An enactive perspective on analyzing finite verbs in French conversational interaction.

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1. Introduction

This paper undertakes to analyze finite verbs in French conversational interaction from an enactive perspective. Used in cognitive science, the notion of “enaction” relates to the way a living organism depends on and is an objective part of its environment, while it also creates it through its perception in moment-to-moment interactions. Enaction views language as a conventionalized domain where utterances orient towards objects or other interactions (Maturana & Varela, 1980; Maturana & Varela, [1987] 1998). In this paper we argue that conversational discourse could as well be seen as a niche, within which participants work their way through but which also continuously evolves as a result of their participation. How this reflexivity becomes a crucial feature of this approach is reminiscent of ethnomethodology and conversational analysis: actions of the participants result in modifying the context, to which they subsequently adapt (Mondada, 2006). Conversation analysis also describes how by the language they use within a given turn of conversation participants seek to render intelligible for others what is their understanding of the situation (Mondada 2006; Clayman & Teas Gill, 2011). However, in the theoretical perspective we will outline, internal interactions that participants embody when they use words should also be taken into account to the extent that utterances orient them in their “cognitive domain”, defined as the set of possible interactions (Maturana & Varela, 1980).

This offers a glimpse of how discourse analysis will be approached here. The focus of this paper, however, will be on the role of finite verbs in defining the conditions of understanding of the interactions the verbs refer to. Bringing in the notion of “modal cut”, the parting line between the possible and the irrevocable instigated by the finite verb (Gosselin, 2005), our analysis of finite verbs in discourse will be based on the following hypothesis: finite verbs are orienting components which specifically time the perception toward possible interactions.

The remainder of this paper will first look back into the theoretical elements constituting the framework in section 2, that is, on what enaction refers to and how we will draw upon that notion to develop our hypothesis. For comparison and illustration purposes, the notion of “current discourse space” (Langacker, 2001) will briefly be mentioned. Section 3 will introduce the data, a short video excerpt of a casual chat between three young women, who are French native speakers aged 22 to 25.
The method adopted in this paper will also be detailed: in a conversation analysis manner, actions and inferences drawn upon will be described, as well as the reflexive effect the participants’ own words or gestures bear on the tenure of the interaction. The analysis in section 4 is divided into three parts: the first deals with the construction of the so-called French immediate future tense *aller* + infinitive, the second reports on an extremely rapid change of perspectives on two processes involving two different places, and the last part consists of an attempt to utilize the same hypothesis to account for counterfactuality in the past conditional. The final section offers a summary of the results obtained, before looking at possible ways to improve the present approach.

2. A enactive perspective on finite verbs in spontaneous speech

This section aims to develop a hypothesis on the role of finite verbs in spontaneous speech, beginning with an succinct overview of the notion of enaction.

In cognitive science, enaction conveys the idea that subjects or more broadly living organisms are objective forms of a world already there, which is at the same time brought forth or “enacted” for an organism alone as a result of its actions (Varela *et al.*, [1991] 1993). As element of its milieu, every living organism (including human beings) obeys general physical principles of the world, but through its sensory surfaces this milieu also appears as a unique product of its perception. This characteristic circularity is described by Maturana and Varela (1980) in their enterprise of designing a biology of cognition, where a useful account of our species-specific linguistic communication is also provided. In short, the interactions a living organism can enter into, which define its cognitive domain, first depend on that organism’s anatomical organization. Interactions with external entities modify its neuronal activity, but are predictable (the set of predictable interactions constitutes the cognitive reality of the organism) since those interactions through which the organism has succeeded in maintaining its integrity will occur again. A living organism which can interact with its own internal states is doted with abstract thinking. Moreover, there are living organisms with abstract thinking which can modify the behavior of other organisms whose cognitive reality is of the same kind, by orienting them within their cognitive domain: this is the basis for communication. Linguistic communication resorts to conventionalized and systematized material alterations made available to us, by means of waves in the air or surfaces on objects directly or indirectly altered by hand (see Bottineau, 2010). Each component of utterances made out of linguistic systems is an orienting component, i.e. it orients the orientee towards entities within her cognitive domain (Maturana and Varela, 1980: 35).

