which requires that the agreement be toned down (cf. Pomerantz 1978).

According to de Fornel (1990), the prototypical structure of a compliment is:

A exprime une attitude favorable par rapport à B (D,) au moyen de: D2: l’état de choses X est bon; D: B est lié à l’état de choses X.

(Fornel 1990:170)

Now, the preferred response may take one of two forms: what de Fornel calls “acceptation à minima”, which refers to D2 and changes the evaluation; or a “refus à minima”, which refers to D1 and changes the referent (ibid.:175). B’s response in this example is in my view a case of minimal acceptance. By answering that the person paying the compliment is being “nice”, she is implicitly saying that the state of affairs evoked in D2 (that “A has finally made friends with a worthwhile person”, where D1 is “B is that person”) is not inherently good, but is merely being interpreted as such. There is thus a slight element of contradiction, which might account for the fact that this otherwise “preferred” response is nevertheless delayed by a prefacing discourse marker.

The following example shows an invitation (to speak) — acceptance pair:

(12') A. il va avoir du mal pour écrire le deuxième tome qui sera le sou-
verain
B. Françoise en attendant de lire le deuxième tome
C. eh ben toujours mes petites notes (MP, p. 14)

We find a high-rising intonation on the word notes here, which in my opinion shows that the speaker is defending her style of criticism, as compared to that of speaker A. In support of this we find, on pp. 8-9 of the same transcript, the following exchange:

C. et puis Jean-Didier en homme sérieux qu’il est a parlé du capital
qui est dans ce livre c’est-à-dire le chemin politique de Mitter-
rand mais puisque tout à l’heure j’ai parlé des gambettes et que
j’ai décidé que je serai comme ça toute la soirée
B. ah bon
C. oui comme ça y a des petites notes qui ne relèvent pas de l’im-
merel mais qui sont importantes […]
B. on peut expliquer le dix mai par la plume et le crayon, enfin
C. non mais […]

and on p. 21:

B. bon vous l’avez lu & l’Assouline alors & &
C. & tout à fait ah oui & & je l’ai lu je me suis régélée
B. petite note & non & &
C. & euh & & des petites notes oui oui
B. vision d’ensemble pour une fois, non petite note

Finally, in this last example, we find neither disagreement nor an adjacency pair structure:

(2') A. […] c’était pas un voyage simplement pour rester dans les
piscines des hôtels comme ça héin non non on a beaucoup visité
hein
B. c’était quel organisme
A. c’était le Club Med
B. c’était le Club Med
A. comme Evelyne Bachiller
B. eh ben comme quoi le Club Med euh, fait des choses qui sont
finalement pas si euh
A. ah mais c’est la partie en fait ça s’appelle Club Med Découvertes
& pour les voyages & &
B. & ah oui d’accord ah oui & &
A. donc et ils ont des guides vraiment on avait une Egyptienne mais
vraiment spécialisée héin […] (VE, pp. 15-16)
However, there is a clear sense in which *le Club Med* is being constituted as a topic in this exchange, a topic which is subsequently commented on by A. This is analogous then to the kind of utterance interdependence found with intra-sentential *eh bien*.

Now, the Club Med has a reputation of organizing the kind of resolutely non-intellectual vacation where people relax and enjoy themselves, but where they stay among their compatriots, having little or no contact with the indigenous culture or population of the country they are visiting. In the utterance marked by *eh bien*, B is thus contrasting her preconceived idea of a Club Med vacation with what A has told her about her trip to Egypt. Note that A is fully aware of the reputation of the Club, as evidenced by the fact that her identification in Turn 3 is pronounced in a rather low voice, and that immediately upon B’s comment, she hastens to add that, in fact, her trip was organized by a special branch of the Club Med.

3.4 Eh bien itself constitutes a turn at talk

In this last type of example (of which I unfortunately have only one), *eh bien* is used alone, as a reaction to an utterance or situation, on which it may then be seen to depend.

