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## WORDING VIEWPOINTS AT SCHOOL IN DEBATES ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

MARIE CARCASSONNE & MIREILLE FROMENT & CHRISTIAN HUDELLOT

Usually, a dialogue is considered an argumentative one when the speakers utter arguments with the intention of making their point of view prevail and of persuading their interlocutors. In fact, a debate offers the speakers the opportunity to formulate and compare points of view. The relation between intention and linguistic means can be present, but there is a diversity of discourse figures. Dialogical effects also have to be taken into account.

Argumentation is spoken of when discursive moves modify the former utterances, whether through a shift of theme, or a shift of genre, or modalisations... Those discursive moves are all together what propels the debate and what justifies it.

They also raise theoretical questions. Some of these moves can only be determined by the analyst, others are the result of speakers interpreting words differently and also depend on the type of words used.

The analysis is led from the receiver's point of view, no-one can tell in advance how the discourse he receives will make sense for him/her. Thus, argumentation is not merely in the speaker's intention. Besides, it also raises the question of lexical meaning in argumentative dialogue, and precisely how words work in accordance with their type.

According to Weinreich (1963), Hockett (1958) and François (1980), different types of words can be distinguished. Technical words (eg. *sulfur*, *sulphate*, *sulphide*), names of artefacts (eg. *chair*), concepts defined in a set of relations (eg. *phoneme*, *sentence*, *string*), can be distinguished from 'full' words, which support *notions*, as mentioned by Perelman (1988), Grize (1990), François (1994), (eg. *difference*, *racism*, *jealousy*, *rejection*, *liberty*, etc.).

Some words refer to a notion. According to François (1994), we can speak of a "notion word". This is precisely because there are words whose particularity is to be "notion words" (Grize, Perelman) that discussion is possible: "if words meant the same thing at the end of a text as at the beginning, it wouldn't worth speaking or writing" (1994: 48).

Our conception of meaning and types of words is elaborated from the receiver's point of view, which can be said a "dialogical" point of view. This is why, in a dialogue or a text, we contrast expected and unexpected words, which strike the receiver: words that are familiar or unfamiliar to him, either words from specialized discourse or words referring to another culture.

The diversity of interpretation is linked to the fact that the meaning of words is not only in the words themselves but in the relationships between speakers, as Bakhtine-Volochinov even says (1977: 146): "one has no grounds to say that meaning belongs to the word per

se. In reality, it belongs to the word as a hyphen between speakers, which it is actualised only by the process of active understanding, implying a response”.

In fact, it's important to note two aspects of interpretation, one which is tied to the words and which everyone can have access to, another which is relevant to our own experience, feelings and associations.

The reception of an utterance involves both the interpretive movements that discourse imposes and interpretive movements of the receiver himself or herself, based on the associations the utterances awaken. On the one hand, the utterance has a restraining effect upon its receiver, on the other hand it resonates with him or her.

### 1. *Interpretation, wording and dialogue*

More than other words, notion-words generate what Wittgenstein (1945/1961) has called “language-games”. It is worth debating because of them. Several authors have noted that they stimulate formulations of points of views (Lahire 1998, Froment & Hudelot 2007).

François underlines that “thinking with words” can partly be defined as “searching to transform *a notion into concept*” (1994: 43), by analysing the notion, clarifying presuppositions, giving definitions, or distinctions, as well as examples or telling stories. The matter will then be a “concrete concept”.

Therefore we will not study words but the “wording” and the elaboration of notions. Wording implies the relation between discourses, that is to say the discourse of the self with the other (present or missing) as well as the relation between discourse and the experience to be communicated.

Wording is defined by François (2004) by noting that language offers a large number of possibilities: it concerns words or constructions but also genres of discourse. In order to refer to a concrete or abstract object, the selection of words and of their arrangement may be different from one speaker to another and from one moment to another for the same speaker: these possibilities arise during a process which occurs “within us but without us”, that is to say not by effective choice.

Using the concept of wording lays the emphasis on the process of spontaneous selection among possibilities: it does not imply that there is a notion which pre-exists and is “worded” afterwards. Wording is not conceived as a “tracing” of the reality (a complete description for example would be impossible) nor as a reflection but as a process including a part of creativity or at least of specificity – the fixed aspect of ideological discourse for instance doesn't really allow us to talk of “wording” anymore.

