

Punctors: A pragmatic variable

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ABSTRACT

Punctors constitute a class of markers that have usually been classified as nervous tics, fillers, or signs of hesitation. The words we consider to be punctors share a number of structural and functional characteristics: they manifest prosodic assimilation to the preceding phrase; they are almost never preceded by a pause; they show a high degree of phonological reduction; and all punctors have lost their original meaning or function. From the analysis of twelve interviews sampled from the Sankoff–Cedergren corpus, we have isolated the following punctors: *là* ‘there’, *tu sais*, *vous savez* ‘you know’, *n’est-ce pas* ‘isn’t it so’, *hein* ‘eh’, *je veux dire* ‘I mean to say’, *moi* ‘me’, *osti* ‘[communion] host’, *vois-tu* ‘do you see’, and *il/elle dit*, *j’ai dit* ‘he/she says’, ‘I said’ (used in reported discourse). Our main concern in this article is to present the distribution of punctors, within the sentence and within the discourse, and to suggest an explanation of some aspects of their conditioning in terms of the interaction of etymological, discursive, syntactic, and social constraints.

In recent years, discourse analysts have tried to work out structures and organization specific to spoken language, including prosodic features (Guy, Horvath, Vonwiller, Daisley, & Rogers, 1986) and various kinds of markers: interaction markers, pragmatic markers, discourse particles, etc. (Ducrot, 1980; Erman, 1987; Roulet, Auchlin, Moeschler, Rubattel, & Schelling, 1985; Schiffrin, 1987; Vincent, 1983, 1991, 1993). Punctors (first defined in Vincent, 1983) constitute one class of markers appearing only in spoken language. In fact, they have usually been classified as nervous tics, fillers, or signs of hesitation.

Our main concern in this article is to characterize the distribution of punctors, within the sentence and within the discourse, and to suggest an explanation of some aspects of their conditioning in terms of the interaction of etymological, discursive, syntactic, and social constraints. But first we define punctors in terms of their role in discourse.

PUNCTORS

The words we consider to be punctors share a number of structural and functional characteristics: they manifest complete prosodic assimilation to the

TABLE 1. *Number of occurrences of each punctior and relative importance according to percentage of total punctior use and according to number of speakers making use of them*

Total	<i>là</i>	<i>tsé</i>	<i>j'veux dire</i>	<i>osti</i>	<i>hein</i>	<i>savez</i>	<i>il dit</i>	<i>spa</i>	<i>moi</i>	<i>vois-tu</i>	<i>X</i>
3056	1133	649	364	256	255	134	95	50	23	20	77
%	37	21	12	8	8	4	3	2	.7	.6	3
Speakers	12	7	3	2	10	4	9	1	2	1	10

X indicates concatenation of two or more punctiors.

preceding phrase; they have no independent intonational pattern.^{1,2} They are almost never preceded by a pause. They show a high degree of phonological reduction. Punctiors have lost all or most of their original meaning or function; we can say that they are to a large extent desemantized.³ Finally, they are virtually absent from the written language.

From the analysis of 12 interviews sampled from the Sankoff-Cedergren corpus (Sankoff & Sankoff, 1973), we have isolated the following punctiors:⁴ *là* 'there'; *tu sais*, *vous savez* 'you know' (familiar and formal forms, respectively); *n'est-ce pas* 'isn't it so' or 'right'; *hein* 'eh'; *je veux dire* 'I mean to say'; *moi* 'me'; *osti* [communion] host'; *vois-tu* 'do you see'; and *il/elle dit*, *j'ai dit* 'he/she says', 'I said' (used in reported discourse).⁵ What is striking is how diverse the historic origins of these words are, from deictics (*là*) and interaction markers (*tu sais*) to sacrilegious oaths (*osti*), extraposed pronouns (*moi*), and dialogue markers (*il dit*). Individual speakers may or may not use specific punctiors in a given context, depending first on the social connotation associated with these words and second on discourse constraints. But, at a functional level, we can say that they are interchangeable, even if they are constrained by etymological or contextual factors. For example, *j'ai dit*, *il/elle dit* are used only in reported discourse and are constrained to take the same form as the dialogue marker used first in the sentence. Thus, these punctiors adopt the form, but not the functions of a dialogue marker. Strikingly, no other punctior regularly occurs in reported discourse. *Là* is preferred in locative or deictic contexts, even if it clearly bears no locative or deictic meaning. The form of some of the punctiors is also constrained to conform to the *tu/vous* form of address used by the speaker, that is, the familiar versus the polite form.