(19) A. *ce n’est pas parce que vous répétez chaque vendredi soir que la gauche a échoué que la réalité est celle-là ce n’est pas vrai*
   B. *s’il n’y avait que moi*
   A. *ce n’est pas vrai*
   B. *ça ne serait pas grave*
   A. *ce n’est pas vrai*
B. Estier mais Estier s’il n’y avait que moi ça n’aurait aucune importance mais il y a des millions de Français qui pensent comme moi & je le répète à chaque occasion & &
   A. & prenez prenez & & les résultats de la politique menée depuis deux ans et demi comparez-la honnêtement et objectivement
   B. oui *eh bien*
   A. *avec les résultats de la politique de Monsieur Giscard et de &
      Monsieur Barre & &
B. & *eh bien eh bien & &
   A. *Monsieur Barre 14% d’inflation & Monsieur & &
   B. & *eh bien Estier & &

*EH BIEN:* MARKER OF COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

A. Giscard passant de 400.000 à 1.800.000 chômeurs en sept ans
B. oui
A. *bon comparez avec cela et dites-nous si la gauche a échoué* (VS1, p. 10-11)

Here, we find A introducing an explicit comparison between the performance of the Socialist government of the time with that of the previous right-wing government. B seems to be using *eh bien* to enquire about the conclusion to be drawn from this comparison, which in this particular case amounts to implying that such a comparison is not relevant.

4. Conclusion

I have argued, then, that in "X *eh bien Y*, *eh bien* should be seen as an instruction from the speaker to the hearer, directing him to do two things: 1) to understand Y as manifesting one element of a comparison or contrast, and to search his mental model of the discourse for a second element, which may or may not be manifested by X; and 2) to understand Y as being dependent on the understanding of X for relevance, and in most cases, vice versa. This, then, represents the coded content of the particle.

A marker of this type may be seen as a kind of filter which, without actually creating content (to the extent that the same interpretation of the host utterance would, in principle, be available in the absence of the marker), nevertheless helps to "weed out" unwanted alternative interpretations. Its basic function is thus one of enhancing discourse coherence and of easing cognitive effort on the part of the hearer. Gernsbacher (1990) has convincingly shown that comprehension consists in the construction of mental structures, and that information which is less than optimally coherent with what has preceded it will result in shifts to building new substructures, such shifts again making information which has preceded them subsequently harder to retrieve. Given the ephemeral, linear nature of (at least relatively) unplanned spoken discourse, such as that which is studied here, any element that works to ensure coherence takes on a great deal of importance. If it can be shown that discourse particles in general have this function (for some other examples see Hansen, forthcoming), then they deserve to be studied far more carefully than has hitherto been the case.17
Notes

1. In many cases, the marker is manifested rather as *eh bien*. I consider this a free variant of *eh bien* found only in (mimicked) speech.

2. See also Hansen (forthcoming).

3. This theory is a coherence-based theory of *langue*, as opposed to *parole*, in which sequencing problems assume a central role.

4. In both of the latter cases, Sirdar-Iskandar speaks of “énonciation”, thus conflating the categories of “acte illocutoire” and “acte d’énonciation”, or in Searlean terms “illocutionary act” vs. “utterance act”.

5. I should like to thank Professor Mary-Annick Meryl of the University of Paris Ill for allowing me access to the corpora gathered by the Dept. of French Linguistics.

   I have taken the liberty of occasionally simplifying the transcriptions, in the sense of using ordinary, rather than phonetized orthography, of writing proper names with capital letters, and of leaving out most hesitation phenomena, corrections, pauses and the like, except where these occur in the immediate environment of *eh bien*. This should make the examples easier to read and comprehend for the untrained reader. & and & mark the beginning and end of overlap, and mark short and somewhat longer pauses, respectively. Other than in proper names, capital letters designate intonational emphasis.

   As there will sometimes be more than one instance of *eh bien* in the same example, the one that is commented on will be the one that is emphasized.

6. This dissertation, bearing the same title as the article, is unavailable for inter-library loan at the time of writing.

7. In my corpora, *eh bien* is in fact used significantly more often in debates than in ordinary conversation. It may be that comparisons are more likely to be emphasized when used in argumentative discourse.

8. Note that I am well aware of the difficulties inherent in trying to give an operational definition of a “sentence”, when analyzing oral discourse (cf. Crystal 1980; Gildlich 1970: 46-47). Thus, I do not consider the notion to have any privileged theoretical status, but use it here for lack of a better term.

9. In Ducrot’s theory of “polyphony”, λ symbolizes the “sender of the utterance”, as opposed to the “sender as an individual”, the former having no existence outside the specific situation of utterance.

10. Although it is not stated explicitly, it would appear from the examples used in Rijksbaron’s paper, that only preposed temporal clauses are being considered. Whatever the case may be, this is as far as I am prepared to go.

11. Note that in spoken French, clauses that must be interpreted as having a temporal or, especially, a conditional meaning may occur without a subordinator, whereas this does not seem to be the case for clauses with other types of adverbial meanings:

   [...] et puis en plus on part à Assouan, c’est des il y a des rotations d’avions

   (VE, p. 31-32)

   Il ferait ça moi je piégnerais une crise (overheard)

   In such cases, the resemblance between these types of clauses and left-dislocated topics is, of course, even more striking.