The objectives in the remaining part of this section are twofold: to draw a distinctive theoretical perspective on discourse from this paradigm, and to establish our own approach to pinpointing what finite verbs in spontaneous speech refer to and how. Firstly, an enactive perspective ought to consider the characteristic recursivity of the very act of speaking, since speaking is an action that modifies the material context of the speaker, but first and foremost the speaker herself. Our own words indeed prompt
changes in our cognitive domain, creating new entities upon which new perspectives are to be taken:
“every internal interaction changes us because it modifies our internal state, changing our posture or
perspective (as a functional state) from which we enter into a new interaction.” (Maturana and Varela,
1980: 39). The hearer is oriented within her cognitive domain by the same token, or uses the words she
perceives as instructions to access entities that are talked about.

This idea hints at how conversational speech proceeds forwards through moment-to-moment and
context-sensitive adaptations. The notion of domain of interactions within which lie the entities that are
being brought forth can evoke Langacker’s “current discourse space”. The two are however different. To
make this point, we will briefly examine the related notion of “focus of attention”. In Langacker (2001),
this notion designates the entity to which the speaker and hearer have turned their attention to at the same
moment: “In successful communication, they manage to coordinate this action [directing attention] and
focus attention on the same conceived entity.” (p.144) The following figure displays how language is
used in discourse in a Cognitive Grammar’s perspective:

A “current discourse space” which includes the speaker, the hearer, the speech event, the immediate
circumstances, the context and any shared knowledge is “construed as being shared by the speaker
and hearer as a basis for communication at a given moment in the flow of discourse.” (ibid.) Then, the
current discourse space is updated as discourse unfolds (Langacker, 2001: 163). However, an enactive
perspective on discourse would rather underline how one can gain individual access to such a current
discourse space, if any. Accordingly, a notion such as focus of attention may not apply if it presupposes
an objective and independent reality. As well as this, utterances would be considered conventionalized
instructions to achieve access to entities being referred to, whether these be in the immediate
circumstances or not, and of a concrete or abstract nature: “Speaking does not refer to the world; it
causes an experience that happens to coincide (or not) with the narrow situation or the larger reality such
as it is enacted, and has to be mapped against the environmental medium, including the psychological
medium.” (Bottineau, 2010: 278; italics in the original). In short, attention in discourse, may it be inner,
private, external or written, takes place in one’s cognitive domain.
From this theoretical point of view, we will now consider the specific role the finite verb plays in spontaneous speech. Its orienting function, we argue, relates to the modal value it bears, which is, according to Gosselin (2005), the parting line between what this author calls the possible and the irrevocable: what lays in the future as possibilities and what seems to be irretrievably lost in the past. The finite verb is considered a key component of a device of simulation of perception (dispositif de simulation de la perception) which precisely reproduces this parting line. It represents at any period of time “the fundamental feature of the present, that is to continuously operating the irreversible cut between the possible and the irrevocable.” (p.27) In the words of this author, the possible is converted into the irrevocable. The interest of his model is that this conversion is what the finite verb makes the speaker / hearer perceive the action that is being represented.

However, an enactive perspective on discourse would also look at this model in reverse: how the embodiment of actions or the embodied access to objects modifies both the speaker / hearer equally. Rather than analyzing action as represented (for example, in a “discourse space”), it is the act of perception itself that is to be considered simulated. What is important then is interactions with entities, and how these are perceptually present rather than represented. Noë (2012) describes how our sense of presence of things stems from our species-specific “sensorimotor understanding” of how to access them in front of us and how to have them available to our seeing, grasping, etc., while it is as if our body is stood in the background. Accordingly, thought is an extended perception where conscious reference relies on these same sensorimotor skills (Noë, 2012: 27). Along these lines, this is how we can hypothesize the role played by the finite verb: as it bears the modal value of irreversibility, it is a key orienting component in locating the cognizant self of the speaker / hearer in the familiar configuration where the body rests in the background and is oriented toward what Gosselin would call the “possible”, but which can be termed more generally one’s external cognitive domain.

The next section introduces the data used to explore this hypothesis, and the method deemed appropriate to do so.

