

Mere Noise or More than Noise? The Interactional Entextualization of Signs in a Rural Encounter

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Abstract: This paper starts off from ethnographic data collected in the still diglossic rural hinterlands known as the Bourbon Mountains (*Montagne bourbonnaise*) in central France. Looking at what goes on interactionally during a seemingly liminal and marginal sequence when an elderly speaker misreads a reminder note for our next informal meeting, it shows how through interactionally identifying some signs as being irrelevant (*mere noise*) and others as deserving attention (*more than noise*), speakers also define what is going on in the broader social context, i.e., interactional text-in-context. To do so I draw from Paris School semiotics' concepts of "modes of existence" and particularly *potentialization* (Greimas and Fontanille 1991), as well as analytics from semiotically informed linguistic anthropology, particularly *entextualization* (Silverstein and Urban 1996).

Keywords: language shift; noise; chronotope; potentialization; entextualization; interaction

Introduction

It is early Fall 2024, I am sitting in Cléo's living room in her house on one of the central streets of Ferrières-sur-Sichon,¹ a rural community of around 600 dwellers located in the hilly area north of the Massif Central mountain range in central France, known locally as the *Montagne bourbonnaise* (Bourbon Mountains), a region of steep hills culminating at Puy du Montoncel (1287 m). In town for a couple of days, I have come to visit this 60-odd

year-old retired woman, to chat. She grew up here, and her parents owned the hardware store that existed before it was turned into the living room we're sitting in now. Cléo spent most of her adult life in the south of France. She still goes back as often as she can to see her son but can only afford to live year-round in this house, which she inherited from her late parents.

"I love my neo-rural friends," she says in French, "but they make me laugh when they complain about the noise. They should've seen how it was back in the 70s!" She then details the various noisy workers who would rattle people's eardrums: the mechanic who would test car engines all day long, the wine merchant who would clean barrels on the curbside by putting a chain inside and shaking them around,² the limestone quarry where dynamite would go off, the blacksmith on the lower town square ... "And if you wanted to sleep on Sunday mornings, you couldn't because of the church bells!" She continues, exhilarated: "A village makes noise!" She pauses and says with a hint of nostalgia: "And now it's gone from making too much noise to not enough." Indeed, the pharmacy is now the only open shop left in town. And while traffic does go by on roads crossing town, from Vichy to Roanne or Thiers (cars, but also logging trucks and tractors) and the sound of a distant chainsaw or brushcutter (accounting for remaining forestry and agricultural activity) can be heard on occasion, by comparison, today, Cléo implies, the village has gone silent.

This ethnographic vignette introduces to two distinct conceptualizations of noise.³ One, which is held by Cléo's friends, is a negative one: noise is what should disappear, comes in excess, serves no purpose and should be silenced, in a word, noise-as-*nuisance* or *mere noise*. The other, developed by Cléo herself, is a positive one: noise as a particularly (perhaps *too*) salient sign of presence and vivacity, in that sense, noise-as-presence, not just noise, or *more than noise*.⁴ This article explores the intertwining relations between ways of interpreting semiotic matter either as a sign of something or as meaningless, superfluous form.

I argue that the sheer fact of recognizing presence—which is necessary in identifying excess (i.e., for there to be too much of something, there needs to be something)—involves the possibility of taking up an object for reinterpretation. To say it otherwise: what is backgrounded *is*; as such, as suggested by Paris-School semiotics (Greimas 1966; Greimas and Courtès 1982; Greimas and Fontanille 1991; Fontanille 2003, 2007), the backgrounding of potential signs is an integral part of meaning making and ideology (in Gal and Irvine's [2019] sense).

More specifically, I show how different orientations towards signs as noise imply the contrastive definition of what Michael Silverstein called *interactional text*, or "how discursive forms bring about the understanding of what is happening in the cause-and-

effect world of social coordination” (2023:7). What I explore here is the backgrounding by speakers of some element of discursive interaction in the process of interactional entextualization (Silverstein and Urban 1996), the process through which *what is going on interactionally* becomes accountable for, describable, citable, but also replicable in another event. I focus, in particular, on how this is done through defining what is marginal, residual, irrelevant, or indeterminate, which I broadly term *noise*. This process can be understood as a case of what linguistic anthropologists have called *erasure* (Irvine and Gal 2000; Gal and Irvine 2019) or what Greimassian semioticians have called *potentialization* (Fontanille 2007). Here, I favor the latter as it stresses the idea that backgrounded/erased signs remain up for uptake somewhere or sometime.

In what follows, I start out by questioning the introductory vignette, looking into how the two complementary ways of addressing noise presuppose different norms, which are socially, geographically, historically—in a word, culturally—situated. The point here is not to identify what counts as noise or how it counts as noise in the absolute; rather, it is how speakers and interpreters define what counts as less-than-meaningful and how this implies contrasting ways of orienting toward semiotic matter: either as deserving to be fully forsaken or as being up for reanalysis and recontextualization. I then link up this introductory vignette with its own relevant context of occurrence by briefly presenting the history of the village, conversely suggesting that defining what is or isn’t noise depends on historical and political conditions which orient interpretation and determination. This history, and in particular the place of diglossia and language shift (from Patois to French) within it, raises the distinction between what is *mere noise* and what is *more than noise*. As we will see through my ethnography, Patois is, in some occasions, treated as little more than noise; in others, as (much) more than that.

To show this, I analyze a specific interaction that I had in 2014 with two elderly informants. In this interaction, we suffered an organizational mishap—missing our appointment to meet and talk in Patois. This led to an attempt to better organize our next meeting by writing down its time and date. This interaction provides occasion to understand the semiotics of qualifying and disqualifying noise. Considering, with Michael Silverstein, that “an index is indeterminate in contextualizing capacity without implying some functional metapragmatic, some ‘interpretant,’ as Peirce termed it, that is a determining convention” (2023:155), I look at how my interlocutors position themselves with relations to what is fully (usually referentially) meaningful, in distinction to what is treated either as less than meaningful (mere noise) or as tangentially, obliquely meaningful (more than noise). I suggest that through two opposite processes, one clearing signal from *mere noise* and the other enriching it with what can now be considered as *more than noise*, they manage to hedge indeterminacy and maintain the incidence of their voice as fully meaningful, always against a backdrop of residual noise, potentially up for reinterpretation.⁵

I conclude by stressing how the analysis of this little more than five minutes of interaction is infused with processes of hedging indeterminacy—of *potentializing* through defining some signs as mere noise—and of reanalysis—of *remarking* the salience of some sign as more than noise. By understanding the semiotics of noise as what people orient against and what orients them towards something else, I suggest that interactional entextualization is always a question of qualifying the boundaries between the fully meaningful and the relatively meaningless, a blurry borderland I term *noise*.

Qualifying and Disqualifying Noise

Two Takes on Noise and Two Village Chronotopes

In his 1980 book, *The Parasite*, philosopher Michel Serre points out that in Latin languages the term for parasite, that which takes without giving, is also used to talk about static in a sound signal (Serres 1980:11, 1982). This usage stems from an ellipsis of “*bruit parasite*” (literally, parasitic noise), which emerged with the development of radioelectric communication (Rey et al. 2006). As Paul Kockelman points out, drawing on Claude Shannon’s work on telecommunications (2017:33–34), a signal is always produced against a backdrop of noise, or what the signal is not, and what can cause it not to reach its intended destination. In this sense, noise is what degrades the signal and can, in some cases, make it imperceptible by the intended receiver.

Cléo’s neo-rural friends’ take on noise as nuisance fits this understanding of noise as parasite: it *takes* place in a space which it disturbs without *giving* anything (in terms of referential meaning in particular). This perspective on noise as turbulence or disturbance conversely contributes to defining what the signal *should* be like (without noise), and in this case a stereotype of the village which the formerly urbanite dwellers long for: a quiet place preserved from noise, the latter presumably being associated with the city. Indeed, by qualifying them as neo-rural, Cléo frames their trajectory from the city to the countryside as relevant to their understanding and orientation toward what is qualified as “noise.” This trajectory undergirds the existence of a specific village chronotope (Bakhtin 1981) built in synchronic contrast with the city: the quiet village, which one can indeed experience nowadays, especially after hours on a winter night in the very center of town.

On the other hand, static (or parasitic noise) in a radioelectric channel might also suggest that the channel is open for communication, that is, that there is potential signal (in Manning’s [2018:67–68] terms there is “phatic contact”).⁶ This is what Cléo points out in her own analysis of noise in the village. Noise doesn’t come from nowhere and, therefore, never *just* takes without giving. If aptly analyzed, it can also give information about its context, or rather, reframed contextually, what was once considered as noise can also be understood as full of signs of (valued) presence. For instance, the resonating rattling of a chain inside a wooden barrel can become the sign of someone being there moving these

items around, and just by this fact, be a sign of presence (including of the further lively presences presupposed: the emptying of the barrel by it being drunk in the local inn, the social activity around the drinking, etc.)

Yet, in Cléo's analysis the relevant contrast is not only synchronic (village versus city, locals versus transplants), it is also diachronic (itself signaled by the prefix "neo" in "neo-rural"): the noisy (past) village is not qualified as a function of its difference with regards to the city, but through its distinction from what it has become today. This chronotope is therefore locally centered and historic, as opposed to the neo-rural's one which is geographically differential and a-historic.

Articulating Noise-as-nuisance and Noise-as-presence

It seems that noise-as-nuisance and noise-as-presence share asymmetric relations. For one, for there to be anything like nuisance, or even disturbance or turbulence, something that is not noise needs to be potentially present—but arguably, not the reverse: we often imagine the possibility of presence without disturbance. Yet perhaps it is better to say that disturbance itself is a reinterpretative evaluation of something more fundamental, of the unanalyzed presence of something that's just there.⁷ That is, something can only ever appear against the backdrop of something else, its ground, for which this *something* is a figure. Noise and signal, thus, would only ever be possible positions in a relationship, and not essential qualities linked to forms: what sounds like noise from one perspective may be heard as music from another.

Cléo's example is a case in point. Though she doesn't question the definition of noise as such, taking for granted the fact that what her friends call "noise" is the same thing she calls "noise," she does draw a distinction between just noise (mere noise) and noise as an index of *something else* (more than noise). In this sense, we can understand presence—that of the quarry workers, of the wine merchant, of the mechanic, the blacksmith and the priest, all at the same time—as bearing a surplus, something whose significance is perspectival, variably considered as inessential and collateral or essential and meaningful. While the mechanic is meant to fix cars, should there be a quieter method to do so, it would be acceptable for the person irritated by the clanging of work. Yet, from another point of view, the howling of a car engine may give the mechanic, and his client, indications as to how this engine is working.⁸

In short, what seems central in the conception of noise, even understood as a sign of presence, is the idea of residue or excess, of *something else existing in surplus of what is or should be the essential character of something* (Inoue 2006). Arguably, the re-analysis of noise-as-disturbance into noise-as-presence (of something) resembles the process of identifying noise. Indeed, when something is analyzed as *just noise*, potentially meaningful

or relevant elements of that thing are qualified as inessential. In this sense, Cléo's identifying of signs of presence in her recollection of noise is an analysis of what is noise to noise: noise became ground for the emergence of oblique signs which had been overshadowed by the reduction of something to *mere noise*. Cléo and her friends have both already experienced some particularly salient phonic matter capable of covering up other sounds, disturbing, or out-noising an interaction. It is this fact of sharing a common (though not necessarily co-occurrent) experience of something treated as *noise*, which brings them together in the distinction between what *is* and *isn't* noise.