12. I consider the clause marked by *eh bien* as the main clause of a complex sentence beginning with après avoir..., since the parenthetical tout le monde le sait is fairly clearly in response to the overlapping comments by B and C.

13. I analyze the two last utterances by A as one turn at talk, since A’s tu te souviens hardly constitutes more than a “within-turn signal” requesting a backchannel response from B, whose oui displays that she is following what A is saying (cf. Duncan & Fiske 1985: 146).

14. For the view that they are not, see e.g. Stalnaker (1975), Johnson-Laird (1983:55-62). I do not believe, however, that their arguments substantially affect my interpretation of (11).

15. I am somewhat in doubt as to whether this example ought perhaps to be placed among the examples of intra-sentential occurrences of *eh bien*, because the De Gaulle, jeune... clearly seems related to the clause beginning with puisque. I have chosen to place it here, because the speaker does affect a reformulation of the utterance as originally planned. I consider the ça ne m’étonne pas du tout mais je tombe dans le détail as parenthetical.

16. Parallel to example (1), I consider B’s oui in the next-to-last utterance to be a simple backchannel response (cf. note to example 1).

17. I would like to thank Hanne Korzen and Henning Notke for helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

References


**Sources**

Colovou, Catherine. s.d. *La Colonie de vacances*. Université de Paris III, UER de Linguistique française = CV.
Nalouti, Mongia. 1990. *Nombres et neurones*. Université de Paris III, UER de Linguistique française; partial transcription only = NN.

---

**The degrammaticalization of agentivity in Tlapanec**

**Søren Wichmann**

*University of Copenhagen*

1. **Introduction**

By degrammaticalization I mean the process whereby a category which used to interact with other categories falls out of such relationships. It may possibly then become a structural feature of the lexicon, and finally it may disappear, leaving only scattered, lexical traces. In the present article we shall look at an example of what I consider a possible case of deggrammaticalization.¹ The case in point is the Tlapanec category of agentivity. This is discussed from a typological perspective and in the light of the controversy about the origin of Tlapanec.

Hopper and Traugott (1993:2) and Heine, Claudi & Hünnemeyer (1992: 258-259) claim that the existence of grammaticalization processes is a serious challenge to oupholding a sharp distinction between synchrony and diachrony. My general point in this article is that the same challenge is posed by deggrammaticalization, the opposite of grammaticalization.

2. **Tlapanec and the theory and typology of agentivity**

Tlapanec,² which is spoken in Southern Mexico, is usually taken to be a language of the Otomanguean stock (Rensch 1977, 1978; Suárez 1986; Kaufman 1983, 1987-88, 1990). Earlier it was identified as being Hokan ( Sapir 1925). Although the evidence currently seems to weigh heavier in favor of Otomanguean, the question cannot be said to have been settled yet. The category to be treated here may be an important piece in the puzzle of resolving the question since it is apparently an old category, which today, as I shall show, has shrunk to almost total lexicalization.
STUDIES IN LANGUAGE COMPANION SERIES (SLCS)

The SLCS series has been established as a companion series to STUDIES IN LANGUAGE, International Journal, sponsored by the Foundation "Foundations of language".

Series Editors

Werner Abraham
University of Groningen
The Netherlands

Michael Noonan
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
USA

Editorial Board

Joan Bybee (University of New Mexico)
Ulrike Claudi (University of Cologne)
Bernard Comrie (University of Southern California)
William Croft (University of Manchester)
Östen Dahl (University of Stockholm)
Gerrit Dimmendaal (University of Leiden)
Martin Haspelmath (Free University of Berlin)
Ekkehard König (Free University of Berlin)
Christian Lehmann (University of Bielefeld)
Robert Longacre (University of Texas, Arlington)
Brian MacWhinney (Carnegie-Mellon University)
Marianne Mithun (University of California, Santa Barbara)
Edith Moravcsik (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)
Masayoshi Shibatani (Kobe University)
Russel Tomlin (University of Oregon)
John Verhaar (The Hague)

Volume 29

Elisabeth Engberg-Pedersen et al. (eds)

Content, Expression and Structure
Studies in Danish functional grammar

CONTENT, EXPRESSION AND STRUCTURE
STUDIES IN DANISH FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

Edited by

ELISABETH ENGBERG-PEDERSEN
MICHAEL FORTESCUE
PETER HARDER
LARS HELTOFT
LISBETH FALSTER JAKOBSSEN

JOHN BENJAMINS PUBLISHING COMPANY
AMSTERDAM/PHILADELPHIA