3. Data and method of analysis.

The material for the analysis below was chosen from the French data base CLAPI, which includes more than 63 hours of audio and video recordings of conversational interactions in real settings. The short excerpt (1m 48s) we have selected from the corpus “Repas entre ami(e)s - kiwi” features three female middle class native speakers of French aged 22 to 25, who will be referred to as Élodie, Caroline

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1 “la caractéristique fondamentale du présent, qui est d’opérer continûment la coupure irréversible entre le possible et l’irrévocable”
2 CLAPI : Corpus de LAngue Parlée en Interaction (http://clapi.ish-lyon.cnrs.fr/).
3 Corpus “Repas entre ami(e)s – kiwi”, by Thevenon E. and Tommasini I. (2008), under the responsability of the Conseil de gestion Clapi. Slight changes have been made to the transcription available online.
and Sandra (figure 2).

Fellow students at the University Institute for Teachers Training, they are casually chatting over snacks and fruit juice at Élodie’s home. The scene is video-recorded with a camera purposefully oriented towards the kitchen table they are sitting at. After they have sipped at their drinks, the three friends comment about the apartment Élodie has just settled in, which is new for Caroline and Sandra, and the conversation moves for a while onto the topic of Élodie’s sister. Then, Caroline asks Élodie about her boyfriend, who will be called Adrien, who too now rents a new apartment. The excerpt we will be focusing on corresponds to this last part.

The method we will follow for the analysis stems from the objective we pursue: accounting for finite verbs as orienting components which time the body towards possible interactions. Adopting a form of conversational analysis, the entire excerpt was first browsed through, with a focus on finite verbs whose analysis may prove illustrative. It was critical to select a topically coherent section of conversation that had an appropriate length. The excerpt about Adrien’s installation, as we thought, fit these conditions. The next step was to describe how the participants displayed their comprehension of what occurred during the discourse. Only then could we proceed onto a moment-to-moment analysis to trace back how finite verbs would affect the course of each participant in their domain of interactions, with the understanding that such domains are not shared (see previous section). While this approach is inspired by conversational analysis, how it differs from ought to be further looked at.

In conversational analysis, accounting for reflexivity is a prominent feature indeed: “context reflexively emerges out of the participants organizing their action, by adjusting to what they consider to be constituting the properties of context, which in turn they configure in a specific fashion.” (Mondada, 2006: 117) However, in the enactive perspective we have outlined, this recursive effect should apply to the words we utter as well: as we have pronounced them, our internal state, our body, the immediate context, and our interlocutors (if any are present) have been modified. Our environment has changed and

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4 We won’t address the “observer’s paradox” mentioned in Clayman and Teas Gill (2011) induced here by the camera: the three participants may have behaved differently without a camera videotaping their chatting, that which can’t be known by us without another observer, etc.

5 “le contexte émerge réflexivement de la manière dont les participants organisent leur action, en s’ajustant à ce qu’ils interprètent comme constituant les propriétés du contexte, qu’ils configurent ainsi en retour d’une manière spécifique”
will constitute a new ground from which to proceed forward. Indeed, whereas conversational analysis aims predominantly to describe the practices that “inform how actors implement norms in specific situations, and more generally how they produce actions and render them intelligible” (Clayman & Teas Gill, 2011: 120), we will endeavor in our analysis to also account for possible internal interactions the actors are engaged in within their cognitive domain. When considering verbs as orienting components, where and to what they orient can in this manner be inferred to by analysis of their temporal and aspectual value.

4. Analysis

The short excerpt selected from the CLAPI data base will be divided into three parts according to three main subtopics: 1) Élodie explains that she is the one who handled the decoration, 2) she describes how she chose ceramic pots and put them in the apartment, and 3) she lists other furniture she and Adrien brought in to decorate the apartment. Here is the first part.

4. 1. Excerpt 1: “j`vais pas y rester longtemps je vais rien mettre”

When asked whether her boyfriend Adrien has well settled in, Élodie complains that he had not been willing to put much care into this matter. After Sandra and Caroline have mocked his reluctance (turns 6 to 16), Élodie manages to bring back her friends attention to the part she played in this situation, eventually eliciting another question from Caroline. We will focus on this moment when Élodie reorients the conversation, and specifically on the role played by the finite verbs – in bold type below turn 17.