The wording always manifests a point of view and so always simultaneously elaborates notions, several authors have noted this trend (François 1994, Grize 1990, Tomasello 1994/2004).

## 2. *Move, theme, genre, linking*

The theme of the discourse does not determine its wording. How one imagines the theme is always worded through a genre of discourse, which can be observed in the linking of utterances.

In this study, we also mobilize the notion of *move* (discursive and/or interpretive move), that is to say the various displacements involved in the linking of utterances, the various ways a speaker links up his discourse to another one. The relationship can be a genre move, a move of theme, a move of genre and theme, a move affecting lexical-grammatical categorization or a move that affects the referential world. We use this term to depict how a notion is elaborated through the confrontation of viewpoints and/or values tied to various dialogical frames.

In the debate which we observed and analysed, we noted, as Wertsch (1985) did, the meeting of the pupils' spontaneities with what is expected in the school world. The moves show the locutors' various relationships with the referent in a given interaction with certain co-locutors. They show the encounter between the various locutors' social worlds, the values and affects they perceive in them. Moreover, some moves are easily identified, in particular the moves concerning the themes, the modification of the categories or those which are introduced by a grammatical word. Other moves result from the receiver's interpretation.

In our data, at least three social worlds are linked together: the school source, the class group source and the child's family. Of course, it is not the speaker's knowledge and culture as a whole which are involved, and we can add that those worlds interact and modify each other.

## 3. *The data*

Our study focuses on a debate at school about relationships with others. The data consists of a session of civic instruction in a primary school (2nd and 3rd level). The teaching-learning situation is a deliberative debate, based on the reading of a fable *Les chameaux et le dromadaire* (*The camels and the dromedary*), taken from a book written for pupils, whose title is *Silence, la violence* (*Violence, be silent*) (1999). Its theme is difference, which leads to violence between the animals.

The children were encouraged to interact and answer one another, so that they might find a non-violent solution to a conflict.

We selected a group made up of four children (seven to eight years old) who interacted with one another. The teacher managed the macro units of the dialogue. Children were supposed to elaborate a problematic and to be involved in the debate. They were asked not to express content with doxic utterances.

From a didactic point of view, the institution expects children to learn to distance themselves from their own experience and their usual ways of wording, so that they may become familiar with a genre of discourse less tied to the context.

Some characteristic moves collected in our corpus are examined in the next section.

#### 4. Some characteristic moves in our data

The first selected example<sup>1</sup> is located in the beginning of the dialogue. Pupils build a discursive space and explore the notion of difference.

##### Example 1

Marion 2: [...] we don't exactly know if they will/ if they will try to live together since they are different or if they will fight. That is, we don't know very well what they'll do about that

Axel 2: Because sometimes there are some kinds of animals that don't accept others so er... because they're different and all that but actually it's false so er...it is not because we are different that we should

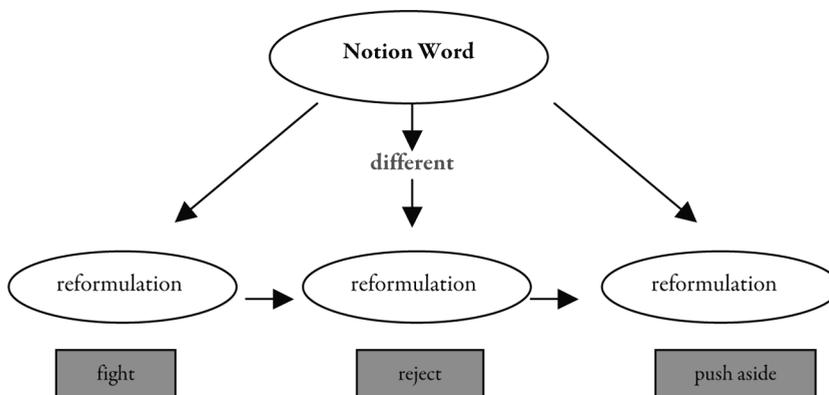
Marion 4: we should reject others + it's not because for example it is like racism it's not because

Axel 3: The others are Black

Marion 5: The others are Black and (because) they are not like us that we should push them aside and that we should say that they are slaves who don't know anything + we shouldn't say that 'cause **they also look like us** + they have two arms and two legs and they have a head with a brain and they are a little bit like us + **they are like us** it's only the skin that changes because there is a lot of sun that's all + If it was like us but except that if it weren't for the sun it would be the same it would be exactly the same for all of us.