Defining Noise as Entextualization

However, on a higher scale, Cléo brings forth a dissensus on *what constitutes too much noise*, and what is *not enough*, or on the value of the noise one can experience nowadays in the village (see Kockelman 2022). The nostalgia she manifests is a result of the village becoming *too quiet* by her standards, rather than a positive love for anything called noise. From this point of view, although there is indeed agreement on the fact that something is called noise, both the specific definition of a threshold for noise and, implied, of what counts as noise are still up for debate.

This shows another aspect of the definition of noise: it is context-dependent, or to invert the perspective, looking at what counts as noise to whom tells us something about the context, but also, to what those in that context take to be going on or happening in that social world. Noise, thus, is an *indexical sign*. And it is one that is constituted as such through a semiotic process which linguistic anthropologists call *entextualization* (Silverstein and Urban 1996), the way by which co-occurring signs emergently frame each other, cohering as "text" in relationship to "context." Indeed, defining noise as nuisance projects some signs into what appears to be the background, not the focus of discourse, and contrastively brings forth and into focus others.⁹ Conversely, noise participates in, and emerges as noise (as nuisance, as presence) through a process, and produces not only an experiential envelope of qualia and affects (sound, nuisance, etc.) but also what Silverstein (1993) calls an *interactional text*, a pragmatic doing of social significance among situated actors. Minimally, entextualizing something as noise says something about the position of the interpreter. And this is not just due to personal inclination, but also (and, arguably, critically) to social norms and socialization, as the neo-rurals' complaints and Cléo's mild critique show.

In Cléo's account, noise is meaningful, even desirable (to a certain extent), and she analyzes the quiet village as a degraded form of the noisy village, one which could do with a bit more noise (and life). The depicted neo-rurals analyze the quiet village as the object of desire, even perhaps the image of rural primitivity, away from the tumult and corruption of capitalist urban commerce and industry (see, e.g., Williams 1973). Indeed, Cléo seems

to be answering to (and hence presupposing) this vision of the village. As processes of entextualization, defining noise as nuisance in the village brings about the image of the silent rural village chronotope (a [meta-]text), within an undesirable and noisy (meta-)context. On the other hand, defining the current village in distinction with its historical state entails its contrasting from its former self, the (meta-)context within which the chronotope of the boring, fading village emerges as a (meta-)text. These two trajectories of analysis, or perspectives, are situated: one has come from the city into the village (the neo-rurals) while the other has moved outward then back in (Cléo). The village itself, as Cléo recalls, has undergone significant changes. In the following section, I look at some of the historical transformations that Cléo's narrative indexically presupposes, most important of which are those that have led to language shift.

History and Sociolinguistics in the Village

While something like a quiet village can rather easily be experienced in the center of Ferrières nowadays, as Cléo's narrative indicates, in the past the village was a lively, loud place. If one asks the village's 60-year-old-plus inhabitants, like Cléo they will easily recall the several fairs that took place each month, start counting the former more or less official cafés that served drinks, and list the various shops that were open back then. Older inhabitants will also account for the fact that "back in the day, everyone spoke *Patois*," referring to the local Romance vernacular, now only spoken on a daily basis by older inhabitants.

Ferrières, Its Golden Age and Decline

Historically, Ferrières was one of the most important towns in the region (Batissier 1837:290), and though it was never an administrative center, it still hosted cattle markets that drew sellers and buyers from the nearby communities both in the Allier and Puy-de-Dôme *départements* at least once a month. With the development of roads and the automobile, such secondary markets became irrelevant (Groshens 1980:180) and, over the second half of the twentieth century, the town lost its importance in the local livestock economy. Up to the after-war period, local agriculture was based on sharecropping, where families of agricultural workers living on estates paid part of the harvest and cattle to the landlord as rent. This made them highly dependent on the harvest to feed their family and usually kept these families in relative poverty. Though the Allier *département* was one where sharecropping existed for the longest in France, it had also disappeared in the late 1980s (Cochet 2004:1, 13–14).

Yet another factor in the transformation of rural life in the area was the development of mechanization. Indeed, the steep hills that had been cultivated in the past for subsistence were not easily accessible to farming machinery or adequate for the development of

industrial intensive agriculture. As many agricultural lots were turned into planted pine forest, the farming population diminished dramatically, just as the general population did.

Ferrières was also a local center for extraction and transformation of quicklime, with quarries in and around the town center, as Cléo mentioned to me, and a great number of lime kilns, which remained active until the after-war period. Here, too, the development of roads and transportation reduced its competitiveness, and limestone production also stopped over the second half of the twentieth century. Another facet of this residual industry in Ferrières were small ironworks, and one factory remained in activity until the late 1980s. Nowadays, very little employment is available in the village or those around, and workers have been pouring into the cities nearby to find employment.

Hence, the village faces a dilemma. In order to maintain the resources allocated by the French state to the municipality, and to be able to provide for the day-to-day costs, it has to keep the number of official dwellers stable. This is why the mayors have been active over the years in trying to attract people into the village. This is carried out mainly through trying to maintain commercial activity in the village, on the one hand, and the development of tourism, on the other. As we can see, the lively and noisy village nostalgically recollected by Cléo is not just an abstract and ideal projection; it is also linked to a very concrete local level policy involving, for example, financial support for maintaining a bakery and convenience store in town (unsuccessfully for the moment), and having itinerant retailers come to town on a weekly basis. On the other hand, this comes in tension with the neo-rural inhabitants who come looking for quiet and “nature.”

Language Shift

As Asif Agha (2015) has pointed out, Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope is not only linked to time, space and images of the human being, but also to language, register, and, as I argue here, entextualization. Chronotopes emerge, transform, and are maintained through what Agha calls *chronotopic formulation*: that is, the way in which event-specific discursive activity lays out (or “formulates”) spacetime relations (“chronotopes”) wherein social actors and objects of semiosis come to be situated. In her account, Cléo uses language—tense, aspect, mode in particular, but also lexical noun-phrases like “in the 1970s”—to locate her own trajectory with relations to the village, and in distinction with the figure of her neo-rural friends.

However, language is not just important because it is used to denotatively draw out a chronotope, but also because a language or one of its registers can be associated with a chronotope. As mentioned, the Romance vernacular qualified locally as “*patois de va Farrère*” (Patois from Ferrières) is associated to the Golden Age village. Just like the noise produced by the various professionals Cléo recalls, the sounds of Patois may be

interpreted both as signs of the presence of a fading (and somewhat desirable) past; or, alternatively, as turbulence or inessential surplus in a signal oriented towards Standard French as the normative (national) center. Both interpretations can overlap, or one and the same person can alternatively refer to both, but this orientation, just like orientation towards noise in the village, can be understood as part and parcel of particular normative expectations sometimes linked to personal trajectories within structured social chronotopes.

In the village, Patois is usually qualified by locals as an irregular, grammatically incoherent ensemble of sound. It is less than a language, a degraded version of Standard French: *français écorché* “flayed French,” as (Romance) vernaculars are more generally qualified in other parts of France too. Not only degenerate, Patois is also sometimes qualified as an old (primitive) version of French, and these associated qualities also contribute to making it undesirable as an object of teaching or learning.

Nevertheless, what both orientations towards Patois (as degenerate or as primitive) share, are its association to the past: after the Second World War, it became usual to not speak Patois directly to one’s children, and most people under 70 today would self-qualify as passive speakers. Though a common stereotype tends to isolate linguistic practice in schools and associate it with (corporal) punishment, in Ferrières, speaking Patois or nonstandard French in school, *like any other mistake* would lead to such punishment. Schooling took place in French, and the majority of rural children who first came to school had only very limited to no knowledge of Standard French. This gap between some monolingual Patois-speaking schoolchildren and the monolingual French expected of them caused these children to sometimes face strong misunderstanding and discrimination (Danos 2020).

Nevertheless, as shown by Anne-Marie Thiesse (1997), the stereotype of an ultra-violent discrimination against all languages other than French should be put in perspective with the fact that within the national project, local schools also valued local specificity. The project of nation building involved getting children to first love their small country (i.e., the rural countryside they grew up in) so as to come to love the great one: France. Therefore, the opposition between Patois and Standard French is not simply one of exclusion; its exclusion rests on the feeling of endearing nostalgia for a vernacular which was both associated to rurality, coarseness, and the primitivity of the past, as well as metaphorized in relation with the maternal womb.

Two contradictory dynamics have contributed to the ongoing shift away from Patois to French: on the one hand, people have been deserting the town, due to lack of employment, and, on the other hand, there is a pull to attract people to come into town,

by staging it as a peaceful and preserved periphery for monolingual French speakers from elsewhere (Danos 2022:190–93). The first dynamic is oriented to French and the urban, industrial world, and in so doing effaces Patois; the second is as well, but in a folkloristic development of green tourism that leaves a place for Patois as a sign of desired rurality and romanticized primitivity.

Notably, as I hinted, in the village, the memory of a time when there were many cafés is also that of a time when “everyone” spoke Patois. In this sense, there is a correspondence between the gradual quieting down of the village and its linguistic gallicization (and perhaps more generally standardization). Could Patois, thus, be considered like noise that needs to be filtered out of correct speech? Or, from another perspective, could its noisy quality remain as a witness of a lively past?



Figure 1. The town center of Ferrières, France

Doing Research on Language and Meeting My Hosts

In the mid-2010s, for my dissertation research I set out to know more about the relations between language and territory in discourse in this rural hinterland where I had spent some of my childhood holidays at my maternal grandfather’s house. My venture to know more about Patois in the village originated in the childhood experience of visiting the kitchen of a working-class old lady who had worked for my great-grandparents. We would visit her with my older sister every time we were in the village, and she would welcome us in the afternoon with a blackcurrant drink, candy, and a few words to teach us in Patois. This woman had long passed away, and I’d forgotten most of the Patois I had known when I returned to the village with a research project which involved having conversations in Patois (Danos 2019).

Although I had a few contacts in and around the village, I decided to start out by visiting the local tourist office. The shop is located on the upper village square (Figure 1). It is typically a place where foreigners will stop for information about what tourist activities the area has to offer. The store also sells local products (mainly for tourists) and books. The shopkeeper, having sold me books about Patois, suggested I should ask one of the customers if she could teach me. This customer declined to help me but showed me Néné's house and told me I should go ask her. I did, and Néné became one of my main interlocutors and conversation partners in Patois.