1 CAR  et Adrien il est bien [installé/]
2 SAN                      [xx x      ]
     (0.4)
3 ÉLO  oh là là/
     (1.3)
4 SAN  ((laughter))
5 ÉLO  pour l'installer lui j` te jure (0.7) alors déjà il voulait rien mettre en décoration\
6 CAR  ouais mais [c`est un garçon/  
7 SAN  [((laughter))
8 ÉLO  [t` sais]
9 SAN  [un  pos]ter de matrix\
     ((laughter))
10 ÉLO  t` sais i` dit/
11 CAR  un calendrier là
12 SAN  ((laughter))
Élodie does not answer directly, but complains with feigned exasperation (“oh là là” turn 3) and tries at first to instantiate what she wants Sandra and Caroline to see as a problem: “alors déjà il voulait rien mettre en décoration” (“well to begin with he didn’t want to put anything for decoration”) (turn 5). But at this point she somehow misplaces her intonation: as it falls down after “decoration”, her interlocutors jump in for a shared and complicit mockery of men. Both Sandra and Caroline laugh at men for their areas of interest being purely to power or sex (“un poster de Matrix” (“a poster of Matrix”), and “un calendrier [...] de femmes nues” (“a calendar [...] with naked women”). However, unwilling to attack Adrien’s actions, Élodie does not join in with Sandra and Caroline’s laughter. While smiling at her friends good humor, she instead maneuvers to recover control over the conversation: “tu sais” (“y’know”), five times uttered turns 8, 10, 13, 15 (two times), serves the characteristic function of ligator (ligateur), with a rising voice that represents a movement toward the addressee. However, “tu sais” also conveys more precisely the implicature that interlocutors “should know” (Morel & Danon-Boileau, 1998: 97). In this case the implication is that Sandra and Caroline should not be surprised at Adrien’s indifference regarding the art of furnishing apartments. Élodie eventually has her friends listening to her, and can proceed to explain what really occurred and to what Adrien actually said. With two introductory verbs for reported speech, first “dire” (“to say”) in “i’ dit” (“he said”) turn 10 and then “se dire” (“to think”, literally “to tell oneself”) in “il s’est dit” (“he thought”) two times turns 15 and 17, she prepares her impersonation of Adrien’s nonchalance: “j’vais pas y rester longtemps je vais rien mettre” (“I’m not
gonna stay here for long, I’m not gonna put anything in”) (turn 17). At this point, an antagonism – “ça m’a saoulée” (“it bugged me”) (turn 19) – is now set for her to enter the scene: keen on decoration – “moi qui suis bien déco” (“for me who really am in deco”) (turn 19) –, she could not accept her boyfriend residing in such a sparse, undecorated place. When she says “t’inquiète” (“don’t worry”) turn 23, her voice is louder: she self-mockingly shows she stayed true to her own character. She continues in the same self-derisive tone, warning she “coped with that the right way”: “géré ça comme il faut” (turn 23). The laugher with which she punctuates her last words, and to which Sandra and Caroline both respond, acts as the emotional device described by Chafe (2008). While “adding new ideas to another person's store of knowledge can be a serious matter”, laughter is a “mitigating device that makes imposing ideas on others less of an imposition than it might otherwise be.” (p. 35) From Élodie’s part here, it is meant to defuse any sense of seriousness her reaction (“it bugged me”) might have brought in in staging the initial circumstances of her story.