Pupils rather quickly speak of racism instead of difference. The elaborating of the notion is the result of several intricate moves.

Figure 1



<sup>1</sup> Tape recording debates are transcribed along the following code:

/: used when the locutor modifies his /her utterance

+: used for a pause (the number of crosses depends of its length)

Capital letters: the locutor stresses a word or a sentence.

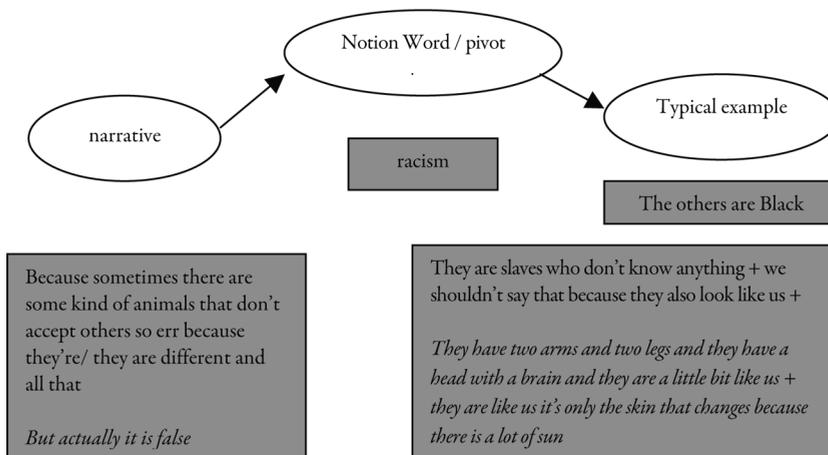
Our choice for children's discourses translation is to keep the wording even if it sounds more French than English.

First, we take interest in the re-categorization move: the pupils reword the word “different” which represents a notion here. They reword it three times as “fight”, “reject, and “push aside”.

“Different” here becomes a pivot-word around which the locutor makes a move. A pivot word is an anchor point in the discourse, a word which is repeated or modified. There is no possibility of knowing before the utterance which word will become a pivot word, nor how it will be modified.

The lexical move corresponds to an evolution of the meanings of the notion, which are negotiated between the locutors. We have to take into account the children’s spontaneity, the repeating and modifying, the frames in which the discourses are interpreted.

Figure 2



The word *racism* becomes a main word. We observe both a theme move and a genre move.

– On the one hand a genre move: the locutor utters a generic narrative. Then there is an opposite move: the locutor utters a typical example. *To be Black* is taken as an emblematic example of racism.

– On the other hand, we observe a theme move: in the narrative we identify the theme of rejection, in the example of the theme of equality.

The typical example shows a child’s point of view about racism and Blacks. More or less doxic beliefs from different historical contexts are repeated. These can be seen as the memory words and discourses.

The pupil speaks of “slaves” which reminds us of the colonial era, and she adds “they know nothing” which points out the belief in a cognitive difference. We notice that the typical example is a medium between the generic and the particular.

## Example 2

Andréa 2: *I have a pal who is Black in our building his name is Sidiki and well I do play with him because we ARE not racist we really like Black people because **they are like us**, as Marion said they have a brain like us <laughter> and what's more **I know some Black people who are nice there are even sometimes Blacks who are nicer than Whites.***

