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The Pragmatics of the French Discourse Markers donc and alors

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Spoken French relies heavily on a vast array of discourse markers, small words that help speakers in situating discourse at the referential, structural, interpersonal, and cognitive levels (Maschler 1998) and illustrating the import of pragmatics in interactions. This study focuses on the two French discourse markers donc and alors (both equivalent to the English so in some contexts) in native speaker conversations. Highly frequent in spontaneous speech, donc and alors represent important means of managing conversation. While several studies have shown that donc and alors express various discourse functions, the underlying assumption has been that they both broadly express consequence (i.e., conclusions and results), as in (1):

(1) [nf1 speaks about her lack of experience with the American way of life]

NF1: J’suis pas là d’puis longtemps alors / donc y’a des choses

NF1: I’ve not been here for very long, so there are things

In this utterance, taken from the native corpus used for the study, there is no way of saying, from the outset, that either discourse marker is preferable. In fact, past research emphasizes the functional overlap between alors and donc. According to Hansen (1997), the fact that the two markers may occur together indicates “partially overlapping distributions” (162). Barnes (1998) also sees common discourse functions between alors and donc. In her second language (L2) study, she asserts that “donc and alors mark a relation of consequence or a discourse transition” (193); specifically, “both alors and donc may mark a shift from one level of the discourse to another, for example, from descriptive background or commentary to the main story line” (193). For Barnes, donc and alors are so functionally identical that, at least in this second language acquisition (SLA) research, she collapses them into one category: marking consequence and transition. Finally, in a Canadian French L2 study, Rehner (2002) grouped together donc, alors, ça fait que (an expression typical of this variety of French), and so, suggesting that they are form-function equivalents. In fact, she assigns the same function labels to donc and alors (organizational/transitional, clarification/expansion, turn-yielding signal, emphaser, and punctor).
I argue that these two French discourse markers are not functional equivalents in conversations and that a form-function analysis of recorded interactions between pairs of native speakers reveals that, to a large extent, donc and alors occur in complementary distribution. Specifically I argue that donc is used to assert the validity of a speaker’s viewpoint and occurs within a turn-at-talk (monologal use). By contrast, alors is used to preface a reaction to new information usually presented by the interlocutor and tends to occur turn-initially (dialogal use). In other words, donc marks continuity, whereas alors marks a shift and indexes a reactive move.

Discourse Markers and Analytical Frameworks
Discourse markers do not have propositional meaning and do not explicitly contribute new information (Brinton 1996; Jucker and Ziv 1998). Neither content words nor function words, they fulfill two main pragmatic functions in spoken discourse: First, discourse markers guide the interlocutor toward a correct interpretation of the propositional content of an utterance as well as indicate the speaker’s position with regard to the utterance (epistemic orientation). They also play an important role in sequence structuring and turn management. Analytically, binary approaches essentially distinguish between a discourse content function and a discourse management function (Brinton 1996; Moeschler 2002; Rehner 2002). Other approaches can be viewed as “multiplane”: Schiffrin’s (1987) five-plane model; Östman’s (1982) tripartite model (anchoring vs. implicitness vs. expressiveness); Roulet’s (1997) modular model applied to French; or Maschler’s (1998) four-domain approach (referential, structural, interpersonal, and cognitive) applied to Israeli Hebrew. While binary approaches may help to sort functions more easily, multiplane approaches better address overlapping and gray areas that arise because of the typical multifunctionality of discourse markers. Hence I find that Maschler’s framework best categorizes the different pragmatic functions of discourse markers.

Because discourse markers are said not to contribute new information, narrow definitions exclude them from having any referential function. Within the referential domain, they express logical relationships (causal, coordinative, disjunctive) between utterances. In other words, when donc marks a consequence, it functions as a grammar word (conjunction of coordination) not a discourse marker. Nonetheless, to sort out the referential and nonreferential (or literal vs. pragmatic) uses of donc and alors with respect to one another, their referential use must be included: although a distinction exists between connectives (referential function) and other “pragmatic” functions of the same linguistic form, it is situated at an abstract plane. The functions are not clearly distinguished in the minds of the speakers—in fact, the distinction is made post facto by linguists. Thus it is possible to hypothesize some sort of interaction between the unique form of a discourse marker and its different functions.