DIFFERENCES AMONG SPEAKERS

Table 1 presents the number of occurrences for each punctior in the corpus examined. *Là* was used by all speakers, representing more than one-third of all occurrences. We may consider *là* and those other punctiors used by many

TABLE 2. Occurrences of punctors for each speaker

	Age	l.m.	n.p.	Forms	n.f.	w.
Armand	53	.71	54	<i>là, hein, X</i>	2	.582
Jean-Paul	62	1.00	74	<i>spa, hein, là, savez</i>	4	.125
Simone	60	.91	85	<i>savez, là, X, il dit</i>	3	.606
Ginette	24	.09	167	<i>là, hein, il dit, X</i>	3	.814
Rita	62	.03	217	<i>là, savez, hein, il dit</i>	4	.748
Michèle	24	.95	250	<i>je veux dire, là, il dit, tsé, X</i>	4	.207
Odile	22	.71	276	<i>je veux dire, tsé, là, X, il dit, hein</i>	5	.383
Berthe	78	.62	320	<i>là, tsé, hein, savez, il dit, X</i>	5	.606
Christian	18	.74	328	<i>tsé, là, hein, il dit, X</i>	4	.331
Marc-André	22	1.00	348	<i>là, tsé, je veux dire, vois-tu, hein, X</i>	5	.478
Jim	28	.06	386	<i>là, osti, tsé, hein, moi, il dit, X</i>	6	.692
Léo	41	.01	551	<i>osti, là, tsé, hein, X, il dit, moi</i>	6	.441

l.m., linguistic market index; n.p., number of occurrences; n.f., number of different forms; w., speaker weighting in a variable rule analysis for choice of *là* vs. other punctors. (See Table 4 for the other factor group in this analysis; input probability around .37; precise value not available at time of writing.)

speakers as relatively neutral, while punctors used by few speakers are socially marked. *N'est-ce pas* and *osti* represent the two extremes of the spectrum. In fact, *n'est-ce pas* is an expression more characteristic of continental French than of Québec French. Its use in Montréal French has upper class connotations. At the other end of the scale, *osti* 'host' is an oath frequent in the spoken language of working class men. This swear word had a high degree of expressivity until the time it became repetitive, inexpressive, and a punctor (Thibault & Vincent, 1981; Vincent, 1982a).

Table 2 gives the total number of punctor occurrences and the number of variants used by each speaker. We focus first on the fact that, as the number of occurrences increases, the number of different forms used also increases (correlation .84). One explanation could be a word frequency sampling effect, whereby the number of different words increases with the length of the corpus or text (cf. Dubois, 1992). However, consistent with other tendencies to be reported here, the explanation of both quantity and diversity of punctor use may lie in the speaker's fluency.

We now compare the last column, which indicates the speaker's preference for *là* versus other forms, with the column containing the linguistic market rating⁶ (Sankoff & Laberge, 1978). We observe that speakers with a high linguistic market rating prefer punctors other than *là* (correlation .66). We will return to this later.

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

As mentioned earlier, punctors appear in a wide range of contexts. For the distributional analysis of punctors in the sentence, we characterized contexts

of appearance in terms of the prosodic phrase. The distribution of punctors within the sentence helps confirm that they are interchangeable particles, although differentially affected by contextual constraints—analogueous to the variants of phonological or syntactic variables.

Punctors occur in four prosodic contexts that we identify as regulation, demarcation, segmentation,⁷ and discourse. Regulation includes all the features of discourse sometimes grouped together under the label “break-out,” such as hesitations, false starts, interaction markers, and interruptions of all kinds that require a follow-through in the sentence (1–3).

- (1) On savait comment vivre. On savait *tu sais*: c'était cette délicatesse qu'on avait *vous savez*. (Berthe: 8)
We knew how to behave. We knew *you know*: it was that refinement that we had *you know*.
- (2) J'ai resté dans—attendez un peu *là*—dans le coin de St. Thimothée puis Ontario. (Jim: 1)
I lived in—wait a minute *now*—in the neighborhood of St. Thimothée and Ontario.
- (3) C'était le doyen: son nom m'échappe *là*: le rouquet *là*: le rouquin: le chanoine *là*: le rouquin là qui était (. . .) (Jean-Paul: 12)
It was the dean. What's his name *there*? Red *there*: the red-head: the canon *there*: the red-head now who was (. . .)

Demarcation identifies, in prosodic terms, contexts with a minor intoneme, that is, intonation found at the end of every unstressed phrase.⁸ A distinction can be made between syntagmatic demarcation and coordination (4–5 vs. 6–7).

