

# UNE ENTENTE GLACIALE ?<sup>1</sup> FRENCH AND AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH INTERACTION

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Different cultures have different ‘cultural scripts’—different unwritten rules about how to behave, how to speak and also how to think and how to feel.

(Wierzbicka 2002a, 244)

## Introduction

We have almost certainly all experienced an awkward interaction with someone from another culture; a strained conversation which leaves both parties with a negative impression of the other. If one party does not speak the other’s language very well, cultural misunderstandings are allowed for; ironically, the more proficiently the other speaks our language, the less forgiving we are of what we perceive to be interactional errors. Although often based on nothing more than different styles of discourse, the non-native speaker may be seen as impolite or unfriendly, leading to assumptions and generalisations about everyone from that particular linguistic background.

For example, there is a common misconception that the typical French person is ‘rude’<sup>2</sup> and ‘arrogant’. In order to understand where this reputation comes from, and why French speakers often consider Australians ‘wishy-washy’ and ‘hypocritical’, we need to examine the interactional style of these speakers. To an Australian, French conversations appear full of overlaps and interruptions, strong opinions, arguments and disagreements. To a French speaker, however, a typical Australian English conversation seems full of hesitations and hedges, where the speakers display an unwillingness to engage with their interlocutor and to express their opinion.

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<sup>1</sup> Borrowed from the book *L’Entente glaciale* (Roudaut), the title of which is of course a play on *L’Entente cordiale*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Waters in press on this term.

In this article I present selected aspects of French and Australian English interactional styles, interspersed with examples from a corpus collected between 2000 and 2002.<sup>3</sup> The participants quoted are native speakers of either standard French<sup>4</sup> or general Australian English<sup>5</sup>.

The examples from my data cannot claim to be representative of *all* French or Australian English speakers. Not everyone who shares a linguistic background will have an identical interactional style, since an individual's personality will also contribute to their interactional style (although I would argue that personality is largely shaped by cultural background). As Wierzbicka points out, 'every human being, and every human group, is a blend of the universal and the particular' (2006, 24). Nevertheless, interactional norms are largely shared by speakers from the same linguistic background. Despite some variation in interactional behaviour according to age, gender, social origins and region, there will be general shared tendencies which transcend these differences; that is why we understand each other as native speakers of a language. As Goddard says (1997, 199),

Cultural norms may be followed by some of the people all of the time, and by all of the people some of the time, but they are certainly not followed by all of the people all of the time. Whether or not they are being followed in behavioural terms, however, cultural norms are always in the background as an interpretive framework against which people make sense of and access other people's behaviours.

## Cross-cultural (mis)communication

*La langue joue un rôle déterminant et moteur dans l'identité nationale.*  
Language plays a determining and driving role in national identity.<sup>6</sup>  
(Hagège 2000, 49)

<sup>3</sup> Some examples also appear in Mullan 2010 and Mullan in press.

<sup>4</sup> Hansen defines standard French as 'the kind which is spoken by educated Parisian speakers and which exhibits no noticeable regional or social characteristics' (1997, 154). While this may seem a narrow definition, it is representative of the French spoken by my participants, who are all from Metropolitan France

<sup>5</sup> It is generally agreed that there are three main types of Australian English: broad, general and cultivated, and that these are largely distinguished on the basis of vowel pronunciation (cf. Horvath 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Translations are author's own.

Of the many definitions of culture, two are particularly relevant. Firstly, the classic definition from Goodenough: ‘a society’s culture consists of whatever one has to know or believe to operate in a manner acceptable to its members’ (1964, 36). This definition embodies the notion of politeness, and which behaviour is expected, or culturally acceptable. Hofstede and McCrae define culture as ‘the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group of people from another’ (2004, 58). This emphasises that culture is not directly visible, but manifested in behaviour. This collective aspect is important, since, as I argue below, the overall interactional tendencies of French and Australian English speakers are culturally determined, rather than based on characteristics such as age, gender and socio-economic status.

It is generally accepted that communicative principles are subject to substantial variation across cultures; different priorities and values in different societies lead to different ways of speaking and interacting. Many studies looking particularly at interactional style have shown this connection, some of which we will briefly consider, where the interactional styles examined show similarities with those of French and Australian English speakers.