The Corpus
This study is based on an analysis of a corpus of three pairs of native speakers (three men, three women) who discussed two topics for ten minutes, for a total of one hour of recordings. The native-speaker data was part of a larger study involving language learners; therefore the task and type of interaction were designed to
serve that purpose. The main criterion for the study design was to obtain conversational data. Because discourse markers are a trademark of informal oral expression, creating an informal context would be more conducive to their production and allow the participants equal opportunities to use them at different conversational points, for instance, embedded in a question or prefacing an answer to a question. In fact, both alors and donc are used at these junctures with specific speaker intent. If the data do not qualify as “naturally occurring” (participants volunteered for the study and did not choose the topics for their semiguided interaction), the study situation did resemble a natural conversation in that there was no interviewer/interviewee structure, which often leads to unequal participation and power issues.

The topics for the two conversational tasks tapped into everyday situations, requiring no specific knowledge: participants were first led to express their opinions on French perceptions of Americans; they then had to plan a trip to France together. The two tasks provided some degree of cross-task validation (see Chaudron 2003) and created more opportunities for openings and closings, typically signaled by discourse markers (Andersen et al. 1999).

Results

The results of the distribution of donc and alors with respect to their turn position are given in table 14.1. The numeric results confirm at least the position component of the hypothesis for the corpus under analysis: alors occurs more often at the beginning of a turn (thirteen out of nineteen occurrences), and donc more often within a turn (forty-nine out of fifty-nine occurrences). A striking result is the three times greater frequency of donc over alors, which held not only overall but also across participants, despite individual variation, as indicated by table 14.2. The study’s small sample cannot address individual variation, but the nature of the task (conversation)
may explain the differential frequency: *alors*, because it can mark sequentiality, is particularly important in oral narratives, which usually follow a chronology, whereas *donc* is likely to dominate interactions.

**Alors**

According to the hypothesis, *alors* is preferred at the beginning of a turn to preface a reaction to newly received information. There were nineteen occurrences of *alors* in the native corpus under study; thirteen occurred at the beginning of a turn, with only six occurring within a turn.

*Alors* turn-initial (thirteen occurrences). When *alors* is turn-initial, its discourse functions fall into two broad categories. First, it fulfills the function of “attaque de discours” (Bouacha 1981), or discourse opening, for which *donc* is never used in my data. This function is illustrated in examples (2) and (3):

(2) *Alors*, les vacances en France . . .

*So*, vacation in France . . .

(3) *Alors* . . . Sur le matérialisme des Américains . . . ben . . . c’est vrai . . .

*So* . . . About the materialism of the American people . . . well . . . it’s true . . .

Because *alors* opens the discursive sequence, it is obviously turn-initial. It shifts the interlocutors from [0] (i.e., no discourse) to [purpose for the interaction]. There cannot be continuity here as there is no preceding discourse.

Second, *alors* is a reactive marker and functions as an anaphoric to reprise the information just given by the interlocutor to present a different perspective or an alternative proposal, or to take issue with the interlocutor’s position or information. For instance, in (4) *Nm3* presents an alternative:

(4) *NF3*: Je veux partir, je veux voir aut’chose.

*NM3*: Ben *alors* pourquoi pas dans l’Nord?

*NF3*: I want to leave, I want to see somethin’ else.

*NM3*: Well then why not in the North?

The reactive aspect of *alors* is particularly evident in the English equivalent, which better translates the marker as *then* rather than *so*. As it occurs at the beginning of the turn, *alors* emphasizes that the alternative proposal (here, going to northern France) directly derives from the information just shared by the interlocutor.

Taking up an issue after just-shared information is often reinforced with the co-occurrence of the contrastive marker *mais*. There were three such instances in this corpus, as in (5):

(5) *NF3*: /attends/ si on prend l’autoroute A-un . .

*NM3*: Ben voilà.

*NF3*: c’est direct y’a deux heures.

*NM3*: Ben voilà. On est en Normandie sans problème.
NF3: Ouais mais alors c’est pareil en Normandie va y’avoir tous les touristes pour le D-day pour euh la plage du débarquement . . .

NF3: /wait/ if we take the highway A-one . . .