- (4) Parfois on exagère *n'est-ce pas* cet accueil. (Jean-Paul: 9)
Sometimes we exaggerate *don't we* this welcome.
- (5) Je pense que c'est ça un peu *vous savez* qui se passe. (Simone: 29)
I think it's sort of like that *you know* that's going on.
- (6) Vous savez il y a Sherbrooke *là* puis il y a Rosemont. (Ginette: 2)
You know there's Sherbrooke *there* and there's Rosemont.
- (7) Elle dit il peut pas *elle dit* je l'ai présenté à mon autre amie. (Ginette: 13)
She says he can't *she says* I introduced him to my other friend.

Segmentation signifies an important rupture in the melody of the sentence. There can be topicalization, in which case we may talk of thematic segmentation (8–9).

- (8) Prendre des push-up dans les bras *là* c'est raide en tabarnac. (Jim: 31)
(The effect of) Push-ups, for the arms *there* it's harder than hell.
- (9) Les Clercs St. Viateur *là* c'est des frères qui enseignent aux sourds-muets. (Rita: 8)
The Clerics of St. Viateur *there* they are the brothers who teach the deaf-mutes.

If there is no topicalization, but only a stressed prosodic phrase, we may speak of nonthematic segmentation; this is the case of parentheticals and appositions (10–12).

- (10) Franchement *là* il y en a c'est décourageant. (Berthe: 16)
Really *there* there's so many it's discouraging.
- (11) La façon de vivre américaine *n'est-ce pas*, pas tellement canadienne anglaise mais américaine. (Jean-Paul: 17)
The American way of life *right*, not so much the English–Canadian but the American.
- (12) Ça fait à peu près sept mois que je suis sorti de l'hôpital *là*, le mois d'octobre. (Léo: 2)
It's been about seven months since I came out of the hospital *there*, in October.

Finally, if the punctor appears at the end of a prosodic sentence, that is, after a terminal intoneme, it is a discourse punctor. Referring to Labov's (1972) analysis of narration, we can functionally identify stretches of discourse such as presentation, evaluation, orientation, result, etc. Punctors emitted in contexts of transition between such stretches of discourse are called discourse punctors. In (13), we find such a punctor, one that terminates a stretch of discourse and, indeed, an entire turn.

- (13) Puis nous-autres on se dit que: si on manquait notre messe, la semaine serait doublement longue. Puis ça nous fait une: quoi une raison de vivre. Ça nous donne: je sais pas: Puis quand on a des reproches à se faire, surtout pour dans: quand on est marié ou des affaires de même, bien quand qu'on va à la messe le dimanche on pense à ça, puis quand on se couche bien: on est porté à s'expliquer à dialoguer quoi. On dirait que c'est: je sais pas ça: ça s'enchaîne. C'est plus facile *vous-savez*.
(Interviewer) Vous avez l'air d'être un couple parfait? (laughter) (Ginette: 27)
And we feel that: And we feel that: if we missed mass, the week would be twice as long. And that gives us: what, a reason to live. It gives us: I don't know: And when we have complaints, especially for in: when you're married or something like that, well when we go to mass on Sunday we think it over, and when we go to bed well: we are likely to explain ourselves to talk to each other, what. You could say that it's: I don't know it: it follows naturally. It's easier *you know*.
(Interviewer) You seem to be the perfect couple? (laughter)

For these four contexts, we observe the following distribution:

regulation: 309 punctors (10%)
demarcation: 468 (15%)
segmentation: 1056 (35%)
discourse: 1223 (40%)

