

**Synchronic and diachronic variation:
the how and why of sociolinguistic corpora.**

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Abstract

Tape-recordings have come of age. The spoken word has been captured, stored on tape and (in as yet regrettably restricted amounts) transcribed for a number of decades now and this is a situation which can only improve. Where good accompanying demographic data are available, it is beginning to be possible to trace linguistic change and to provide empirical evidence of the way that synchronic and diachronic variation may be linked. In the past, it has only been possible to guess at long-gone spoken manifestations through written, mainly literary, evidence. This paper aims to describe and illustrate the potential of (spoken) sociolinguistic corpora for research studies in both synchronic and diachronic variation, with reference to French, and to suggest ways in which useful research corpora may be established for future generations of scholars.

The *Etude Sociolinguistique d'Orléans*, currently available from the University of Leuven, Belgium, was conducted by a group of university teachers of French at Reading University from 1966-70. The resulting electronic corpus comprises approximately 109 hours of spoken French, 902,755 words of which have been orthographically transcribed, with a further 13 hours of phonetic transcription. These transcriptions are available at : <http://bach.arts.kuleuven.ac.be/elicop>. Although French researchers, notably Claire Blanche-Benveniste and the GARS team in Aix and Mireille Bilger in Perpignan, have collected and transcribed spoken French, their corpora are not (yet?) available on line. Beeching's (1980-90) "Bristol" Corpus, which comprises 17.5 hours of orthographically transcribed speech, or 155,000 words, involving 95 speakers, aged 7 to 90 years with a balanced range of educational backgrounds, though small in scale, may be accessed at <http://www.uwe.ac.uk/facults/les/staff/kb/CORPUS.pdf>.

Beeching (forthcoming b) suggests that pragmaticalisation is a process of language change during which words, used in everyday social interaction, shift in meaning or accrue a certain social semiotic, become habituated in that usage and are propagated because of a new fashion or prestige which is attached to them. Spoken corpora and corpus tools are an excellent heuristic in charting distributional frequencies or probabilistic factors. Andersen (2000) suggests that the upsurge of *innit* and *like* in the COLT Corpus of adolescent English may be more than age-grading. The present paper will present broadbrush preliminary evidence with respect to the evolution of selected pragmatic particles in French.