During my stays in Ferrières, I spent much time with Néné and her cousin, Danielle, both in their 80s, who had accepted to teach me Patois over afternoon coffee (Danos 2022:194–96). The younger cousin, Néné, usually welcomed us to her kitchen in her home in the village center, and we would spend up to three hours speaking in and about Patois, about the country around, about the olden days, which always entailed talking about what things had become, and what was going on here and now. During our meetings, we shared coffee, pie, and cookies, as well as information. I might convey news about the surroundings that I heard from hunters in the hills or at the bar, two sites of more stereotypically masculine gossip (Brenneis 1984:28–47; Besnier 2009:14) in contrast to the female-coded kitchen. For their part, the cousins would talk about their own daily experience, as well as their memories about the “olden days.”

Additionally, and more unidirectionally, the cousins imparted information about Patois. Not only did these take place in Patois for a large part, they also were occasions for the foregrounding, especially by Néné, of word forms and expressions that had more or less explicitly been deemed relevant to my work.¹⁰ Each of these formulations of our interactions—for example, as gossip session,¹¹ as reminiscing about the “olden days,” and Patois class (or “research”)—have their own chronotopic alignments and one may be interpreted as the others' *noise*. However, this relation can be understood as asymmetrical: although Patois is necessary to the two cousins' gossip (it is their preferred code, to a large extent), the Patois class framing relied on what was presented as ordinary conversation between the two ladies, part of which they called “*parlà de din l'tin*” in Patois or “talking about back in the day.” In the gossip session, the linguistic forms used were usually not the center of attention, but the fact that it took place in response to my request for learning Patois did entail foregrounding elements which might have otherwise been understood as *mere* form. Conversely, when foregrounding these elements through metalinguistic discourse (as when we shifted into a “class” mode), the referential content of a token occurrence would become backgrounded (or *potentialized*; on this, see below). In this sense, defining what was noise and what was not involved determining the discursive frame of the interaction. What was or wasn't “noise,” in other words, was a function of what was “going on” during our sessions, that is, of the *interactional text* that

we were intersubjectively building through our conversation (Silverstein 1993:36–37, 2023:41). These are far from being the only possible interactional texts, of course. Indeed, I detail one further such interactional text below that took place in one of our sessions: that of paramedical appointment making.

The work of specifying the interactional text in these events, or the process of interactional entextualization (i.e., what we were doing, who we were to each other, and what we could say or do) happened through particular chronotopic formulations, through signs that oriented ourselves in terms of space, time, and personhood. To do this, however, required specifying a *channel* of communication against the backdrop of *noise*, namely, that which is irrelevant to any form of understanding or what is left when everything supposedly relevant has been understood (Kockelman 2017:34). Conversely, it now becomes obvious that what counts as noise is highly ideological and situated (in Gal and Irvine's [2019] sense). It is also linked to a process of the commensuration of the incommensurable, to use Rancière's (2007) expression. For Rancière, this involves the fact that the use of any type of scale or criteria for sharing the sensuous necessarily leaves out a remainder, a process that also makes it possible to share something (see also Povinelli 2001).

Meeting and Arranging a Meeting

As we have seen, two perspectives on noise mediate and are mediated by contrastive conceptions of what the village should be. While the opening vignette gives an example of this in explicit metadiscourse, it is also entextualized in more implicit ways, as shown through a 5-minute interaction with Néné and Danielle that I analyze in detail below. As noted, one aspect of determining what noise is has to do with defining what is essential to an experienced sign and what is not: what remains can be considered as noise, at least until it is analyzed again. In order to understand this semiotic process, we can use the notion of “modes of existence,” as explored by Greimassian semiotics and, in particular, the concept of *potentialization* (Fontanille 2007).

One day in late August 2014, I went to Néné's home to chat unannounced. Seeing the garage door open in the afternoon, I assumed they were in and I entered. Néné was there, and she called Danielle on her phone. Danielle wasn't answering, so I went to her place down the road and asked around. She was nowhere to be found. This was unusual, considering she always said that she never went out. I spent about two hours chatting with Néné and the visitors who would pass by her kitchen before we got news from Danielle, who had arrived at the house. Danielle, we learned, had gone for a walk to the cemetery with a friend and had then sat down on a bench for a while. Since the conversation between the three of us had been shorter than usual, and as it was getting late, Néné suggested we set up another meeting for the coming Friday (it was Monday), which led Danielle to ask me to write a reminder for her. Once I had done so, I handed it to

her and she test-read the note. Doing this, she mistook the letter “h” standing for “heures” (hours) in French for a 4 and thus read “34” instead of ‘three hours’ (i.e., three o’clock).

218.DAN	trente [quat’/] <i>thirty-four</i>	
219.NEN	[si j]amè t’pas a[van:] <i>if ever you come by beforehand</i>	
220.DAN		[TROIS] HEURES TRENTÉ HO BIN <i>THREE HOURS THIRTY OH WELL</i>
	OUI <i>YES</i>	

Transcript 1. NB: Transcription conventions are adapted from Sidnell 2009:xv–xviii. Sections between < angular brackets > signs indicate the segment on which the comments in double parentheses are applicable. Sections between [square brackets] overlap with corresponding brackets on line above or below. / marks raising intonation. = signs show continuous prosody between different lines of text. CAPITALS mark perceptive salience of segment (typically rise in volume). Transcription of Patois is adapted from French orthography. Vowels followed by an n (“an”, “in”, “on”) are nasal vowels resembling those existing in French. By contrast to French, the letter s is always silent, and the letter g always occlusive. (For a full development on French phonology, see Tranel 1987.) Segments in Patois are in **bold light green**; segments in French are in unmarked typeface; segments in my idiosyncratic learners’ Patois are in **bold black**.

Misreading, Self-correction, and the Potentialization of Signs

In order to understand the social semiotics of noise in this short snippet of discursive interaction, in Figure 2 I have reproduced “3h30” in my handwriting, which is a usual way to abbreviate 3:30 in France.¹²

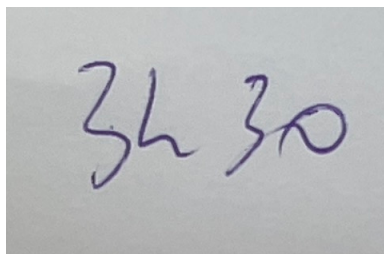


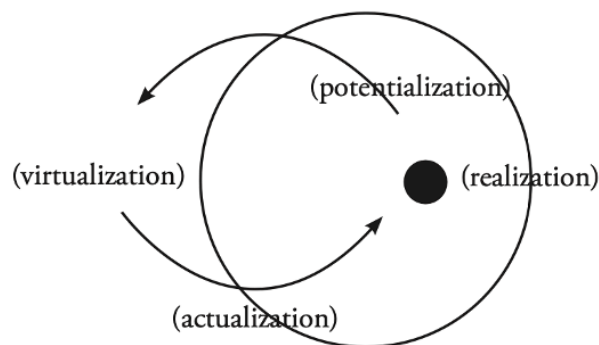
Figure 2. Reconstitution of “3h30” in the author’s handwriting

We might stress that something was considered as present on this bit of paper, and that this something caused the subsequent production of two different interpretants, the articulated “*trente quat*” (thirty-four) and then “*trois heures trente*” (three [hours] thirty). This hints at the fact that the presence of the ink mark wasn’t fully straightforward, it featured a degree of indeterminacy, as it yielded unexpected semiotic effects. And this indeterminacy or slack is exactly what noise is made of, whether it be considered as superfluous and unnecessary or as revealing of some other semiotic activity.

Paris School semiotics have long theorized presence by building on Saussure's classic distinction between relations *in præsantia* (syntagmatic) and *in absentia* (paradigmatic) (Greimas and Courtès 1982:1), and its reanalysis by Louis Hjelmslev (1942:40) into the fourfold *schema/norm/use/act* (*schéma/norme/usage/acte*).¹³ Developing from this, Greimas and Courtès start by distinguishing two modes of existence: virtual existence or “in absentia existence” and actual existence or “in præsantia existence” (ibid.:242). Passage from the virtual to the actual is referred to as *actualization* (ibid.:112). Adding to this, and striving to adapt Hjelmslev's quadripartition, they introduce “a third mode of semiotic existence, which occurs as discursive [sic] manifestation, due to semiosis: the mode of realized existence” (ibid.:112). This mode of existence belongs to the realm of *parole* rather than *langue*, as the virtual mode does, while actualization occupies an intermediate position between the two levels.

The fourth mode of existence—introduced by Greimas and Fontanille in their 1991 work on the semiotics of passions—focuses on the semiotic analysis of narratives and the constitution of subjects of knowledge therein. This mode of existence is that of the “potentialized subject” (Greimas and Fontanille 1991:146). In 2003 (translated into English in 2007), Fontanille describes *potentialization* as the movement back, by a *realized* sign, towards *virtualization*. Figure 3 summarizes the respective place of each mode of existence with relations to the field of discourse. As Fontanille puts it:

The productive art of signification is thus presented first of all as a tension between the *virtual* (the *outside-the-field* of discourse) and the *realized* (the center of the field of discourse), mediated by the *actualized* mode (passing through the border). Moreover, another tension appears, which leads from the *realized* mode to the *virtualized* mode, which is itself mediated by the *potentialized* mode (passing through the border in the other direction). (2007:199)



**Figure 3. Relations between modes of existence in semiotics of discourse
(reproduced from Fontanille 2007:199)**

Indeed, it seems that what Fontanille calls “existential tension” is at play here, when “the semiotic act ... consists in *realizing* a figure, in sending another one back to the *virtualized* stage, and in placing them in interaction” (ibid.:200).

Let us apply these analytics to a snapshot moment of semiosis: Danielle’s misreading of the note and self-correction. As we shall see, Paris School semiotics is particularly effective in describing instants of semiosis and their complexity, while Peircean semiotics offers powerful tools for analyzing semiotic dynamics, reflexive interpretation, and effective causal relations.

Here, the interaction might be parsed in three moments: (1) my writing of the note and the resulting ink mark on paper; (2) Danielle’s first reading of these words; and (3) Danielle’s self-correction. In my writing, the realized ink marks on paper virtualized their pronounced utterance as something one *might* say when reading. Thus, the word “*heures*” (hours) was virtually in play in the mark “*h*”, and my capacity to abbreviate was thus actualized.¹⁴ At the same time, a wealth of potential signs was backgrounded: other possible times for our next meeting, other ways of writing, and the like.