Jewish American conversation has been found to show a preference for faster turn taking, ‘machine-gun’ questions, frequent overlapping and disagreement, in what has been termed ‘high-involvement style’ (Tannen 1984 and 2005a). Although these features result in the stereotyping of Jewish New Yorkers as ‘pushy’ and ‘aggressive’ (Tannen 2005b, 206), they in fact display interest and a closeness between the interlocutors. This ‘high-involvement style’ also describes French interaction.

Kochman showed how African Americans distinguish between argument as a simple expression of opinion, and angry, hostile argument; Anglo Americans do not make this distinction and equate confrontation with conflict (1981, 18–20). African American culture values the expression of feelings, believing that when expressing an opinion ‘emotion cannot be separated from its cause’ (1981, 38), whereas Anglo Americans believe that emotion interferes with one’s ability to reason (1981, 19). Wierzbicka also refers to this Anglo preference for ‘keeping cool’ (2006, 47), and Fitzgerald claims that Australians prefer a calmer, ‘unemotional’ style of argument (2003, 138).

This is the opposite of Polish culture which values uninhibited expression of feelings and disagreement (Wierzbicka 1994, 79), and Israeli

culture where ‘sincerity and truthfulness in interpersonal relations overrides the importance of avoiding infringement of the other’ (Blum-Kulka 1997, 54). Byrnes compared German and American English interactional styles, and found that Germans were more concerned with truth and facts, and do not avoid confrontation and disagreement; on the contrary, these are valued and represent a kind of social bonding (1986, 201–202). These tendencies all show similarities with French interactional style, but contrast with Australian English interactional styles, which show a preference for agreement and not imposing one’s opinion on someone. One of my French participants remarked that he felt that:<sup>7</sup>

- (1) Luc: The English have a bit more objectivity in their ways of expressing themselves. They always try to have a point of view that’s a bit distant from their personal point of view. You get the impression that when they speak they have a bit, they put a bit of distance with regard to their emotions ... An English person will maybe put a bit more ... watch what they say a bit more, put a bit more distance with regard to what they feel and what they say.<sup>8</sup>

The relationship between the French and various English-speaking nations is well known for being fraught, for a wide range of historical reasons which will not be entered into here: it has been *de rigueur* for these nations to dislike (or at least misunderstand) one another for a long time. This is evident from the plethora of books and newspaper articles such as: *L’Entente glaciale*; *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can’t Be Wrong: Why We Love France, But Not the French*; *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism*; and *The Arrogance of the French: Why They Can’t Stand Us and Why the Feeling Is Mutual*.

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<sup>7</sup> In the interest of space, most examples are quoted in English only and some have been edited for conciseness.

<sup>8</sup> While having lunch with a French writer for *Le Monde*, John Simpson (editor of BBC World Affairs) explained that the British consider the French more sophisticated, sexy and cultured than themselves, whereupon the French writer replied that the French see the British as more calm, successful and rational than themselves, with their sang-froid and discipline and common sense, as opposed to the French characteristic of getting carried away (2001, 74).

The reasons for this discord between French and English-speaking nations can be attributed in part to the differences in interactional style referred to above. Some of these will be discussed below, with an emphasis on the importance of expressing opinions for French and Australian English speakers.

## French interactional style

*La France, c'est également des terrasses de café avec des gens qui discutent<sup>9</sup>.*

France is also about café terraces filled with people talking.

(Ungerer 2000, 51)

At the very core of French interactional style is the importance of expressing one's opinion. French education itself stresses the judgement of the individual, and from an early age students are expected to demonstrate this by expressing their points of view (Ager 1990, 198).<sup>10</sup> According to Maître de Pembroke foreign expatriates living in Paris claim that 'the French always want to give their opinion' (1998, 22). For French speakers, exchanging and defending ideas is highly valued as this shows commitment to the conversation by way of involvement with one's interlocutor. This is captured in the French term 'commitment' or 'involvement'. According to Béal (1992, 46), the term *engagé* ('involved', 'committed') 'reflects the strong cultural value French places on the public display of one's opinions, even in everyday life and on any kind of topic'. Maître de Pembroke claims that French speakers 'give preference to personal expression on the basis of the values of authenticity and sincerity' (1998, 23), confirmed by several of my French participants:

- (2) Robert: Probably even from the moment you make contact with someone, if you tell them something I think you do it through honesty, if not it's not worth telling them something ... well, for me ... I see

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<sup>9</sup> The verb *discuter* is somewhat difficult to translate, as none of the usual English glosses 'discuss', 'debate', 'argue about', convey the image of animated conversation in quite the same way. *Discuss* implies a serious topic, and *debate* and *argue* usually represent conflict in English, whereas *discuter* implies a lively but earnest exchange, and contains a notion of sociability which *discuss* does not.

