

SEMANTICS OF FRENCH DISCOURSE PARTICLES *QUOI* AND *BEN*

Full presentation

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Discourse particles are strewn throughout natural spoken discourse revealing the locutor's attitude towards what they are saying and guiding the interlocutor's interpretation of that utterance. Almost four centuries ago, Locke remarked that these small words encapsulate 'the postures of the mind while discoursing', and therefore have 'the sense of a whole sentence contained within them' (1976 [1690]:245-6). Discourse particles tend to be highly language-specific, as can be seen in the marked differences between *quoi* and *ben* and their so-called English equivalents *y'know* and *well*. The majority of works in the area of French discourse particles *quoi* and *ben* (Beeching, 2006; Bruxelles & Traverso, 2001; François, 1998; Hansen, 1998a) provide detailed and valuable analyses, with their primary focus placed on usage. Problems arise however, when word usage is discussed without a systematic approach to semantics. The present study applies the Natural Semantic Metalanguage method of description (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2002; Wierzbicka, 1996) to the particles, proposing definitive explications which can be substituted into naturally occurring examples of *quoi* and *ben* without causing any loss or addition to the semantics. Explications, framed in the culture-neutral terms of NSM, capture the subtleties of meaning conveyed by each discourse particle. They are presented in parallel English and French versions (Peeters, 2006) and are tested against a corpus of spoken French.

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