However, this *existential tension* really came to the foreground when Danielle interpreted the written mark, thus realizing a virtualized sign in my writing, and effectively potentializing the reading of “*h*” as “*heures*” (hours). By reading “*trente quat*” (thirty-four), Danielle’s capacity to interpret two subsequent numerals as one composite number is actualized and, what she understands as a “4” is realized orally through interpreting the preceding “3” as “*trente*” (thirty). Figure 4(!) shows how the small script *h* written in my handwriting can be read as a partial and somewhat tilted version of a four, realizing Danielle’s utterance in the form of the figure as a manifestation of her capacity to read something which is somewhat present, regardless of my intention to communicate it.



Figure 4. “h” as “4”

The third semiotic moment we can parse here is Danielle’s exclamation of the time for our next meeting “*trois heures trente*” (three thirty). The relation between this utterance and the previous one can be understood not only as a sequence of possible interpretations of a written mark, but as the meta-level realization of indeterminacy. As illustrated in Figure 4,

and as realized in Danielle's two utterances, both "h" and "4" can be seen in the ink mark.¹⁵ The question here is not whether it is correct to read in one way or the other. Rather, I wish to stress that both are potential interpretations of the same thing, and that, hence, this thing brings along some level of indeterminacy which needs to be dealt with in order to *determine* what the sign essentially is in this particular interaction. As can be seen in Transcript 1, through the poetic juxtaposition of two potential interpretants for the ink mark, Danielle determines which of the two the mark really *is* by potentializing the superfluous one.¹⁶

As can be seen when she was uttering the first interpretant (line 218), she nevertheless raised her intonation and produced a metapragmatic marker manifesting her own doubt on the appropriateness to co(n)text of this interpretant (Silverstein 2003). Indeed, this *thirty-four* didn't fit, as opposed to the appropriate uttering of the time of our next meeting. It is, thus, through recognizing that this number was out of place that Danielle herself potentialized it, immediately treating it as a kind of noise, less than meaningful turbulence in a signal, or as Kockelman termed it "information out of place" (2017:38). Just like Cléo's reinterpreting the various village professional's racket as signs of social activity, my interest in Danielle's utterance of "*trente quat*" as a sign of indetermination in my handwriting can be understood as the reanalysis of *mere noise* as *more than noise*: a sign of the presence of something else in what I thought was a clearly entextualized ink mark.

This analysis of potentialization borrows mainly from Fontanille's conceptualization of modes of existence in relation to presence. Here, our focus has been on the interpretation of the referential or conventional meaning of an ink mark on paper, with a focus on referential content. Indeed, in Fontanille's view, the realized mode of existence is treated as that which is not modalized, that is, that which simply describes, in what seems to be an unmediated way (Fontanille 2007:113). It is, in this sense, quite effective in telling us about what an outside analyst can do with mere noise (i.e., make referential sense of it as *more than noise*), but it doesn't quite illustrate what lay speakers do with it. In what follows, I draw from Danielle's own reaction to the unexpected irruption of a noisy interpretant ("*trente quat*") in her discourse, to show that she comes to interpret it—that is, entextualize it—as an indexical sign pointing to her physical condition, rather than a potentially acceptable interpretation of graphic conventions (due to the bad handwriting of the writer, for instance).

Danielle: A Competent User of Glasses

Danielle's raising intonation when she misread the written note marked her awareness of the inappropriateness of her interpretation (line 218). She also explicitly commented on the

fact of her misreading, invoking her glasses as an explanation. Note that she did not suggest the hypothesis of my bad handwriting.

Rather, Danielle introduces the criteria of “being clear” as an explanation, in an utterance which treats her glasses as a malfunctioning agent that should “make [her] clear” (line 222) but doesn’t. This comes as a metapragmatic explanation for why the uttered but potentialized sign “*trente quat*” appears instead of “*trois heures*.”

220.DAN		[TROIS] HEURES TRENTE HO BIN THREE HOURS THIRTY OH WELL
	OUI YES	
221.FEL	<((laughter)) nin hin [hin hin]>	
222.DAN		[mé qu’y è mé y]unèt eu é m’fan pu but I have my glasses uh they don’t make
	byin syâ in me very clear anymore huh	
223.FEL	-èh (0.5)	

Transcript 2

The glasses further pointed to failing eyesight that required them, itself an indexical sign of other geriatric impairments. In this interpretation, the explanation of misreading through properties of my handwriting are potentialized, and the explanation through Danielle’s bodily affection and their inadequate treatment (through malfunctioning glasses) is realized.

Note that here, in the (referential) narrated world, eyeglass malfunction can be understood as turbulence, disturbance or nuisance, something inessential, that had better be done without, something resembling *mere noise*. But at the (indexical-iconic) level of what the speaker is doing, Danielle’s utterance is also that of a competent eyeglass user: she knows how her glasses should work, in this sense, this sign is *more than noise*. In fact, on at least one other occasion over the little more than 5-minute clip I have been considering here, Danielle started talking about her glasses, even though this was only indirectly the issue at hand. The first utterance considered here was indeed about her glasses malfunctioning. But this topic had first been brought up earlier when I asked Danielle if she could read the note I was handing her.

145.FEL	[((gives DAN the note)) ou /pouyé\] /li:r/ <i>can you read</i>
146.NEN	(.) [\alor\ /atan\ /vèr\] <i>so wait a minute</i>
147.DAN	[/Â wi\ a bin [y è mé-] <i>AH yes ah well I have my-</i>
148.FEL	[/wi\] <i>yes</i>
149.DAN	y è mè /lunèt pa\ /li:r\ <i>I have my glasses to read ((reading glasses))</i>
150.FEL	<((laughing)) aha /bon/ > <i>oh really</i>
151.NEN	(.) <((showing a second pair of glasses that Danielle is not using)) /vwé pa klè\> <i>isn't it these (ones)</i>
152.DAN	(.) /â:/ \non\ <i>ah no</i>
153.FEL	[/nan/] <i>no</i>
154.NEN	[mé] /t'you [vé:/] <i>but (can) you see</i>
155.FEL	[vwé] [/pa klè(r)/]> <i>it's not clear?</i>
156.DAN	[/Â/\wi:\] â wi <((reading)) <i>chez::[:&]</i> <i>at</i>
157.NEN	[oui] <i>yes</i>
158.DAN	&chez néné avec félix <i>at néné's with Felix</i>

Transcript 3

Transcript 3 took place a few minutes before the interaction we have been considering, and my question can be understood as a prompt to test-read the note, as was made explicit with Néné's reformulation (line 154) leading to Danielle's first, and successful reading of the beginning of the reminder note (lines 156, 158). Danielle, however, first answered me about her capacity to read, rather than about the clarity of my handwriting (lines 147, 149). In answering this potentially face-threatening question, she presented and named her "*lunettes pa lir*" 'glasses to read.' Having been prompted more effectively by her cousin, she proceeded to read the note, demonstrating her competence.

Similarly, in Transcript 2, by showing that she was eyeglass-savvy, Danielle also demonstrated that she was a competent reader, despite having misread. From this point of view, the misreading itself came to be potentialized, in contradistinction with her repeatedly gesturing to the fact that she was not unsuccessfully dealing with her bodily

affections, and that there was no question as to whether she was a competent reader or not.

So far, I started by questioning the event of a reflexively identified misreading as a sign of indeterminacy in the process of semiosis. I conceptualize this metasemiotic move of hedging indeterminacy as a process of *potentialization*, that is, as the qualification of effectively occurring interpretant signs as *mere noise* while still leaving this semiotic matter up for reinterpretation as *more than noise*. Here, the distinction of some signs as *mere noise* as opposed to signs as *more than noise* can be compared to a channel's malfunction as mere disturbance, as opposed to its malfunction as revealing something about the context in which it works. Indeed, here, Danielle's repeated mention of her failing eyesight can be understood as a sign of her age and physical impairment. Crucially, as Kockelman points out: "*the channel may be defined by, or understood in terms of, its capacity to fail, in the sense of introducing noise into the system and thereby interfering with the signal and garbling the message*" (2017:34, emphasis in original). Here, it seems that her disabilities and her relation to them do point back to the larger context. Not incidentally, it was also because of the impairments of old age that the note was written in the first place.

Locating and Devising the Reminder Note

On the day we'd been unable to find Danielle, in order to avoid another missed meeting, as we saw, Danielle had asked her cousin to give her a pen and paper for me to write down the date and time. Just like her fading eyesight required corrective lenses, her failing memory made it necessary to produce a written reminder, the reading of which, relied on her eyesight, glasses, and ability to read.

Organizing a future event is itself a particular type of event, what Kockelman calls a "self-channeling channel" (2017:44–45). Here, written text-artifacts hold a central place in systematically potentializing other events and interactional frameworks. Let us consider Transcript 4, which directly led to devising the reminder.

55.DAN	<((to Néné))[a douna mâ] in papi è in crayon:> (.) a é ah and just give me a paper and a pencil ah I do write marque meu agrè pasque t'sâ qu'y oubli in now because you know I forget huh
56.FEL	ah ouais/ ah yes/

Transcript 4

To justify the need for a reminder, Danielle drew on the distinction between a punctual verbal form and a habitual one. On the one hand, she conatively called on Néné to give

her the required tools to “*marque*” (write down), literally ‘make a mark on something.’ This punctual imperative “*douna mâ*” (just give [me]) contrasted with the habitual present “*ey marque*” (I write down) and “*y oubli*” (I forget). The second part of the utterance, the expressive one, was focused on her own language practice of writing, linked to her (contextual) condition of memory loss. These were temporally modified by the deictic “*agrè*” (now), which situated both the actions of writing and forgetting within a time-frame contiguous to the speech event. Indeed, the sheer fact of marking “*agrè*” rather than simply using the present emphasized the fact that this was distinct from a preceding period, which was not explicit but could be understood as starting with her memory loss.

Here, we might understand memory as a message destined to a future version of oneself. It may be more or less subject to entropy (Kockelman 2017:44), and in Danielle’s alleged case, it was very much. Other experiences taking place in the meantime might then have worked as *mere noise* and interfered with this message, making it ineffective. Considering this, having agreed on a meeting without writing it down could have been understood as an orally registered form of memory, and the reminder note its equivalent in writing. From this point of view, Danielle was then in much noisier territory nowadays (*agrè*) than she used to be, and therefore much more dependent on her glasses. Being subject to memory loss also allegedly affected her other practices of appointment making, as developed in Transcript 5.