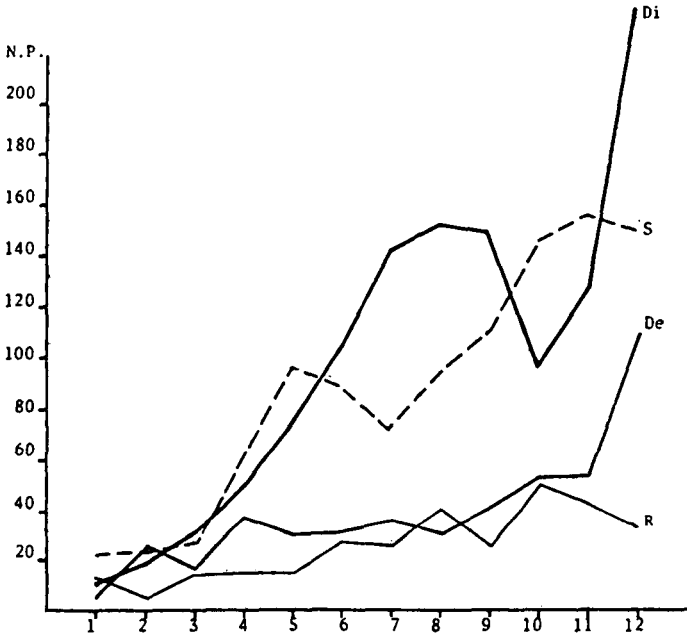


FIGURE 1. Distribution of punctors for each speaker. R, regulation; De, demarcation; S, segmentation; Di, discourse; N.P., number of occurrences. Speakers in order of Table 2.

It is important to notice that we cannot ascribe the relative frequencies of punctors to the frequency of the contexts themselves, for example, a context of demarcation exists after every phrase, but accounts for few punctors.

DIFFERENCES AMONG PUNCTORS

Figure 1 depicts for the four basic contexts the kinds of punctors used by each speaker. We observe that punctors are used less in contexts of regulation and demarcation than for segmentation and discourse. We also observe that the difference between these two sets of contexts remains proportional as the number of punctors increases. This suggests that speakers use punctors in much the same way even if their overall rates of use are significantly different.

Thus, prosodic contexts of minor rupture contain punctors less frequently than those of major or final rupture. This result can be refined by considering subcategories of segmentation (thematic or nonthematic) and of demarcation (syntagmatic or coordination), making six contexts in all. Table 3 orders these contexts according to the number of occurrences of the most frequent punctors of our corpus (which represent more than 92% of all occur-

TABLE 3. *Order of contexts according to the importance of each punctor*

	<i>là</i>	<i>tsé</i>	<i>hein</i>	<i>osti</i>	<i>savez</i>	<i>j'veux dire</i>
Thematic segmentation	1	6	6	4	6	5
Demarcation	2	5	4	3	4	6
Nonthematic segmentation	3	4	5	6	3	2
Regulation	4	3	3	5	5	4
Coordination	5	2	2	1	2	3
Discourse	6	1	1	2	1	1

TABLE 4. *Order of contexts according to the importance of là versus the other forms*

	w.
Thematic segmentation	.770
Demarcation	.717
Nonthematic segmentation	.550
Regulation	.590
Coordination	.263
Discourse	.156

w., relative weight of *là*.

rences). For example, the context in which we find the largest number of occurrences of *là* is thematic segmentation. The major feature to observe is that *là* behaves completely differently from all other punctors, its order being almost systematically reversed. This hierarchy is maintained in the results of multiple regression analysis (see Table 4), opposing *là* to all other punctors.

Hence, *là* is the preferred variant used for the punctuation of phrases relatively dependent on the rest of the sentence (regulation, syntagmatic demarcation, or thematic segmentation). In contrast, there is a tendency to use a different punctor in independent utterances (such as coordination, discourse). It is not the degree of rupture that influences the choice of variant, then, but the degree of linking of the punctuated phrase with the following one. For instance, even if topicalization implied a major rupture in intonation, the extraposed phrase is strongly linked to the following segment.

In an analysis of the distribution of *là* versus the other punctors for each speaker, we obtain a similar hierarchy (Fig. 2). In particular, there is confirmation of the opposition between dependent and independent contexts. In addition, this implicational scale supports a claim we made earlier: people with a high linguistic market rating, who tend, with some exceptions, to have

Speaker	JP	M	O	C	S	L	MA	J	B	R	G	A
Linguistic market	1.00	.95	.71	.74	.91	.01	1.00	.06	.62	.03	.09	.71
demarcation	X	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
non-thematic segmentation	X	X	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
thematic segmentation	X	X	X	X	X	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
regulation	X	X	X	A/X	A	X	X	A	A	A	A	A
coordination	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
discourse	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

FIGURE 2. Order of contexts according to the most important punctor used by each speaker. A, *là*; X, other punctors.

a more normative speech pattern, prefer a socially marked punctor rather than *là*.

PUNCTORS AND GENRE

We now examine the variation among speakers with regard to the frequency of punctors of all types in their interview in relation to the length of each interview and the type, or genre, of discourse. Figure 3 illustrates the link between punctor frequency and the length of the interview. Frequency is calculated in terms of the number of punctors per line of transcription; the total number of lines of transcription gives us the length of the interview. As this figure clearly demonstrates, the rate of punctor use increases with the length of the interview, that is, with loquacity⁹ or fluency of speech.