NM3: Well there you go.

NF3: It’s direct it’s two hours.

NM3: There you go. We’re in Normandy without any problem.

NF3: Yeah but then it’s the same thing in Normandy there’s going to be all the tourists for the D-day for uh the landing beach . . .

In fact, the preferred format of response with alors at the beginning of the turn is with another marker. The sequence can comprise up to three markers preceding alors and forming one single intonation unit: (1) a “receptive” marker (receiving or taking in the information); (2) an optional phatic marker; with (3) a contrastive marker, followed by alors, as, for example, (6):

(6) NF3: Après euh . . . toi tu t’occupes de l’organisation?

NF3: Ben ouais mais alors comment j’fais moi pour trouver un gîte?

NM3: After uh . . . you, you take care of the organization?

NF3: Well yeah but then how do I do, me, to find lodging?

*Ben ouais* forms a subunit that sets the stage for marking the speaker’s different perspective. Its apparent function is to signal that the interlocutor’s contribution (a cooperative move in surface) is taken into account. At the same time, *ben* specifically indexes the contribution as containing evident information, or information that does not give a complete perspective. Affirmative *ouais* (as opposed to standard *oui*) is not a neutral phatic response but signals the speaker’s mitigated attitude, which is confirmed when the speaker brings up the issue of lodging. *Mais alors* forms the second subunit and prefaces the upcoming disagreement with, or at least objection to, the information just received by the speaker. *Alors* anaphorically evokes and reacts to the information by marking the speaker’s distancing from its propositional content.

Example (7) represents an exception. The speaker presents her interlocutor with a problem following just-heard information, yet *alors* is utterance-final:

(7) NF3: On a la forêt, on a le lac, on va faire une petite randonnée en vélo.

NF3: On va pouvoir prendre les vélos alors?

NM3: We’ve got the forest, we’ve got the lake, we’re going to a little bike ride.

NF3: We’re going to be able to take the bikes then?

In fact, example (4) could be rephrased as (4’) yet carry out the same pragmatic function:

(4’) NF3: Je veux partir, je veux voir aut’chose.

NM3: Ben pourquoi pas dans l’Nord alors?

NF3: I want to leave, I want to see somethin’ else.

NM3: Well why not in the North then?
Although *alors* is utterance-final in (7), it is still dialogical: It occurs at a point of turn taking and is uttered by the speaker who regains the floor. This question has a yes/no answer, and as is typical of spoken French, the speaker resorts to intonation rather than subject-verb inversion to signal the interrogative value. Because there is no interrogative word, I believe that moving *alors* to the end of the utterance reinforces the rising intonation pattern associated with a question. One more reason to consider (7) dialogical is that a question inherently, if briefly, returns the floor to the interlocutor. In (7), *alors* shifts the focus from the interlocutor’s proposal of riding bikes to taking bikes. By contrast, (4’*) does not have to carry that burden (signaling a question), and (4) is therefore preferred. Note that in (4’) *ben* and *alors* are split, which certainly occurs in conversations but may not be the preferred format.

In sum, *alors* used at the beginning of a turn is a reactive marker that presents the interlocutor with a problem that he or she had not taken into account but that derives from his or her newly presented information. In this sense, the discursive *alors* does not represent a consequence or conclusion but a new perspective, often involving a problem. *Alors* allows the speaker to realize a shift of focus.

### Alors within a turn (six occurrences).

In my data, *alors* within a turn fell into three categories. First, it marked a shift to a new topic, as in (8):

(8) **NF3:** enfin . . . c’est un petit peu comme ça. *Alors* après on nous demande . . .

> [continues]

**NF3:** *I mean . . . it’s a little bit like that. So after we’re being asked . . .*

[continues]

Second, in a narrative, it marked a return to the foreground (another type of shift), as in (9):

(9) **NF1:** Et j’étais chez des amis, et le 31 d . . . le 31 au soir . . . *alors* on sort et tout euh . . .

> [continues]

**NF1:** *And I was at a friend’s place, and the 31st d . . . the 31st in the evening . . . so we got out and all uh . . .*

Third, in *if* constructions, *alors* introduced the apodosis (a consequence and/or conclusion), a function that cannot be assumed by *donc* (Hansen 1997), so no overlap is possible.