61.DAN	[je viens chez le:] y vin chi le:= <i>I come to the: I come to the:</i>
62.NEN	=a bin te voué chi l’kevin= <i>oh well you go to Kevin’s place</i>
63.DAN	=chi l’masseu= <i>to the masseur’s</i>
64.FEL	=hnh=
65.DAN	=mé èy ou marque <i>but I write it down</i>
66.NEN	è bin mouè meu [èy ou marque euh] <i>oh well me too I write it down</i>

Transcript 5

While detailing the fact that the practice of using notes as reminders was usual for her visits to the physiotherapist, Danielle used ambiguous spatial terms. She mentioned the masseur/physiotherapist’s place but used the inflected verb form “*je viens*” in French and “*èy vin*” in Patois meaning ‘I come,’ as if she were speaking from her place of destination, the office, even though we were still in Néné’s kitchen. By contrast, Néné, when she intervened to complete her cousin’s utterance, used the form “*te voué*” (you go) in Patois, which was consonant with the fact that she was not speaking from the place of

destination. Thus, Danielle’s utterance could be understood as referring to something that usually took place elsewhere “*chi l’masseu*” (the masseur’s place) rather than “*chi Néné*” (Néné’s place) but used a verb that suggests that she was currently at “*chi l’masseu*.” Here, as Danielle presupposed that the place of utterance was the masseur’s place, she was potentializing Néné’s place in discourse, though in practice, a wealth of realized signs continued to indicate that we remained in Néné’s kitchen regardless of what Danielle was discursively presupposing.

This ambiguous chronotopic formulation contributed to a parallel between what was currently happening and what usually happened when she went to see Kevin, the masseur. Danielle’s non-congruent deictic could itself be understood as *mere noise*, and potentialized in analysis. However, analyzing it as *more than noise*, we interpret it as an indexical sign congruent to a set of co-occurring (meta)signs, namely the drafting of the reminder, which also usually occurred at the masseur’s place. In turn, this became a sign of Danielle’s building on her failure to attend the meeting to demonstrate her capacity to be resilient, in a similar way to how her reinterpretation of misreading the note led her to exhibit her knowledge of eyeglass use. She then indeed went on to specify the details of how the reminder note was usually devised (Transcript 6).

67.DAN	[pasque because	] èy ou mè sou mon napp’ron vè I put it under my doily with
	mon pô d’fleur (.) ou d’pas in mijon ou voué byin my flower pot it sticks out a bit that’s good	

Transcript 6

In this excerpt, the whens and wheres of this habitual reminder device were detailed. The take-away note was destined to be left securely under her flowerpot in her kitchen where she spent most of her time. We can assume that by having it there, she would walk past it and be reminded every time, making the potential event of a coming meeting present, as more than noise, while also working as a potentializing device for other possible activities at that date and time (like going off with her friend for a walk, something much more desirable from her physiotherapist’s point of view than coming to sit and chat in Néné’s kitchen!).

Having presented the workings of the reminder device in her kitchen, Danielle went on to explain how it was that the physiotherapist carried out his part in this process.

73.DAN	[â] y è un papi qu'èy m- qu'èy vin tous lou cô qu'èy ah I have a paper that I that I come every time I vin ô m'di apportez vot' papier come he tells me bring your paper
74.FEL	ah oui ah yes
75.DAN	alors j'app- euh- èy porte mon papi: (.) a peu ô marque eu mon so I brin- uh I bring my paper and then he writes down n mon rendez-vous my appointment
76.FEL	mhm (.) ouais ouais ouais yeah yeah yeah

Transcript 7

Here, despite the fact that Danielle and Néné both had asserted that *they* wrote down their appointments, the physiotherapist was depicted as being the one who reminded her to bring her paper, and who actually wrote down the date. Similarly, in our meeting that day, I was the one who took up the writer position in front of Danielle as a reader. And as I was writing the note which would serve as a potentializing device indicating that other events at a said time should be regarded as *mere noise*, something else was becoming clearer: Danielle seemed not only to be reading the note but also to be reading me more clearly as a social persona, as someone somewhat comparable to Kevin, her physiotherapist. In doing so, she was also potentializing other personas that I might have otherwise taken up.

Conversely, she also took up a position where she repeatedly gestured to the fact that she was impaired and accounted for how she dealt with her afflictions. The writing of the reminder note, which originally served merely as an aid for fleeting memory, smuggled in signs of Danielle's—admittedly restrained—social life, and projected them onto our own relationship. Indeed, the written note was itself a part of a broader therapeutic cycle. Conceived to deal with the effects of memory loss in order to allow for Danielle to regularly attend the physiotherapist—who would take care of the bodily affections of old age—it also relied on the old lady being able to read the note, and hence on maintaining her eyesight. No doubt, Danielle also drew on the same type of device when she had an appointment at the ophthalmologist. What emerges here is the semiotic structuration of her keeping in touch with various kinds of practitioners who were taking care of her in old age (including myself¹⁷), keeping both fading memory and blurry vision at bay.

From this point of view, and regardless of the interactional content of our meetings, devising the reminder note itself implied that they were comparable to those appointments, and thus could also be understood as an element of this interactional therapeutic infrastructure. Of course, this did not preclude Patois-learning interactions

from taking place. Rather, it projected such a framing, such an interactional text into the margin, as a kind of parasitic noise, as that which depended on this prior proper scheduling of the meeting.

Thus, Danielle's reading, misreading, use of glasses and of reminder notes all pointed back to ways in which indeterminacy was hedged through techniques and technologies. They made it possible to have one bit of semiotic matter foregrounded as more central while thereby de facto backgrounding—potentializing—another. Yet such other interactional texts nevertheless remained available to break back into experience and even, in turn, background previous framings and interpretations of our interactions. Just as that which counted as noise to neo-rural dwellers in the present-day quiet village would, according to Cléo's comments, not have been salient enough to attract attention in comparison with the surrounding racket back in the day, reading "thirty four" where a meeting hour was given was considered null and void in contrast with "three hours," which was understood to make sense in this context. At each level, determining what the right place is for something and what's in its right place is not only part of defining the interactional text (the answer to the question "what are we doing here"), but also the broader, less immediate chronotopic context of *what the village has become*. As Bakhtin stressed "the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic" (1981:85). Through our interactions, Danielle interactionally constructed and reconstructed a persona of the good patient, which she aligned to, not least through potentialized signs of her being old and impaired, which always threatened to break back into being realized: forgetting a meeting or appointment, misreading, more generally being disoriented, having difficulty moving, but also, as we see below, speaking Patois.

The Unexpected Patois-learning Event

Let us continue with the transcript we started off with. Following Danielle's reasons for her misreading, Néné jumps in to comment on her cousin's own comments, thereby shifting the interaction back to the initial purpose of our meetings (and hence to the primary cause for writing the note): our Patois-language class. Here, as we'll see, the shift in interactional text entails a shift in what counted as *mere noise* and what counted as *more than noise*.

220.DAN	[TROIS] HEURES TRENTE HO BIN THREE HOURS THIRTY OH WELL
	OUI YES
221.FEL	<((laughter)) nin hin [hin hin]>
222.DAN	[mé qu'y è mé y]yunèt eu é m'fan pu but I have my glasses they don't make byin syâ in me very clear anymore huh
223.FEL	-èh (0.5)
224.NEN	té yunèt your glasses
225.DAN	a[vec] félix (reading the note) with Felix
226.FEL	[-ah]
227.NEN	.h euwa- en- en: patois ne di mé yunèt ((stutters)) in Patois one says mé yunèt
228.FEL	[mé Y:unèt]
229.NEN	[n'di pa mes lunettes] [mé yunèt] one doesn't say mes lunettes ((my glasses)) mé yunèt

Transcript 8

Calibrating Word Forms, Qualifying Noise

Just like the case of Danielle's doubt on how to read the reminder and her solving this by assessing which form fit best in this context ("thirty-four" or "three thirty"), two forms competed. Here, however, it was far less obvious whether one was correct and the other incorrect. Rather, the cooccurrence of the two forms stirred some controversy over which one was used by whom, when and where. This affected the interactional text emerging, and the social positionings of the participants.

The two competing forms here referred to eyeglasses: *yunèt* and *lunettes*. The first form, with its semi-consonant initial is not recognizable as French, while the second, with its lateral initial is fully transparent to a French-speaker.¹⁸ In fact, Néné herself immediately remarked on the former form and repeated it while inflecting it, "té yunèt" (your glasses, line 224). She then more explicitly extended it to me through an interactional poetics reminiscent of school recitation (for an example in a more formal French-Corsican class, see Jaffe, 2003:162–63). As we can see in Table 1, my own participation in this interactional routine shows I recognized it as appropriate.

Line 227	Néné:	En patois	Ne	di		mè	yunèt
→ 228	Felix:					mè	yunèt
229	Néné:		ne	di	pas	mes	lunettes
						(mè	yunèt)

Table 1. Poetics of “repeat after me”

Néné offered a word form to me that she located within a catachrestic spatial unit “*en patois*” (in Patois; line 227), uttered in French, and explicitly proscribed the competing one “*mes lunettes*” (my glasses). In Patois, “*mes lunettes*” was out of place, and Néné realized the form only to effectively potentialize it (if for this specific context). In fact, the potentialization of the word form was crucially linked to how Néné’s utterance was pragmatically calibrated (Silverstein 1993; also see Nakassis 2025, in this issue). In her first, almost knee-jerk repetition of Danielle’s form (line 224), Néné maintains the anchoring of the deictic origo in the speech event (i.e., *te* refers to ‘your, Danielle’s’; Silverstein 2023:41; Agha 2007:39–40), whereas when we shift-out¹⁹ into the “repeat after me” routine (lines 227–29), her utterance takes the form of a general truth with direct reported speech (where *me* refers to any speaker, not ‘my, Néné’s’).

More specifically, the three types of metapragmatic calibration identified by Michael Silverstein (1993) are exemplified here, though overlappingly, and often embedded (see Nakassis 2020, 2025, in this issue). When Danielle exclaimed about her glasses, she was commenting on practice going on at the same time in the same place as her exclamation: a *reflexive* calibration. The act of saying “*mé yunèt*” referred to the object glasses she was using at this moment. When Néné repeated but inflected the noun phrase “*té yunèt*,” thereby (implicitly) formulating indirect speech, she treated Danielle’s exclamation as a distinct speech act, and therefore calibrated her speech to it *reportively*.²⁰ In this instance, Néné obliquely distinguished something as *more than noise*, something unforeseen in the original utterance, but which made it possible for the form to be recontextualized. In this particular case, the use of the phonic form as a curiosity to be presented to an outsider, was not intended in the original utterance.

In her next comment, Néné made it much more explicit that she was decontextualizing Danielle’s utterance. By shifting personal deixis and using an unmarked nonpersonal form —*ne* plus third-person verbal inflection²¹— she referred to potentially anyone and to no one in particular (with a move similar to the use of the French pronoun *on*), a *nominc* calibration. Néné related to the object of her discourse as pertaining to the realm of norm or ritual: she didn’t just describe a state of affairs but prescribed how things should be said if one wanted to speak Patois. In this sense, Néné’s use of the canonical prescriptive form “*ne di*” / “*ne di pa*”²² (one says /one doesn’t say) made explicit the conditions where the compound “*mé lunettes*” was catachrestically out of place (namely, “in Patois”).