We will now focus on the two finite verbs in turn 17, “j’ vais pas y rester longtemps je vais rien mettre”, which are both the French periphrastic future tense, composed of the first person present tense of aller + infinitive. Our objective is to demonstrate that the meaning created out of this construction depends on how the finite verb orients the speaker and her interlocutors in their respective “cognitive reality”, defined as the set of all predictable interactions one can enter in (Maturana & Varela, 1980: 11). First it should be highlighted that Élodie’s impersonation of her boyfriend here is a recast of turn 5, “alors déjà il voulait rien mettre en décoration” (“well to begin with he didn’t want to put anything for decoration”), with two changes which both contribute to reduce the distance of the scene that is being depicted: from the imperfect tense “voulait” to the present tense of the grammaticalized form of aller “vais” (“’m going to”), and from the third person pronoun “il” (“he”) to the first “je” (“I”) for direct speech. The underlying comprehension unfolds along the instructions that are taken out by the participants from utterances to orient themselves within their domain of interactions. Here, the impersonation of Adrien by Élodie indeed sets the scene as it is conventionally embodied from a subjective point of view. The body constitutes the background and is the origin of one’s engagement in possible interactions, here in the space of Adrien’s apartment, where he is to be pictured unconcerned with the appearance of his surroundings. The finite verb “vais” in the so-called French immediate future clause captures the internal relation of this move toward other bodily interactions connoted by the infinitives: “y rester” (“to stay there”) and “rien mettre” (to put nothing). The immediate future has this prospective aspect by virtue of allowing the process of the infinitive in the possible that, in Gosselin’s sense, the modal cut operated by the finite verb “vais” has distinctively parted from the irrevocable (see Gosselin 2005: 92). From this perspective, the finite verb contributes to Élodie, Caroline and Sandra internally interacting with entities that are individually embodied and toward which they interact to make sense of the words: they see Adrien’s poorly furnished apartment, and maybe Adrien himself, casually detached, as he is being impersonated by Élodie.
4. 2. Excerpt 2: “après y avait un pot vert avec des anses j’ai mis on a mis toutes les piles dedans”

Élodie has now created the scene where she is to play the first role: “j’ai géré ça comme il faut” (“I coped with that properly”) (turn 23). In turn, and as she surely expected, she is asked how she did this. However, as she answers (turn 26), her own words trigger a detour she may have not thought of before: the most significant part she took in as decoration, about which she is very much looking forward to talking, consists of ceramic pots her father finds, as we are to understand, in antique shops or flea markets (turns 26 to 31). After this detour, she wants to proceed back to her role: selecting items and displaying them in Adrien’s apartment. She nonetheless takes another turn before this, in anticipation of possible disagreement on how one can value antique objects: they indeed are old after all (turn 32). Agreeing, Caroline, the main addressee, loses by the same token her right to subsequently call this into question. At the next turn, after a rather long pause of 0.9 second, Élodie has her friends focusing once more on what she is going to say. A really enthusiastic account of her contribution to the embellishment of Adrien’s home will then culminate in her gesturing over the snacks and the fruit juice to represent with her arms and hands the clay pot with its handles (turn 34). The coda of the excerpt consists of Élodie discarding any possible objection that pots of various colors may ever form an odd set. She obtains from Sandra a convergent statement serving as a conclusion: it is not an oddity, quite the contrary, it is “un mélange sympa” (“a lovely combination”) (turn 41).

For this second excerpt, we will look more closely at a very quick change of perspective from a place (where the pots are stored) to another (Adrien’s apartment) occurring turn 34 when Élodie gestures over the table to represent the shape of the pot: “après y avait un pot vert (0.4) avec des anses j’ai mis on a mis toutes les piles dedans t’ sais plein d’ trucs comme ça” (“then there was a green pot with handles I put we put all the piles inside you know lots of things like that”):

25 CAR qu’est que t’as fait/
26 ÉLO déjà j’ai récupéré plein de trucs pa’ce que mon père/ t’ sais (0.8) vu que i` trouve des trucs trop bien des fois/ (0.5) ça lui arrive quand même/ ((laughter))
27 ÉLO déjà j` lui ai tout pris bichette (0.5)
28 SAN ah ouais/
29 ÉLO trop la loose
30 SAN ((laughter))
31 ÉLO alors t` sais au fur et à mesure où i` rentrait des choses et tout je lui prenais et tout papa je peux y prendre/ ((laughter))
The first finite verb “(y) avait” (“(there) was”) turn 34 refers to Élodie’s visual interaction with the pot at the place this object was first presented to her, that is when she took it from her father. The second one though, “ai mis / a mis” (“put / put), depicts an action that takes place later, in Adrien’s apartment. This abrupt change passes unnoticed, but is however a complex operation which demands that the participants rapidly draw upon inferences to make full sense of it.