(10) **NF3:** Bon déjà si les Américains sont très conformistes, une conclusion serait peut-être: la vie aux Etats-Unis est artificielle *alors*. Mais *alors* est-ce que ça aussi?

> [continues]

**NF3:** *OK for one thing is the Americans are very conformists, a conclusion could be: life in the United States is artificial then. But then does that too?*

The second instance of *alors* (co-occurring with the contrastive marker *mais*) is not functionally identical and indexes a focus shift. This time, the speaker is reacting to what she just said. In all three instances, *alors* functions anaphorically, as it often...
does, to refer back to a newly presented (potential) situation. More important, *alors* marks a shift in focus: In (10), although we don’t know exactly what Nf3 is about to say, the question marker “est-ce que” indicates that she is considering a new perspective. In other words, *alors* does not entail continuity here but rather a rupture (a shift).

In sum, when *alors* occurs within a turn, it usually marks a shift to a (sub)topic and, in narration, to the next chronological event (sequencing). In the only instance when *alors* marked a conclusion (*if* constructions), *donc* could not be used, so there is no overlap with *donc*.

**Donc**

The argument made for *donc* is that, because of its ability to index continuity, it preferentially appears within a turn to assert the validity of a speaker’s viewpoint (discourse content function). By extension, *donc* is also used to keep the floor (discourse management function), although at times it can be used to relinquish it. Its forty-nine within-turn occurrences out of fifty-nine indicate that the native speakers of this corpus markedly prefer this placement (monologal use), and the difference between dialogal (turn-initial) and monologal occurrences is even more marked (in the reverse direction) than for *alors*.

**Donc turn-initial (ten instances).** The marked preference for the monologal use of *donc* finds an unexpected confirmation in a particular set of turn-initial occurrences: where the initial use of *donc* marked a new turn, five of the ten occurrences should be reanalyzed as instances of monologal use. There, the interlocutor gives a phatic response to encourage the speaker to pursue, which is exactly what happens:

(11) NM3: En France on aime beaucoup plus se poser contre ce qu’on nous dit

  NF3: Mmm

  NM3: *D*onc euh /dans c’cas-là/ y’a p’t-être moins d’conformisme

  NF3: /Mais pas forcément . . . /

  NM3: In France we like much better to take an opposing stance to what we’re told

  NF3: Mmm

  NM3: *S*o uh /in that case/there may be less conformism

  NF3: /But not necessarily . . . /

By indexing topic continuity, *donc* legitimizes the speaker’s regaining the floor with, in the previous instance, the blessing of the interlocutor.

*Donc* is therefore used at two levels: Its discourse content function marks topic continuity through the indexing of a consequence, and, more strategically, its discourse management function allows the speaker to keep the floor. To some degree, *donc* overtly marks topic continuity as a connector, but pragmatically, as a discourse marker, it operates somewhat covertly as a conversational strategy. Native speakers may not be conscious of it, but their use of *donc* demonstrates that playing off its overt/covert functions is part of their pragmatic competence (Svartvik 1979).
The cumulating of the two functions is apparent in the next instance, where the two speakers compete to gain the floor:

(12) NM1: ouais ouais mais bon /j’veux dire/
    NF1: /donc/ après y’a une distance [inaudible] ils créent un cercle d’amis
    NM1: yeah yeah but well /I mean/
    NF1: /so/ after there’s a distance [inaudible] they create a circle of friends

The speaker using donc does get the floor; its ability to index continuity asserts the right of the speaker to pursue his idea.

Donc turn-initial can have a dialogal function when used to mark a confirmation request:

(13) NF1: Enfin tout l’sud quoi j’connais pas l’nord.
    NM1: Ouais.
    NF1: *Donc* toi tu . . . t’organises toi?
    NF1: Well the entire South DM I don’t know the North.
    NM1: Yeah.
    NF1: *So* you . . . you . . . you organize, you?

Donc again expresses topic continuity—checking whether the interlocutor’s assertion and the speaker’s understanding of it match. Donc can also be used to mark a recapitulation, the effect of which is to verify agreement between the interlocutors (here, planning a vacation in France) before moving on.