Between the first and the final iteration of the form “*yunèt*” reviewed here, what counts as *noise*, as *mere noise*, and as *more than noise* shifts radically. In Danielle’s initial exclamative utterance, the form used is hardly the focus. Her utterance gestures towards her previous misreading and explains it. The *reflexive* use of the form “*yunèt*” simply refers to the object pertaining to the category referred to as “*yunèt*.” And, indeed, it is not fully successful in doing so, precisely because the specific form used by Danielle is unknown to me, one of her interlocutors. Here, the use of a form departing from the French norm is always at risk of attracting misguided attention.

This is, indeed, what happens: Néné shifts focus and de facto potentializes Danielle’s utterance and its referents. We are no longer talking about her glasses, her capacity to read, or to use a reminder note, but commenting on how she speaks (or at least spoke in this instance). As the word form “*yunèt*” emerges as *more than noise*, Danielle’s gesture toward her bodily affections is potentialized as *mere noise*.

In this very short interaction, therefore, focus shifts from the Patois speaking here-and-now, where words are used to refer to states-of-affairs in the world, to a virtual chronotope where Patois is presupposed as the abjected (potentialized) other to French, realized only in a ritual school exercise, rather than expressing the feelings of a speaking subject (Manning 2018:69; Inoue 2006:11). Indeed, in what follows, out of six lexical units that could be used to refer to the object “glasses,” only one is actually used as such, the rest hovering in a denuded presence, between potentiality and virtuality, bracketed out from the here-and-now by being put in a “mention” mode.

The focus of denotation in the interaction goes from talking about glasses to talking about how to talk about glasses, and with this move, the referential and pragmatic value of Danielle’s utterance disappears as mere noise, an irrelevant background for what we are actually here for: Patois class. In this sense, commenting on the form, even if it isn’t to criticize it explicitly or stigmatize it as less than language, always places it at a remove from an intended (expressive) effect.

Here, Fontanille’s (2007:196) identification of two interacting “dimensions of presence, which are *intensity of assumption* and the *extent of recognition*” is helpful.²³ *Intensity of assumption* refers to the extent to which the speaker (or more technically, the instance of discourse) vouches for what is being said: high intensity of assumption refers to a non-tropic, highly referential use, while low intensity of assumption denotes highly tropic, oblique use. *Extent of recognition* refers to the “social domain,” as Agha (2007) has it, in which a form is recognized. In Danielle’s exclamation about her glasses (line 222), the presupposed extent of recognition covers all participants, and intensity of assumption is at its highest (at least according to a deeply rooted Euro-centric linguistic ideology about

interjections, as pointed out by Kockelman [2003:467]). Néné's uptake of the isolated form presupposes a limit in the extent of recognition, since it singles me out as a student of Patois and therefore as ignorant of the form in question. This lower extent of recognition is accompanied by a lower intensity of assumption, with a move from unquestioned referentiality to a meta-linguistic function.

All this serves as an indexical icon (Silverstein 2023:319) of what has been taking place more largely in the community over the two ladies' lifetime: people have been using Patois less and less in practice and, more and more, throwing it into the margins of what is being talked about, the general matrix language becoming French. In this short exchange, the matrix language remains Patois. Nevertheless, Patois as an effective means for referential practice is marginalized and the referential meaning conveyed in the utterance under scrutiny is entirely left aside, with the exception of linguistic prescription.

Interactionally Negotiating Relation to the Standard

As I have been arguing, the process of potentialization is always up for question, especially when taken from another perspective. In the present case, it was only split seconds before Danielle refuted her cousin's supposedly non-controversial normative statement (Transcript 9).

Notice how, in Transcript 9, Danielle both refuses to vouch for her use of the variant Néné had been exhibiting as the one and only 'in Patois.' Indeed, she shifts back to a reflexively calibrated, deictic form ('ah, but I say "*lunette*"'). Moreover, she never uses the form in question (*yunèt*) again, thus metapragmatically potentializing it. How, then, are we to understand this only token of a fully-fledged referential use of the term "*yunèt*," one that was praised as the only authentic one in Patois by Néné but which was treated by Danielle as *mere noise*? Danielle's denial of usually (or perhaps ever) pronouncing the form can be understood as a sign of her emergent marking of it as out of place. Arguably, the form can be understood quite literally as a result of a slip of tongue: Danielle's tongue tip (the apex) didn't reach the back of her teeth (the alveoles), causing her to mispronounce the lateral consonant.

229.NEN	[n'di pa mes lunettes] [mé yunèt] <i>one doesn't say mes lunettes ((my glasses)) mé yunèt</i>
230.DAN	[â meu mé y] di [lu]nettes <i>ah me but I say lunettes</i>
231.FEL	[-ah]
232.NEN	mé yunèt <i>mé yunèt</i>
233.DAN	ah [non] <i>ah no</i>
234.NEN	[a bin] non mé [lou .h] <i>ah well no but the</i>
235.FEL	[nan:/] <i>no</i>
236.NEN	dé l' [tin: é dizan] byin mé yunèt [voilà yon qu'y è m]è mè yunèt <i>back in the day they did (really/correctly) say mé yunèt oh my yunèt</i> <i>where did I put my glasses ((mé yunèt))</i>
237.DAN	[lou vyeu] [me:: y di: euh] <i>the old ((ones)) me I say uh</i> a non me y di byin l[unettes] <i>no me I do (really/correctly) say lunettes</i>
238.NEN	[lun-] ôh ba moué meu [i di mé l]u= <i>oh well me too I say mes lunettes</i>
239.FEL	[ha houi/]
240.NEN	[=nettes mè voué mé] yunèt [vwâ::lâ] <i>but it's mé yunèt oh my</i>
241.DAN	[voui mes lunettes] <i>yes mes lunettes</i>

Transcript 9

Here, Danielle presents a strong opinion on how glasses should be named and, in doing so, goes against her cousin's assertion. Just like "34" on the reminder note was inappropriate, her metapragmatic discourse suggests that "yunèt" could only be turbulence in the mouth of an admittedly impaired, but literate and eyeglass-savvy woman. From this perspective, Danielle once again demonstrated her knowledge of language in general—how to pronounce a word correctly—and, in particular, her competence for naming glasses—another facet of using the item.²⁴

In this interaction, the two women negotiate their positioning with regards to Danielle's utterance and to Néné's uptake of it. As mentioned, the latter started by isolating the compound and inflecting it to maintain deictic reference (Danielle "mé yunèt," line 222 => Néné "té yunèt"). Immediately after, she went back to using the exact same compound Danielle had uttered (Néné "mé yunèt," line 227) framed in a seemingly reportive formulation (Néné "ne di," 'one says,' line 227) which in fact worked as a nomic

calibration, as did its explicit opposition to the French cognate/Patois competing form “*mes lunettes*” (line 229).

When Danielle started commenting on her own alleged practice, she dropped the personal deictic qualifying the noun: “*a meu mé y di lunettes*” ‘ah me but I say lunettes’ in line 230 (not “*a meu mé y di [mé] lunettes*”), just as she did when she later reaffirmed the same “*a non me y di byin lunettes*” ‘no me I well/(really/correctly) say lunettes,’ in line 237. By contrast, Néné kept using the first-person possessive in each token occurrence of either “*yunèt*” or “*lunettes*”: “*mé yunèt*” in lines 232, 236 and 238, and “*mé lunettes*” on line 238. In these nomically framed occurrences, however, this pronoun didn’t refer to anyone in particular, and seemed to function as a residue of the “sounds of presence” (de Certeau 2000:159)²⁵ produced when Danielle uttered the word, or as a proof of its having been originally reflexively calibrated, and effectively used, just as the example Néné gave on line 236 suggested.²⁶

Conversely, Danielle’s not using any possessive to qualify the mentioned word “*lunettes*” cleared it from any specific context of utterance and made her metapragmatic utterances seem more general than Néné’s. Indeed, it appeared as if she could use “*lunettes*” to qualify eyeglasses regardless of their owner, as opposed to Néné, who seemed only to be repeating a somewhat formulaic expression with links to a specific context. This made the “*mé yunèt*” form seem more undecontextualizable (Fleming 2018) than the standard “*lunettes*.” And just like the national language was supposed to convey a voice from nowhere, the French sounding form (“*lunettes*”) was cited as if it had been uttered by no-one, that is without reference to any particular context (Silverstein 2014:164, see also Nagel 1986), though ironically, Danielle did guarantee that it was the form she used.

At the end of this interaction, when Néné finally admitted to also using the standard word (line 238 “*moue meu i di mé lunettes*” ‘me too I say *mé lunettes*’), it was Danielle’s turn to repeat her cousin’s noun phrase, including its possessive pronoun this time (line 241 “*voui mes lunettes*” ‘yes *mes lunettes*’), thus agreeing to her appropriate pronunciation here and now. Indeed, Néné’s final comment defending the form “*yunèt*”: “*mé voué mé yunèt*” (‘but it’s *mé yunèt*’) although immediately subsequent to her cousin’s agreement, was not taken up, or perhaps not even heard by Danielle, and treated as *mere noise*.

Center and Periphery and Orientations towards the Norm

Like in Cléo’s situated position and perspectival take on noise in the village as opposed to her neo-rural friends, perspective is central in understanding what is considered as mere noise and what is analyzed as more than noise. A closer look at each cousin’s respective trajectory in relations to the countryside and the village center can help us understand their orientation in interaction. Néné and Danielle were both brought up in sharecropper

families in hamlets (also called “*villages*” locally) on the outskirts of the village center. The two hamlets, located north of the village, are at about 1.5 km from one another, with Néné’s birthplace located at about 0.5 km from the village center, as opposed to Danielle’s, at around 2 km from it. Both women grew up having to walk to their French-speaking school from their non-French-speaking homes.

Danielle married a man from the neighboring hamlet, and they moved into the village center, where her husband was at first employed in a lime kiln, before becoming a communal road mender. Danielle would work as a housekeeper, though she often stressed (as her cousin also did) the fact that she was never actually paid. She also kept helping out (“*donner des coups de main*”; ‘giving a hand’) her sharecropper parents on the estate they had taken up nearer to the center of town, in exchange for some of the harvest.

In contrast, Néné married her neighbor, and they stayed in the hamlet they were born in where they continued sharecropping until it was abolished. Her husband then became a waged agricultural laborer on the same estate. Near the age of retirement, they found a barn for sale in the village center, and were able, with the help of their landlord, to secure a loan to buy and turn the barn into a home, which they still currently live in.

While Danielle had grown up farther than Néné from the village center, she had moved into it much earlier, and thus turned away from the countryside. She had married a man from a larger hamlet farther outside of town and her main activity was one linked to indoor urban life. Agriculture then became, in her own framing, a marginal part of her life (merely “helping out” her parents). Néné, who was born a half-hour walk uphill from the village center, never left agricultural life until her husband retired.