The crux of the analysis here will be that as the conversation proceeds objects embodied by the participants trigger possible internal interactions with these objects (seeing, moving toward them, seizing, etc.) or in Gibsonian terms “affordances”, that are to be accounted for in analyzing the use of finite verbs. Élodie’s reference to the ceramic pots she found for Adrien’s apartment will serve as an illustration: 1) the clay pots are possessions of Élodie’s father, who she probably had not planned to mention in her story, 2) she picks up pots from him and, eventually, brings the precious items into focus; there were “tou etout tout plein d’trucs en terre cuite” (“many many many things in ceramic”, turn 34) and they are “trop mignon” (“too cute”): these objects are valuable, and since she is the one who has chosen them their value reflects on her, 3) in this very demonstrative passage, she detaches from the lot (“many many many”) two pots, the first already assigned with its future function of container (“vide-poche”, literally “pocket-emptying”: a small container of some kind to put loose things in from one’s pocket) in Adrien’s apartment, and the second whose shape she shows with her hands by gesturing over the table, 4) this green ceramic item now becomes
an object in Adrien’s apartment: a container for piles of items and other belongings.

It can be said that it is her own gestures which trigger the passage from 3) to 4), which also implies a change of place from where her father was storing the pots (turn 31) to Adrien’s apartment where the pot is now used as a container. This must be analyzed at two levels: not only how one is the interpreter of one’s own words and gestures, but also how this relates to communication as an orienting behavior. First, Élodie gestures (turn 34) and iconically represents two ceramic pots (“l’ vide-poche” and the “pot vert, avec des anses”) and the various items that will end up in the green ceramic pot. These gestures mediate her thought, in the Vygotskian sense of mediation found in McNeill (2005). But she is also looking at her gestures, by which the objects they represent become objects of thought, from a different perspective. This moment-to-moment sensorimotor engagement in our cognitive domain is a definitive characteristic of how we dynamically enact the world from a stable position (our proprioceptive body) but at the same time from a frequently changing perspective, as our internal state is changed as well (Maturana & Varela, 1980: 39, op. cit.). We can find evidence of this in one moment of the videoed scene, focusing particularly on the utterance “après y avait un pot vert (0.4) avec des anses j’ai mis en a mis toutes les piles dedans t’sais plein d’ trucs comme ça” (turn 34). Figure 3 below displays three screen shots of the video recording with a transcript in subtitles. As she pronounces “après y avait un pot vert”, Élodie can be seen gesturing holding the pot by its handles:

But at the moment she pronounces “vert” (“green”), she has not uttered “avec des anses” (“with handles”) yet. This will come after a pause of about 0.4s. As can be seen by looking at the pitch contour figure 4 below, the utterance beginning with “avec des anses” intervenes at the moment of the following internal interaction Élodie has entered in, i.e. putting piles and things in the pot: “avec des anses j’ai mis on a mis toutes piles dedans, etc.” forms a coherent group:

Figure 3: "après y avait un pot vert" (turn 34). Élodie represents the handles of the ceramic pot.

Figure 4: "avec des anses" belongs to the following interaction Élodie has entered in (screenshot of Elan).
Élodie’s gesture of holding the handles for the benefit of her friends must also have triggered her consideration of how the pot was used once in Adrien’s apartment, an interaction to which “avec des anses” seems, as we have observed, a delated component: her thought – in fact her perception – has already moved forward to the apartment. Moreover, it can be suggested here that the shape of the pot itself, which has the archetypical morphology of a “potential well” providing a local equilibrium for objects inside, is a strong attractor. Likewise, the imperfect tense of “avait” conveying imperfective aspect matches the perceptual structure that emerges from Élodie’s hands, which is like a visualization of the entity lying now in her domain of interaction, to the extent that imperfective aspect zooms in into the middle of the process and excludes the bounds, as if we were to look into the center of the object. That could explain the ease with which Élodie’s abrupt switching of places can be traced back, but also how in the first place her own gestures had triggered her following internal interaction corresponding to the finite verbs “j’ai mis on a mis toutes les piles, etc.” (“I put we put all the piles, etc.”).

This leads to the second level of analysis: just as she comes to interpret her own gestures and uses words to catch up with her own story, she displays how she can be understood. Her friends can hear her by following the path she is creating towards different physical locations (her father’s storage place, then Adrien’s apartment) and objects (the ceramic pots, the items to go in them). Finite verbs play an important role, as we saw in the previous section, by virtue of establishing where the perceiving body (i.e. the cognizant self) is to be imagined to live the story that is told: the body in the background is oriented to face possible actions that can be undertaken. The analysis in this second excerpt has underlined this point: Élodie has made the ceramic pots available to perception by iconically representing them, and this has triggered the description of their current function of recipient. Élodie, Sandra and Caroline make sense of the story by, among other means, having places and objects present in their cognitive domain. Then the two interlocutors Sandra and Caroline internally interact with places and objects, just as Élodie does while she, on her side, follows her train of thought, takes new perspectives and adapts her position according to the entities she perceives. Her moment-to-moment reaction to her own words and gestures give clues for her friends on how to effectively access these entities.