(14) NF1: Ouais d’accord.
    NM1: Bon. *Donc* Marseille. Oui mais d’la Corse, euh ok
    NF1: Yeah all right.
    NM1: Ok. *So* Marseille. Yes but from Corsica, uh ok

Therefore not only is donc turn-initial rare in my data, but also it is used as a conversational strategy to regain the floor through its ability to index continuity rather than mark a consequence. Conceptually, consequence and continuity are not unrelated, which explains how donc can take on discourse functions such as prefacing confirmation requests and recapitulations.

Donc within a turn (forty-nine occurrences). donc was overwhelmingly used within a turn (83%). It was used argumentatively to mark conclusions and results in 50 percent of the cases, which means that in the other half, it was used for other functions, giving even less ground for functional overlap with alors. The ability of donc to index continuity is reinforced by its use to stress the truth condition of the utterance with et, c’est vrai que, finalement, and c’est clair que (and, it’s true that, finally, and it’s clear that, respectively), as in examples (15) and (16):

(15) NF1: On a cette idée-là par rapport à l’image en fait que les États-Unis veulent véhiculer d’eux au reste du monde. *Donc* c’est vrai que le système de santé, ben euh, il est permissible
NF1: We have this idea with respect to the image in fact that the United States want to present to the rest of the world. So it’s true that the health system, well uh, it’s permissible

(16) NM3: En plus là on est en train d’parler d’vacances d’été donc c’est clair que euh . . . [laughs] y’aura du monde partout [pause] y’a qu’chez soi où y’a personne finalement!

NM3: In addition here we’re talking about summer vacation so it’s clear that uh . . . [laughs] it will be crowded everywhere [pause] there’s only at home that there’s no one in the end!

Such terms also reinforce the validity of the speaker’s point of view. The use of the contrastive marker mais as a repair strategy after using donc is an indirect confirmation that donc indexes topic continuity or validation of the viewpoint, as in (17):

(17) NF1: Ah oui parce que les Parisiens sont plus . . . sont plus à Paris donc finalement mais euh . . .

NM1: Y’a qu’des touristes! Y’a qu’des touristes, américains entre autres euh ou allemands

NF1: Ah yes because the Parisians are no longer . . . are no longer in Paris so finally but uh . . .

NM1: There are only tourists! There are only tourists, American among others uh or German

In this example, finalement is in line with donc and marks continuity of the argument, whereas the adjacent mais allows the speaker to back out of this continuity. In fact, the interlocutor fills in the counterargument that is missing in Nf1’s turn.

Donc can also preface a recapitulation (Hansen 1997; Pellet 2005) at the beginning of a turn and within a turn. By marking that a decision has been reached, the speakers may progress toward the completion of their conversational agenda, as in (18):

(18) NM3: C’est pas un problème. Euh bon ben donc on a décidé le gîte. On peut p’t-être aller visiter quelques châteaux . . .

NM3: That’s not a problem. Uh ok well so we decided on the lodging. We can maybe go and visit a few castles . . .

Within a frameshift, as in example (19), donc reestablishes topic continuity after the disjunctive or contrastive marker mais and thus establishes the speaker’s right to continue.6 The use of the interactive marker tu vois encourages the interlocutor to share the speaker’s viewpoint:

(19) NM1: C’est une région qu’est extrêmement belle au point de vue nature c’est une région qu’est pas plate parce que j’en ai marre des régions plates mais donc tu vois c’est un peu vallonné y’a des . . . euh des pas des précipices y’a des huh des p’tites montagnes, des collines . . .

NM1: It’s a region that’s extremely beautiful nature-wise it’s a region that’s not flat because I’m sick of flat regions but so you see it’s a little hilly there are . . . uh some not canyons there are uh small mountains, hills . . .
Finally, *donc* is used to signal that the speaker is engaged in a cognitive process (see Schourup 2001 for *well*) with the practical result of allowing the speaker either to retain or to yield the floor. *Donc* marks the speaker’s intention to pursue a thought that is not yet formulated. In fact, the speaker may give up on further elaboration, and in this case, the use of *donc* followed by either a pause or a hesitation particle offers the interlocutor a point of entry, as (20) illustrates:

(20) NM1: Parce que qu’tu prennes euh que tu prennes un hôtel et que tu restes dans cet hôtel pendant huit jours ou qu’tu prennes des hôtels différents et qu’tu . . . ça r’vient à peu près au même prix *donc* euh . . .