To sum up, Danielle’s trajectory is much less stable than Néné’s, her position was farther from the town center, and she then moved more and became a subaltern worker in the relatively urban center.²⁷ As we will see, she was more at risk of facing discrimination because of the way she used language. Néné lived relatively close to town and her schooling conditions were therefore easier than Danielle’s. The latter having had to move out into town early on, she had found herself in a relatively new environment where, even though allegedly everyone spoke Patois, normative discourse on its incorrectness was most likely more present. Moreover, Néné had been well trained at school to use metalinguistic devices (in particular in French class) and was thus socialized to use such devices well enough so as to do it with Patois forms (and in that language!). In this way, Néné was able to rather easily adopt the position of the Patois teacher, which she enjoyed doing. On the other hand, Danielle, as we saw, tended to adopt the position of the good patient, one who knows how to implement a doctor’s prescription. These two orientations

toward the norm illuminate why some forms might be foregrounded and why others are potentialized by them.

Danielle, Néné, and the Old Ones

The analysis of Transcripts 8 and 9 shows an embedded process aiming to determine what is part of the norm, what is marginal, or might be excluded and at what cost. Here, after Danielle's refusal to recognize her usage of the "*yunèt*" form, Néné reformulates her initial proposition ("*en patois, ne di mé yunèt*" 'in Patois, we say *mé yunèt*') as "*din l'tin é dizan bien mé yunèt*" 'back in the day they really said *mé yunèt*.' That is, in order to concur with her cousin, Néné plays on and redraws the scope of her metapragmatic utterance, from a universal statement about Patois to a statement about the past. In doing so, she (re)defines when and where Patois speech would count as *mere noise*. Here, the referents of the "ne" plus third-person singular²⁸ were potentialized, and by the end of this exchange both Danielle and Néné were effectively excluded from being referents of the deictic "*ne*."

From having been framed as potentially used by anyone, though still linked to Danielle's specific occurrence through its possessive pronoun, the term "*yunèt*" was now attributed to a specific social stereotype, "*lou vieux*" 'the old ones', corresponding to a new chronotopic formulation, which Néné qualified with the adverbial compound "*din l'tin*" '(back) in the time [day].' From a potential usage anywhere and at any time, through nomic calibration within the chronotope of synchrony (Silverstein 2005) and the interactional framework of school learning, Patois speech was projected to the margins, a specific temporality which was precisely *not now*.

Potentializing Linguistic Form, Potentializing Social Category

This anticipates what happened in a later interactional sequence (Transcript 10): after temporarily going back (again) to talking about Danielle's glasses, I ask for clarification between what I qualified as two ways of saying something.

251.FEL	â mè n'y a [deux façons (.) de d <i>ah but there are two ways to say</i> younèt <junèt>	]i:r (.)
252.NEN		[((inhales through the nose for 1.0s)) oui] yes
253.DAN	[AH Y OH OUI] OH: c'est les vieu:x <AH EE OH YES OH it's the old (ones)>	
254.NEN	[AH NON OUI-] AH NO YES-	
255.FEL	[é lunèt] <i>and <lynèt></i>	
256.NEN	OU[I vrèm]in lou vyeu [de- de- de- <i>YES really the old (ones) from from from</i>	]
257.FEL	[-ah ouais] <i>ah yeah</i>	
258.DAN		[i' savaient même pas] écrire bonnes <i>they couldn't even write poor</i> gens <i>folk</i>

Transcript 10

Transcript 10 reveals that, having co-constructed some alignment through potentialization of some signs as relatively inappropriate, the two cousins now stood their common ground. Indeed, when, again, I brought up the existence of the two forms that had just been discussed, they raised their volume, Danielle switched to French, and they both exclaimed loudly just after I pronounce the semi-consonant initial form (though very idiosyncratically). Danielle used a presentative form “*c’est les vieux*” ‘it’s the old ones,’ again as to imply that it wasn’t her who used this Patois form. Concurringly, Néné rhythmically distanced herself from where or when these old ones were by repeating the genitive preposition “*de*” ‘from’ without succeeding to specify a name (for the time when they were alive). This repetition dynamically figured the distance of these old ones from Néné. As people who were not here (anymore), they were potentialized just like the word form associated to them: about to be said but never uttered, a spectral (potentialized) presence in the syntactic slot unfilled.

Danielle’s final comment in this excerpt qualifies the category and sets a minimum threshold beneath which how people call glasses was irrelevant and worth no more than *mere noise*: “*i’ savaient même pas écrire bonne gens*” ‘they couldn’t even write poor folk’ (line 258). Writing became, in Danielle’s discourse, that minimum skill required in order not to be treated as irrelevant. Framed in this way, it was thus even more necessary for the two cousins to position themselves beyond this threshold and the people that lay beneath it. Here, again, Danielle acted as the implementer of a prescriptive language norm.

The Threat of Falling Beneath the Threshold

In what followed, both women summoned figures of their own ancestors and positioned them relative to this threshold (Transcript 11).

259.FEL	[ah oui/] ah yes
260.DAN	[oui:::] yes
261.NEN	[eh non] [ah non] oh non eh no ah no oh no
262.DAN	mè [mou parin sa]yan éc[rir quand même] but my parents at least knew how to write though
263.NEN	[eh bin dis donc] [ma gran mèr say]ô li:r mè pa écrire ah well I say my grandmother knew how to read but not write
264.DAN	[Ah: oui-] ah: yes
265.NEN	[dis donc] I say
266.DAN	ma belle-[mère o- say]ô ni lir ni écrire my mother-in-law knew neither how to read nor write
267.FEL	[hm hm]
268.NEN	ah bin ma grand-mère sayô li:r mè <((hits the table with her ah well my grandmother knew how to read but hand)) PAS> écrire NOT write
269.FEL	<((chuckles)) h h ha>
270.DAN	èy ou sayi [mâ] I only know it
271.NEN	[quin] vwé in mijon for that's a bit strong (quite remarkable)

Transcript 11

According to Danielle, her parents knew how to write “*mou parin sayan écrire quand même*” ‘my parents at least knew how to write though’ (line 262). In Patois, she uses a modal adverbial compound “*quand même*” (from French) which I translate both by “at least” and “though” in the English version; here, her utterance was marked as both limiting what was previously said (‘though’) and as being considered the bare minimum (‘at least’).

Néné then adds another character to the list of old relatives. Her own grandmother is presented as a passive user of written language. Insisting on the fact that the woman couldn’t write (through repetition and the salient pronunciation of “PAS” ‘NOT,’ line 268), Néné backgrounds the fact that her ancestor *could* read, which is arguably even more remarkable for a peasant woman of her generation. Looking from our standpoint makes

knowing only how to read look like an impairment, when it could very well be considered a positive competence (*more than noise*).

Danielle goes further by citing her fully illiterate mother-in-law, stressing how educationally poor these people were. Doing so, she marginalizes Néné's example and introduces a paradigmatic example of the uneducated peasant, one who probably said "*yunèt*," and who she could talk about with commiseration precisely because *she wasn't like them*.

As we have seen, Danielle's greater instability in life might explain her repeated moves towards negating her proximity with the rural Patois-speaking world. Here, her mentioning a person that neatly fit the stereotype can also be seen as a way to distinguish herself. Potentializing the figure presented by Néné, a marginal, penumbral one, she foregrounds the stark distinction between her and the poor people who couldn't read or write. These people had no reason to own (or perhaps even recognize) a pair of reading glasses either. They couldn't use a pen and paper, or a reminder note, and there were probably no physiotherapists to make appointments with in those days anyway. Potentializing the voice of these "old ones," Danielle contrastively kept reinforcing her own identification as a competent reader and user of graphic inscription techniques more generally (Debenport and Webster 2019), that of the good patient, as someone who could read and write, and who knew how to use (and refer to) glasses.

Néné, by contrast, presents a non-stereotypical marginal character, sharing characteristics between the rural world of 'back in the day' and that of schooled contemporary, and relatively urbanized people. Indeed, it seems that Néné herself shared some of these qualities as a mediator between two worlds, and qualities to "read" what was going on in interaction and identifying curiosities worth commenting on for the guest urbanite (like "*mé yunèt*"). When departing from Danielle's perspective, Néné's passively literate grandmother counted as mere noise in relation to the paradigmatic example of the former's mother-in-law. The figure of this ancestor in turn came to potentialize the voices of 'poor folk' from her category, and precisely their legitimacy in adjudicating what the right word to refer to glasses is. Thus, our host that day was positioned at more of a remove from the threshold of illiteracy, and of one's voice being considered as mere noise. This, like her more stable position in life more generally, made it less risky for her to manipulate potentially threatening forms and figures, especially in order to exhibit them to me. Knowing first-hand the hardships of belonging to a stigmatized category, Danielle refused to belong, despite having actually used the form associated with it. In a sense, the utterance of the Patois-marked variant—and its uptake by Néné—actualized the emergence of the figure of an illiterate Danielle; in response, we observe an entextualization that potentializes that figure, discursively casting it at a distance, replaced

by other figures realized instead, figures from the past unlike us, figures who used *yunèt* without any bracketing quotation marks.

Conclusion

I began by reflecting on two takes on noise: as undesirable and useless surplus, or as pointing to indexical semiotic chains and social activity. At the scale of the village of Ferrières, two chronotopes were entextualized: on the one hand, the noisy, lively village, full of activity (even on a Sunday!), of back in the day; on the other hand, the quiet, calm, but potentially disturbed village it has become. Orientation to noise corresponded to orientation to these chronotopes, one hoping for the return of the long-lost lively locality, the other longing for the realization of a noiseless place.

We have seen how contradictory orientations analogous to these were reflexively implemented in my encounter with Danielle and Néné. I have argued that out of the two cousins, the most vulnerable of the two, Danielle, ended up aligning to the figure of the good patient, rigorously applying prescriptions, and considering tangential interpretants as *mere noise*. On the other hand, Néné tended to isolate and extend signs as curiosities, as small treasures, which she talked about as *more than noise*, in a way reminiscent of school-learning, thus identifying with the figure of the Patois-language teacher. One of them is located at the patient-end of a therapeutic cycle, not independent from the fact that the village population is ageing and that medical and paramedical services—in the image of the pharmacy being the last shop open—are relatively thriving. The other situates herself at the agent-end of an educational cycle. Having been rather successful at school, she often recounts how her teacher wanted to send her to teacher training but that there was work to do looking after the cows so that she became a sharecropper like her parents.

Thus, they in turn seem to orient towards distinctive images of the village. Danielle as living her daily life in the village in a world full of potentializing devices which reduce the blur, the indeterminacy of existence, but also ignore more creative or original perspectives: exploring the possibilities for alternative readings, going for a walk rather than sitting in the kitchen, using Patois-specific rather than French-sounding forms. Her perspective is therefore potentialization-oriented: being more vulnerable, she needs to define her ground firmly, contrastively effacing conflicting signs as mere noise. Hers is the quiet village chronotope of today, in which signs of potentialization become signs of social life.