Marion 6: It's true, it's true, I even think that Blacks are nicer than Whites

Dimitri 1: Like Igor he is very nice Igor

Marion 7: Except that sometimes he gets on our nerves

Andréa 3: sometimes he gets on our nerves but we really like him

Axel 4: some are very nice but some are quite nasty + like Kevin

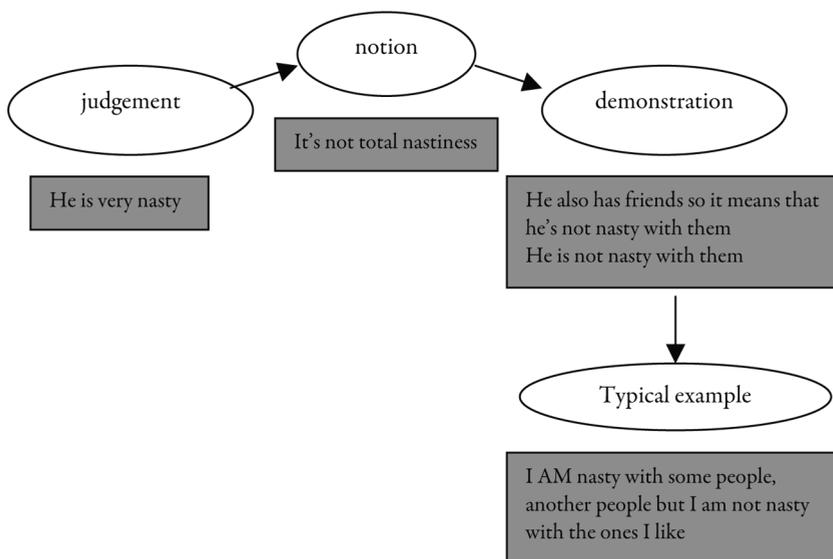
Marion 8: no but it's not really nastiness he also has friends so it means that he's not nasty + he is not nasty with them + I AM nasty with some people, other people but I am not nasty with the ones I like.

We interpret this second example through an affective frame. The speakers deal with particular cases that take a typical value and support or refute Andrea and Manon's generic assessment: "Blacks are nicer than Whites".

The sharing of experience shifts the generic into the particular. Marion (Marion 7) modalises Andréa's utterance and brings an opposite argument.

Two affects (being nice # getting on one's nerves) are put together. The discourse goes from inherent qualities to relational ones. Marion (Marion 9) reflects back on the meaning of *nastiness*.

Figure 3



Her reflexive move is constructed through nominalization (“nasty” becomes “nastiness”) and the restriction brought to the generic utterance with the addition of “with them” which plays the role of a modalisation and allows her to build her demonstration.

She speaks of herself as an example and presents herself as the one who knows. This explanatory discourse is not expected from a child (she can surprise herself) and here we cannot identify her discursive sources. Does she repeat a former discourse or not?

With the nominalization, we go from a judgement to the notion of “nastiness”: lexical-grammatical tools (“so it means”), and the added “with them” points out the moves that have built the demonstration explicitly. The demonstration itself is justified by a typical example, which presents the speaker’s behaviour as exemplary.

### Example 3

Andréa 4: MY cousin she is racist and I try to make her understand because Blacks are exactly the same as Whites because they are nice because me/ in her building there is a Black boy so when he asks her to play with her well she pushes him away and me I think it’s kind of a shame/ so to make her understand and/ well I say “OK I’m going to play with the boys” so after that she gets bored and then she comes to play with us.

Axel 7: That is not

Axel 8: coming back to Andrea’s **supposition** it’s not racism it is some kind of jealousy anyhow

Axel 9: you try to make her feel jealous ‘cause she plays with him but in fact she will try to take his place and she will push him aside once more/ it won’t do any good.

Andréa tells an example, given as a personal one. She communicates her attempt to make her cousin modify her behaviour. Her narrative shows both linking to the former utterances and to the fable.

She tries to give an answer to the first question: “what will happen between the camels and the dromedary?”. She imagines making the opponents play together.

This example (n. 3) is a very precious one. It shows how complex wording can be.

Her utterance can be interpreted through various interrelated items: genre of discourse and wording (she tells a narrative), the assignment, the former discourses, the next locutor’s interpretation, and her enunciative habits.

Our interpretation thus take *all of them* into account:

– Andréa’s utterance is a narrative. We can identify five of the six narrative components identified by Labov (1978): introduction, indications, development, evaluation, and resolution.

Introduction	MY cousin she is a racist and <b>I try to make her understand</b> because Blacks <b>are</b> exactly the same as Whites because they <b>are</b> nice
Indications	because me in her building there <b>is</b> a Black boy
Development	so <b>when</b> he <b>asks</b> her to play with her then <b>she pushes him away</b>
Evaluative comment	And me I think it's kind of a shame
Resolution	so to make her understand and well I <b>say</b> "OK I am going to play with the boys" <b>so after that she gets bored and then she comes to play with us.</b>

As far as wording is concerned, we notice the use of "when he + present" which confers an iterative or nearly generic meaning to the narrative (due to the non-actualization), and of "I try to": thus the extent of this modalisation cannot be determined. The present authors hesitate between a local modalisation that will concern the predicate "make her understand" or a global modalisation: in that case the whole narrative will be interpreted as an example of behaviour that could make a racist into a non-racist.