NM1: *Because whether you take uh whether you take a hotel and you stay in this hotel for eight days or whether you take different hotels and you . . . it comes more or less to the same price so uh . . .*

This processing use of *donc* within turn (twelve instances in the corpus, or 25%) may be viewed as an exceptional case. *Donc* seems to occur at the end of a turn, but the interlocutor is indirectly encouraged to fill in with the unstated but obvious conclusion. The concluding thought “*va de soi,*” that is, “goes without saying,” is acted out here literally. Besides this discourse content function, processing *donc* may simultaneously have the discourse management function of a yield signal. Note that the English *so* functions similarly.

**Conclusion: Alors donc**

In this corpus, French native speakers strongly associate *donc* with marking the validity of their own viewpoint because it indexes continuity through its core value of inferential evidential; that is, it asserts that something logically follows from what has just been said. The corollary is that it can assume a discourse management function by indexing (logical) continuity. *Donc* can be and is used to keep the floor, and argumentative *donc* is therefore used within a turn-at-talk, which explains why, in (21), *donc* is possible but not *alors*:

(21) C’est le cousin de ma femme, et *donc* / *alors* mon cousin par alliance

(from Jayez 1988, 136, cited in Hansen 1997)

*He is my wife’s cousin, and so my cousin by marriage.*

By contrast, native speakers associate *alors* with the processing of just-heard information. *Alors* manifests a change of orientation following an assessment of the interlocutor’s newly shared perspective on a topic in progress. At the discourse content level, *alors* allows the speaker to index a reactive move or even to mark a distancing from the interlocutor’s position. At the conversation management level, the marker gives the speaker an opportunity to interject and (or in order to) get the floor, and thus *alors* is favored in a dialogal context, at the beginning of a turn, which explains why, in (22), *alors* is possible but not *donc*:

(22) Tu sais tout, *alors* / *donc* donne-moi le tiercé

*(from Roulet 1997, 151)*

*You know everything so give me the three winning numbers for the horse-race*
There were no instances of the compound form *alors donc* in my data, and the compound is far less frequent than each individual marker. It is a known fact that *donc* cannot occur, but why? I contend that when the markers occur together, *alors* functions at the structural level, while *donc* functions at the content level. In other words, *alors* operates sequentially to mark forward movement, whereas *donc* marks the end of a previous aside and continuity with the previous topic. The latter is important because it justifies the speaker’s going on. Therefore *alors* must occur before *donc*. As there were no instances of *alors donc* in my corpus, I explored the DELIC corpus (www.up.univ-mrs.fr/delic/corpus/index.html) for *alors donc* and found that it occurs more frequently within turn (sixteen out of twenty-seven occurrences) than at the beginning (twelve out of twenty-seven occurrences).

The corpus used for this study was limited in sample size and duration of interaction. The pair format also favored a cleaner interactional pattern. With multiple speakers, the turn-taking dynamics would change, and the conversational structure, fairly linear with two speakers, would likely become messier. More competition to get the floor might lead to cooperation issues among speakers and to the possible emergence of a dominant speaker. Nonetheless, the semantics and patterns of the use of *donc* as a marker indexing continuity, evidentiality, and inferentiality should hold true, just as *alors* is foremost a marker indexing sequentiality and focus shift.

NOTES
1. Nf1 reflects the coding system used: N stands for native speaker, f for female, and the number simply reflects the order of recording sessions.
3. Maschler relies on single form-function equivalences to explain her model, while of course, in reality, each discourse marker fulfills several, usually related discourse functions.
4. The distinction between function and content words is not helpful here because discourse markers obviously fulfill functions at the pragmatic level.
5. Individual variation along with age (see Andersen 2001) and gender (see Brinton 1996) characterize the use of discourse markers.
6. “Frameshift” is a term usually associated with narratives, meaning that the speaker returns to the main point of the story or ends a digression, both of which are signaled with a marker.
7. Each speaker implicitly recognizes that the turns will alternate.

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