Considering this fact, we distinguished three discourse genres in the interviews. In the first part of each interview, there are many questions about the informant: Where were you born? How old are you? Where did your grandfather come from? These questions are usually answered briefly, and there is a low level of involvement or expressivity on the part of the speaker. The second part of the interview consists of open questions to which the speaker must respond by argumentation, explanation, or description, that is, through more elaborate discourse modes. We make a further distinction between analytic discourse such as argumentation, evaluation, or opinion, as opposed to descriptive discourse such as narration. Figure 4 presents the number of punctors in these three genres: simple answers, descriptive discourse, and analytic discourse. Figure 5 presents the relative frequency of these punctors. In these figures, we observe clearly that punctors are not frequent in simple answers or when utterances are short, objective, and without much speaker involvement. Rather, punctors are more frequent in elaborate discourse such as descriptive or analytic discourse. As the results of this section indicate, punctors must be considered in terms of the kind of discourse in which they appear. They are linked to fluency and expressivity.

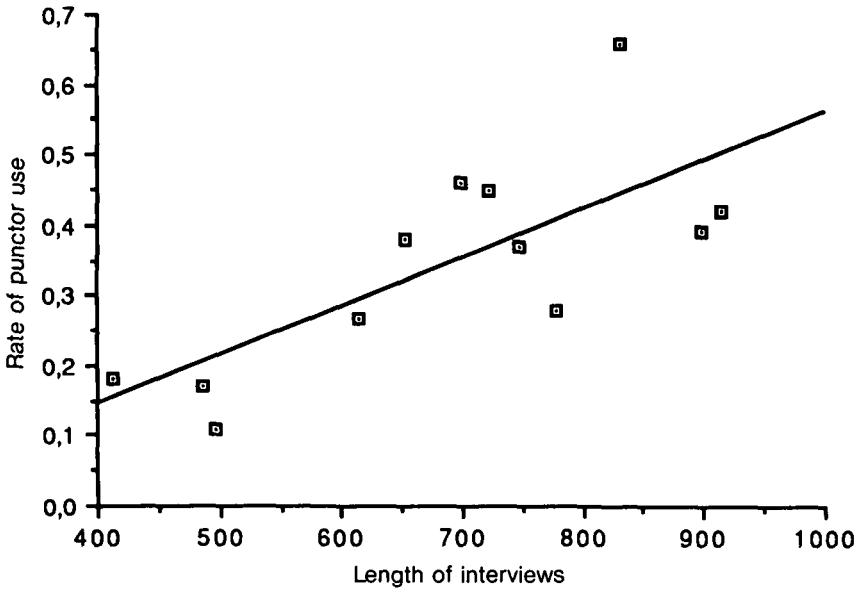


FIGURE 3. Number of punctors per line of transcription as a function of total number of lines for 12 speakers. Least squares regression line shown.

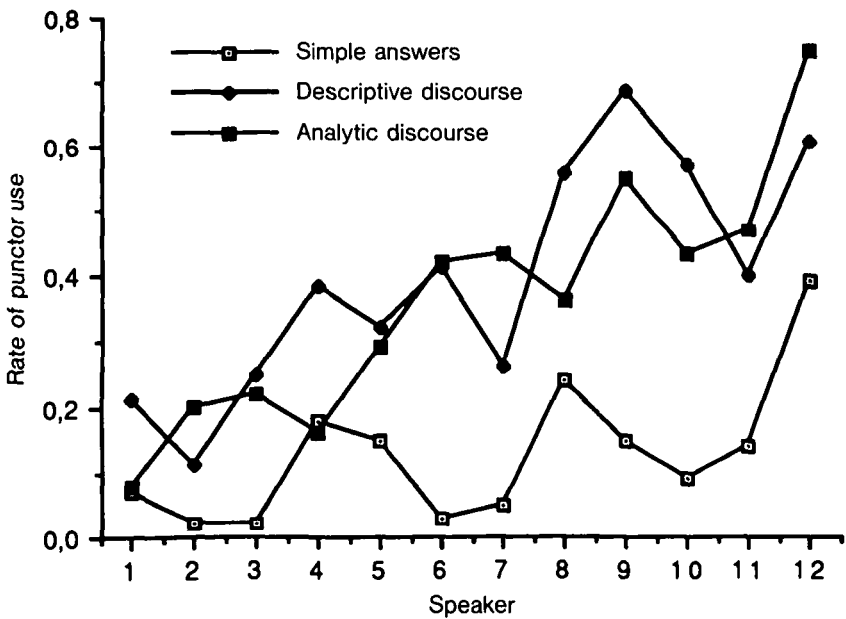


FIGURE 4. Number of punctors in simple answers, descriptive discourse, and analytic discourse for 12 speakers.