– The assignment required answering the question at the end of the fable: "how will the meeting go on?"

Andréa's answer is to act upon the others' behaviour and to bring them to play together.

Andréa: so after that/ **she gets bored and then she comes to play with us.**

Axel: coming back to Andrea's supposition it's not / not racism it's kind of/ kind of jealousy anyhow.

Axel: *you* try to make her feel jealous 'cause she plays with him but in fact she will try to take his place and she will **push him aside** once more/ it won't do any good.

Axel's utterance "to push aside" modifies Andréa's narrative way of meaning. It makes a fiction of it like the fable. His utterance is tied with the beginning of the dialogue, on the first question.

– Andrea's narrative is also related to the former discourses. We notice that some other locutors' words are repeated (the repeated words or sentences are in Black):

Andréa [...] **because the Blacks are exactly the same as the Whites because they are nice**

Marion 5: The others are Black and it's not (because) they are not like us that we should push them aside and that we should think that they are slaves who don't know anything + we shouldn't say that 'cause **they also look like us** + they have two arms and two legs and they have a head with a brain and they are a little bit like us + **they are like us** it's only the skin that changes because there is a lot of sun that's all + If it was like us but except that if it weren't for the sun it would be the same it would be exactly the same all of us.

Andréa 2: I have a pal who is Black in our his name is Sidiki and well I do play with him because we ARE not racist we really like Black people because **they are like us**, as Marion said they have a brain like us <laughter> and what's more **I know some Black people who are nice there are even sometimes Blacks who are nicer than Whites.**

– Her narrative is linked to the next locutor's interpretation too:

Andréa 4: MY cousin she is a racist and I try to make her understand because the Blacks are exactly the same as the Whites because they are nice because me in her there is a Black boy so when he asks her to play with her well she pushes him away and me I think it's kind of a shame so to make her understand and well I say "OK I'm going to play with the boys" so after that she gets bored and then she comes to play with us.

Axel 8: <coming back to what Andrea supposition> it isn't racism it's some kind of jealousy anyhow

Axel speaks of a "supposition", so he makes Andréa's narrative a hypothesis. His discourse is linked with the first question at the beginning of the dialogue. From this point of view, he doubts its relevance. For him, the example concerns jealousy and not racism.

– We can add that each Andrea's narratives resemble each other (have "family resemblances" as Wittgenstein said): she often searches for a compromise.

Let us read a later narrative of Andréa's:

Andréa 30: In Portugal, in the past they did not like red colour because it was the colour of blood and they often went to mass so err.. after when we went to Portugal well Mum she was wearing red things and so **Mum explained to my granny** that it is not because it's the colour of blood that you shouldn't have to wear these clothes because red won't hurt you + **so after** that they wore red clothes + and to go to mass they didn't wear red things they wore Black things all the time.

(Andréa's narrative is in its relationship to her enunciative habits)

She seems to think that a good intervention is enough to bring a good conclusion. Andréa is also playing the pupil who answers the teacher, thus her narratives are personal, but re-composed to fit the assignment.

We can say that the dialogue has built the notion and the viewpoint under our eyes.

### *Conclusion*

In this school debate, the aim is neither to persuade the others nor to take the advantage. It's a debate with a heuristic aim. The pupils learn to explore a notion through wording and dialogue.

Favourable conditions have been created to allow them to propose a resolution together and to elaborate notional content. We remark that they do it by repeating former discourses and personal experiences, or given as such, that they succeed to create a discussion space which supposes listening and cooperation.

We notice the importance of lexical meaning in the debate. We underline the relationships between the way the words work and their types. Words can be the support of a move, but not every word. Besides, the move is tied to the interpretative process, along the exchanges.

Thus, the question of accentuation and interpretation arises: what is the good distance to interpret? What is the good distance to deal with notions?

In our debate, pupils through their discursive moves express viewpoints they would not have said lonely. One can also notice the meeting of various worlds, world of the school, of the family, of history, of stories... and child-like points of view concerning values. The moves manifest the locutor's place and his relationship with the theme, they also reveal the doxa's heterogeneity, and that of the social groups in which we are involved in.

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