Néné, with her positioning as a Patois-teacher, adopts, like Cléo, the identity of a gatekeeper (somewhat ironic, considering she never left the village), a mediator between worlds, like the image of her partly literate grandmother. Looking at signs which were once ordinary but are now all but gone, she turns to these signs that, no doubt were once

considered a nuisance—people did stop speaking Patois to their children, including her—but are witnesses of a not-so-distant past. This new uptake of potentialized signs produces new signs of nostalgia (ones that didn't exist as such beforehand): *more than noise*.

My meetings with Danielle and Néné, thus, were also meetings between two orientations to the community as a polity: one both deeply grounded in today's world, shared by neo-rurals and ageing retired subalterns, and looking for the ideal of an imagined silent locality, one where noise is just noise, and should be treated accordingly; the other fondly attentive to minute details of life, of the memories recounted in tales and of which various other signs bear witness, but also orienting towards the fantasy of a past, diverse and happily coexisting village. Between these two, perhaps I can myself take the place of a mediator, like Néné and her grandmother did.

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Endnotes

1. The personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms. ↩

2. Something sounding like what can be seen here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1OHLdAemESE>. ↩

3. *Noise* is conceptualized in the linguistic anthropological literature as a metafunction necessarily linked to ideology and political processes wherein the semiotic implications of determining the relevance of signs in context are central (see Inoue 2006; Kockelman 2017; Manning 2018; Rosa and Flores 2017; Rosa 2018). In continental political philosophy, Jacques Rancière (1995:43) reinterprets the Aristotelian distinction between logos and phonê by suggesting that rather than having one group of beings endowed with one or the other,

politics take place when the definition of what is noise and what is speech is at play. My approach here suggests that what is important is not strictly what counts as noise but also how it counts as noise. In anthropology, Andrew Carruthers (2019) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) have successfully engaged with Rancière's approach. ↩

4. As Nakassis suggests (see, e.g., 2018, 2020), presence is never a positive, un-mediated property, and in this sense, the sheer understanding of signs as being there, as having presence, is always semiotically mediated, socially constructed and politically problematic. In this sense, this paper intends to explore ethnographically and interactionally how signs as *noise* are made present or erased. A link is thus suggested between Paris school semiotic modes of existence and what Nakassis (2018) has called "indexicality's ambivalent ground," i.e. the fact that what seems unproblematically co-present or coexistent is always embedded in and embedding of semiotic processes. ↩

5. Here, I also draw inspiration from Carruthers (2023), who explores how speakers of Malay deal with excessive indeterminacy on a borderline region. ↩

6. Tatsuma Padoan (2021:87–88) reminds us of the importance of the uptake of the Malinowskian concept of phatic communion by Roman Jakobson (1980[1956]) in his identification of the various functions of language to refer to a function focused on the channel of communication. Padoan suggests that the social interactional context in general, and in particular ethnography, is the locus of phatic contact, which we can also understand as that emerging from the recognition of co-presence in Peircean terms. Here, recognizing noise as more than noise often equates to analyzing the phatic function of social interaction. During my fieldwork in Ferrières, my participation in women's gossip sessions in an elderly lady's (Néné's) kitchen was sometimes commented on by her husband who would simply say I was patient, suggesting his wife's chatter was boring (and probably also pointless). There, our phatic positioning with relations to these gossip interactions—mine, of relatively unusual participation; the husband's, of relative avoidance—can be understood as contrastive positioning vis-à-vis the channel of communication or, in other words, a tendency to engage with noise as more than noise—i.e., towards phatic communion—or to avoid it as mere noise, drawing on what Fleming has dubbed "the anti-phatic function" (2020). I thank Tatsuma Padoan for encouraging me to make these relations between noise and the phatic more explicit. ↩

7. Of course, as suggested in footnote 2, and to follow Nakassis (2018) and others, this can itself only ever be understood as a result of profound social mediation, and not simply an objective datum. ↩

8. Similarly for the quarry work, the blacksmith, and so on in Cléo's account. The Sunday church bells that woke up the young Cléo are perhaps a slightly different matter, as their ringing is a somewhat essential part of the liturgy. It is therefore only noise to the sleepyhead atheist not intending to attend service. As people

are not supposed to skip mass on Sundays, or to ignore the bells ringing, the disturbance comes obliquely: people who experience the bells as noise are simply not meant to exist!↵

9. This can be termed the *metapragmatic function* (Silverstein 1993) of (the orientation towards) noise, one that presupposes and entails some signs as being existent, relevant, or meaningful, and others as not meeting these criteria, and remaining in a kind of semiotic limbo: that is, *potentialized* (Fontanille 2007) and therefore always still up for re-uptake. I thank Constantine Nakassis and Tatsuma Padoan, who encouraged me to articulate this.↵

10. As I had said very explicitly that I was interested in learning Patois, Néné interpreted this as requiring a pedagogy which she enacted by reproducing practices she had experienced herself in school.↵

11. Although the gossip sessions are not at the core of this analysis, they were also an ever-present background for whatever else happened.↵

12. Here, it is obvious we won't be meeting in the middle of the night so the fact that it will be in the afternoon is implicit.↵

13. Hjelmslev's re-schematization of language and society had a profound influence on the theory of enunciative praxis, as summarized by Denis Bertrand in his *Précis de sémiotique littéraire* (2000:54–59). Thanks to Tatsuma Padoan for stressing the importance of this genealogy. ↵

14. In *Semiotics of Discourse*, Fontanille (2007:113–18) articulates modes of semiotic existence and modal logic. He argues that realization is the non-modalized mode of existence (as in “he’s dancing”), fully descriptive of some experience, it corresponds to “being” and doing” (*être* and *faire*) as opposed to actualization which corresponds to “knowing” and “being able to” (*savoir* and *pouvoir*), as in “he knows how to dance”. Virtualization is related to “wanting” and “having to” (*vouloir* and *devoir*), while potentialization is linked to “believing in something” and “believing in someone” (*croire à quelque chose* and *croire en quelqu’un*). This articulation is interesting for analyzing co-occurring signs having various modes of existence: the mark “*h*” is not just a realized sign (the very ink mark on paper), nor just a virtualized, actualized or potentialized one; rather, all these semiotic processes co-occur in enunciation and contribute to the entextualization of these various signs with one another. ↵

15. Fontanille calls this strategy a “semiotic revolution” and notes “Wittgenstein’s famous example of the ‘rabbit duck’ derives strictly from this” (2007:201).↵

16. As mentioned, Fontanille (2007:118) distinguishes realization as being related to the modality of *being* as opposed to potentialization being related to the modality of believing, which helps us understand how in this

case Danielle realizes one meaning as *being* and the other as something she *believed*.↵

17. Danielle often commented on our afternoon chats “*ça fait du bien de parler*” ‘Talking helps’ or ‘it feels good to talk.’ In this respect, my presence participated in their well-being and care: simply visiting them, keeping them company, or caring about them, was already something that, it seems, was recognized as comparable to (though, admittedly, infinitely less important than) visits to her doctors. I thank Tatsuma Padoan for pointing this out.↵

18. This is why I have chosen to write *lunettes* in its Standard French spelling, as well as the compound ‘*mes lunettes*’. Nevertheless, despite orthographic differences, the noun phrases transcribed as *mes lunettes* et *mé yunèt* differ only in the pronunciation of the noun’s initial consonant: [melynɛt] : [mejynɛt].↵

19. We use this term with reference to Fontanille’s (2007:57) uptake of Greimas’s building on Jakobson’s (1984[1957]) “shifters,” or Benveniste’s “embrayeurs,” to forge the “correlated operations” (Bertrand 2000:58) of *embrayage*, shifting-in, and *débrayage*, shifting-out, both understood as pertaining to the process of *brayage*, shifting (translated as “engagement” in Fontanille 2007; see also Bertrand, 2000:58–59).↵

20. Though note, as Nakassis (2020:8) has suggested, that just as a pragmatic event is always underdetermined without reference to a metapragmatics, a metapragmatic event also has its own metapragmatics. Here, the citational renvoi to Danielle’s utterance with continuity in deictic reference (the personal deictics “*mé*” and “*té*” both refer to Danielle) includes both a reflexive calibration, in the fact that the second person possessive “*té*” ‘your’ refers to the addressee, but also the more implicit and emergent reportive calibration I identify here of the form “*yunèt*” used by Danielle in her previous utterance, one I refer to as *indirect speech* in the main text above. In other words, the pragmatic event of Danielle’s referring to her glasses is reflexively calibrated through Néné’s alignment in deixis, but the event of the latter’s citational uttering of “*mé yunèt*” is reportively calibrated to the first pragmatic event, as a citational renvoi, according to Nakassis’s (2020:8) conceptualization.↵

21. This is most likely a calque from French, where a third-person pronoun (“*on*”, itself a calque from Germanic) can be used to refer to an unmarked agent, i.e., anyone or no one in particular. In colloquial speech, the form “*on*” in French is much preferred to the first-person plural form “*nous*” to refer to the speaker and others, including addressee or not. In French, both the very formal “*nous*” and the quotidian “*on*” forms are ambiguous as to whether they include the addressee, but the “*on*” form is also ambiguous on whether it includes the speaker. In Patois, there is no specific third-person form such as “*on*,” but where the “*on*” form might have been used in French, the first-person plural form “*ne*” is used with the verb inflected

with the third-person singular ending. Using this hybrid form, Néné can include herself and Danielle in the community of persons who say “*yunèt*”, as well as include me, as a student of Patois.↵

22. This poetic pair is particularly productive in French prescriptive linguistic practice, and the highest official linguistic prescriptor, the Académie française, uses it as the title of one of its webpages in French “*Dire, ne pas dire*” ‘To say, not to say,’ <https://www.academie-francaise.fr/dire-ne-pas-dire>. This is an exemplar use of a nomic (tenseless) calibration (Lee 1997:286–87).↵

23. Fontanille seems to understand these processes of enunciative praxis directly at the level of a social group. Here I am extending his categories to analyze semiotic production in discursive interaction.↵

24. This was further emphasized through the poetic alternation between Néné’s utterance attributed to “*lou vieux*” ‘the old ones’ “*y dizan bien mé yunèt*” ‘they did say (well/correctly) *mé yunèt*’ and Danielle’s “*me y di bien lunettes*” ‘me I say well/correctly *lunettes*’ (lines 236–37).↵

25. The French version has “*bruits de presence*.” which might have been translated more literally as “noises of presence” (de Certeau 1990:197).↵

26. Note that both the reportively calibrated example (line 236) and Danielle’s original exclamation (line 222), which feature the contextualized use of *yunèt*, refer to situations where eyeglasses fail their users: either by being misplaced or by having unsuitable correction.↵

27. I thank Constantine Nakassis for suggesting this take on the matter.↵

28. Note, again, that this form could be exclusive of either speaker, addressee, or both (impersonal).↵

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