4. 3. Excerpt 3:

After the apogee of the ceramic pots, the topic of furnishing Adrien’s apartment dries up. Élodie brought a tablecloth, a mirror, and a few photos. But there was already dishware, which Elodie bitterly regrets since it is “trop pourrie” (“too miserable”) (turn 54). We will focus on the counterfactual use of “j’aurais trop aimé lui en donner” (“I would have really liked to give him some”) turn 52 when she complains it was a missed opportunity to have Adrien given nice dishware too:

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6 Here, the terms refer to Cognitive Grammar, see Langacker (2013: 55-89)
42 ÉLO [donc j’ai mis] ça:
.h j’y lui ai trouvé une nappe qui était sympa pour sa table
de cuisine ‘fin ça paraît débile mais il allait rien mettre\n43 CAR [ouais\]
44 SAN [((laughter))]
45 ÉLO alors déjà qu’en plus même il est meublé
mais en plus y a même la vaisselle
46 CAR ah ouais mais i- il [lui il a] rien amené [il a laissé tel&
47 ÉLO [alors:]
48 ÉLO [du coup ça m’a ]&
49 CAR &quel]
50 ÉLO &soûlé ça/ (0.6) franchement la vaisselle
51 SAN ((laughter))
52 ÉLO j’aurais trop aimé lui en: donner un [peu t’sais/ é]gayer un&
53 CAR [ah ouais/]
54 ÉLO &peu pa`ce que c’est tout triste c’té vaisselle trop pourrie
55 CAR [((laughter))]
56 SAN [bon après c’est] un mec
57 CAR [ouais]
58 ÉLO [ouais] voilà\n(0.8)
59 ÉLO .tsk et si j’y lui ai donné euh ju- j’avais euh miroir des
trucs comme ça t’ sais que j’avais/ (0.9) mais moi j’aime
pas dépareiller alors [tant qu’ j’ai pas] tout euh
60 CAR [((laughter))]
61 SAN ouais ((laughter))
62 ÉLO ça c’est ça l’ truc
63 SAN hm
(0.4)
64 ÉLO .H::: pu is voilà on a mis quelques photos/ [quelques ]
65 CAR [i` travaille]
toutes les vacances là ou juste les samedis encore/
(0.4)
66 ÉLO euh:[ ]
67 CAR [que l`] samedi/
The past conditional in “j’aurais trop aimé lui en donner” (turn 52) conveys past counterfactuality, its prototypical value in modern French language when employed without protasis (Patard et al., 2015: 206). In this case, the clause implies that the process “donner” has not occurred, and so is the immediate understanding by Sandra and Caroline. Whereas the function of the finite verb as it has been hypothesized is to time the perceiving body toward possible interactions, our aim is to show that this hypothesis, as a starting point, fits in to an account of “nonreal” actions as well. Turn 45, the fact that there was already dishware is brought into the foreground for the three women, becoming then an incontrovertible common ground from which to establish the implicature that Adrien didn’t need dishware. Then, “j’aurais trop aimé” relates to Élodie’s cognitive reality at this moment: it connotes the predictable interactions she can enter in – and she is aware that her friends know she can – to find nice dishware and bring it to the apartment, just as for the green ceramicware. However, she didn’t have to. In other words, to the extent they were objects of thought these interactions (looking for nice dishware, bringing it to the apartment, giving it to Adrien, experiencing rewarding feeling, etc.) were embodied and became cognitive entities with relevant perceptual and introspective qualities, but they remained internal and were never accessed through sensory surfaces by external contact. It is difficult to imagine Élodie gesturing in this case to represent dishware without previous bodily contact with tangible plates, spoons, forks, etc. Indeed, the video shows that Élodie does not make any iconic gestures as she did turn 34. In a nutshell, linguistic counterfactuality, it can be argued, conventionalizes relation to internal interactions, which themselves have had an internal origin. What occurred proved otherwise and counter to expectations, which may assist in explaining why the speaker feels it is worth being made publicly available.