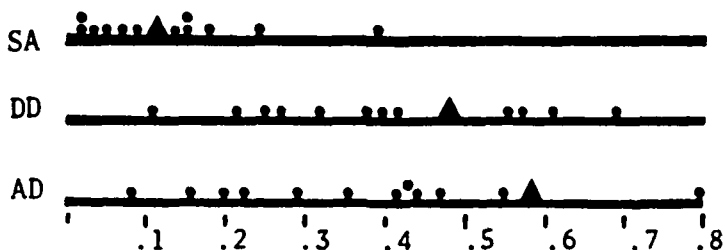


FIGURE 5. Rate of punctor use in the three genres (SA, simple answers; DD, descriptive discourse; AD, analytic discourse) for the 12 speakers. Mean rates indicated by triangles.

	JP	M	O	C	S	L	MA	J	B	R	G	A
SA	X	X	A/X	A/X	A	A	A	A	A	A	A	A
DD	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	A/X	A	A	A	A
AD	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	A/X	A	A

FIGURE 6. Preferred punctor in the three genres for the 12 speakers. A, *là*; X, other punctors; SA, simple answers; DD, descriptive discourse; AD, analytic discourse.

Finally, let us examine the choice of punctor in these genres as suggested in the implicational scale of Figure 6. Considering the great difference between *là* and all other punctors, we observe that *là* tends to be preferred in short answers, whereas the other punctors are used in description or analysis. This suggests that *là* is linked less to elaborate discourse and expressivity and more to simple and objective utterances.

CONCLUSION

Punctors may be considered to constitute a class of largely interchangeable words defined by prosodic features. Their distribution is conditioned by factors such as prosodic rupture, context, and genre of discourse; only the choice of individual punctors seems to be conditioned by social class. Because their frequency increases as a function of loquacity and speaker involvement in the discourse, they cannot be analyzed as errors of production in spoken language, nor as problems of elocution. But the analysis of punctors—or any other discourse particle—goes further than the simple description of a variable. It should help us discover the organization of discourse constituents concerning which we still have little information. Punctors can help us under-

stand the nature of the links between sentences and among constituents, as well as the degree of involvement of the speaker in the act of communication. The analysis of discourse particles is a key to discourse analysis in general.

NOTES

1. When the present study was carried out, these criteria were confirmed largely aurally and by subjective judgment tests of interchangeability (Vincent, 1983: Ch. 3). As for instrumental acoustic analysis, a dozen sonograms were made to double-check some of our perceptions, particularly with regard to intonational intensity. Since that time, an acoustic study of *là* carried out by Demers (1992) clearly shows that there is little danger of confusing deictic tokens of *là* from those that act as punctors. But, while it is true that *là* is never linked to the following segment, it may be somewhat oversimplified to say that its assimilation to the preceding segment is complete.
2. The preceding phrase need not be part of an identifiable sentence; it can itself be one or more discourse particles serving as a turn-opener *oui mais tu sais* 'yes but y'know', *oh ben oui hein*, 'oh well yes eh' (Vicher & Sankoff, 1989).
3. Vincent (1982b) documented the desemantization of *là* in a study of *ici* vs. *ici là* 'here' vs. 'here there'; Thibault and Vincent (1981) assessed *osti* in this framework. Compare Erman (1992) and Silva and Macedo (1992) for other points of view on preservation of meaning versus desemantization.
4. A study (Thibault & Daveluy, 1989), based on reinterviewing half of the speakers in the original 1971 corpus (Thibault & Vincent, 1990) 13 years later (1984), suggests the popularization of the punctor *tu sais veux dire* 'you know what I mean' in the intervening period.
5. Some punctors appear in examples and tables in their reduced form: *tu sais* > *tsé*, *n'est-ce pas* > *spa*, *vous savez* > *savez*.
6. A measure of how important mastery of prescribed speech variety is for the speaker's role in the socioeconomic life of the community. This represents an average over the independent individual perceptions of each of a panel of experts, formed on the basis of brief work histories of the speakers and/or their parents or spouses.
7. These terms are drawn from the literature on prosodic analysis, principally Martins-Baltar (1977).
8. Compare Silva and Macedo's (1992) discussion of *af*.
9. Vincent (1992) and Laforest (1992) make use of a more specific measure of loquacity.

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