5. Results and conclusion

This analysis illustrates an attempt to explore a hypothesis on finite verbs to account for their role in spontaneous speech: as they are uttered, finite verbs set the perceiving body on the parting line – or place: that of proprioception – between the irrevocable and the possible, in Gosselin’s terms, to reconfigure a presence of the body in the place that is talked about. This perspective on discourse inspired mainly by Maturana and Varela (1980) and Bottineau (2010, 2012), termed “enactive”, underlines how meaning is created within one’s own cognitive domain, the set of interactions one can engage in. The data consisted of a short excerpt (1:48) divided into three parts of a casual chat between three friends, Élodie, Sandra and Caroline, talking about how a person not present, Adrien, who is Élodie’s boyfriend, has moved into a new apartment. In each part, a finite verb was singled out. Descriptions of putative internal states of participants were made an essential part of the method of analysis, distinct in this regard from conversational analysis. The results can be recapped from each of the three excerpts:

1. “j’vais pas y rester longtemps je vais rien mettre” is an impersonation of Adrien where the finite verb enables the speaker, Élodie, to configure a background, one’s body, to face possible actions grounded in the present: the tense of aller that has the statute of an auxiliary in the so-called immediate
future and which operates the “modal cut” (Gosselin, 2005) is the present.

2. “après y avait un pot vert avec des anses j’ai mis on a mis toutes les piles dedans” uttered by Élodie entails an instant change of locations, from where Élodie’s father was storing pots to Adrien’s apartment. With its instantaneous and static value, the imperfective aspect of “avait” seems to correspond with the gestures Élodie simultaneously makes: she’s representing an object, that is obviously static as well. However, as we argued, its mention and its shape – she’s looking between her hands, seeing the green ceramic pot – trigger a subsequent interaction that took place later and elsewhere, in Adrien’s place, when they filled it up with various items (“j’ai mis on a mis toutes les piles dedans t’ sais plein [d’trucs] comme ça”). Moreover, as she has to adapt to changes in her domain of interactions caused by her own words, Élodie offers her interlocutors clues to allow them to follow her train of thought from one setting to another.

3. The past conditional tense in “j’aurais trop aimé lui en donner” expresses counterfactuality: an action imagined in the past but which the speaker implies did not occur. Here the finite verb, the past conditional tense of the auxiliary “aurais”, times an interaction toward another internal interaction that has an affective register – “aimé” comes from the infinitive “aimer” (“to like”) – and relates to the action of giving dishware to Adrien. One feature of counterfactuality could be that the origin of the interaction is internal without the object it aimed at being accessed by bodily sensory surfaces.

In sum, we have considered discourse as an enactment of entities in one’s domain of interaction, as the speaker orients and is oriented by the components in each utterance. Following this, the hypothesis suggested that the finite verb would orient the body so the perceiver can access objects in front of her, and would time this orientation by reproducing the perception of the present (Gosselin, 2005). The speaker also accomplishes this interpretation, and uses words to orient herself in her domain of interactions. This line of analysis is congruent with the work of Morel and Danon-Boileau (1998) who show that what is visible within the frames that compose conversations “is the trace of successive steps of a thought which proceeds in its formulation while it seeks at the same time to get its point across for others.” (p. 38) In French language conversational frames specifically “decondensate” (sont décondensés) in successive preambles (préambules) and rhemes, the latest often recast as new preambles. The observation that the speaker renders her own words intelligible to herself when she wants to be understood by others fits in well with an enactive perspective on discourse. One way to refine our analysis may be, then, to utilize the tools that these authors have conceived.

References


Transcription conventions

| / | final pitch rising | (0.4) measured pause |
| \ | final pitch falling | .h inbreath |
| : | lengthen vowel | ((laughter)) action |
| ::: | lengthen vowel (“:” repeated according to perceived duration) | [words] overlapped utterances |
| WORD | higher intensity & | interruption of a turn (beginning and end of interruption) |
| . | brief pause (<0.2s) | xx incomprehensible (“x” the number of syllables) |