<sup>10</sup> The standard required structure of the *dissertation française* involves arguments for a proposition, followed by arguments against a proposition, and a personal conclusion which evaluates these and 'mov[es] the discussion forward' (Ager 1990, 198).

it like that, when you talk to someone, it's to tell them what you really think.

- (3) Elisabeth: Being honest is giving your opinion ... saying what you think, too bad if that ... if someone asks you for your opinion ... it's not compulsory for everyone to have the same opinion, that's what being honest is.

Speaking openly and being committed to one's opinions are highly valued by French speakers. *Franchise* ('frankness') usually takes priority over social harmony—it is more respectful to let someone have your honest opinion than to be overly tactful or polite, which would be taken as a sign of distance, as in this example, where Christine explains how she interacts with her family and friends (my emphasis):

- (4) Christine: And well, I know that in my family we're very open, my mother and I just tell each other everything. I'll say oh your jumper's ugly, and oh I don't like your haircut, there's just no politeness at all with my parents. just no politeness within the family, even with my brother, well there's no poli- well it's not what I call politeness within the family. politeness is for outside, with friends, or people I don't know, even with my girlfriends I don't think I'm very polite.

Kerry: mm .. because you think that if you're close to someone, that you don't [need to -]<sup>11</sup>

Christine: [I just don't] need to, because if, yeah if I had to be polite with my mother I would get the impression that I wasn't being s- myself, not being sincere in fact.

For Christine, being 'polite' is being insincere. Similarly, for the following French participant, being honest is a form of respect for one's interlocutor. David's Australian interlocutor Beth suggests this might not always be the case for Australians.

- (5) David: I do it {express my true opinion} when I respect the person I'm talking with. I think I express myself with people I respect, or if I have to defend myself and say 'okay I exist so I think that we can

<sup>11</sup> Square brackets indicate overlapping, i.e. simultaneous speech.

talk, I am allowed to have some things {opinions} different than you'.

Kerry: yeah .. have you had problems with Australians then? Do you think that you sometimes you feel they don't? Like [Beth said, sometimes we don't]

Beth: [yeah I'm wondering I mean] I wouldn't be surprised if we don't always speak up in certain circum- certain situations.

David: but I had problems in my job ..... I had trouble 'cos I could feel that what he was saying was not what he was thinking, because he was trying to be nice with me, but I could feel that he was lying because he don't want to have conflict .... and ah I hate that, I don't like it! I prefer being, if I can be er true with myself which is not very always very easy, I will. I will tend to be true with the other person.

Sincerity will often be accorded preference over saving face in French interaction; French speakers would prefer to lose face in the short term but project a positive image of themselves in the long term. Béal quotes a participant as saying, 'As far as I am concerned, whatever the context, I prefer very clear-cut relationships, even if it sometimes means being hurtful. At least, one knows where one stands' (2010, 346). Some of my French participants felt the same:

(6) Pauline: For me it's the same, you know where you stand, you're honest and you know where you stand if you like, and for me it's clear cut, there's no problem, and the problem is that sometimes you've got to be nasty to be honest, and I've decided to do that. I prefer to be nasty and be honest than say nothing.

(7) Robert: I see it like that. it's true that, well, when I've got something to say, yes I, I say it

Elisabeth: well you do yes that's for sure, good or bad

Robert: well yeah good or bad.

Elisabeth: but that's not bad. I prefer someone who says exactly what they think they've got to say than going behind ...

This value afforded to self-expression and honesty in French interaction is not the same for Australian English speakers, who often prefer to remain non-committal to avoid conflict and offending the other:

- (8) Beth: I think in our culture perhaps we don't always ... I mean, oh it's interesting, in terms of how we deal with people, perhaps we're not so honest; we might put on a smiley face and, and not mention things and, and perhaps brush over things when we might be thinking something else but I guess that's natural for people anywhere.

This can be frustrating for French speakers who have different expectations from interaction. Following a paper I presented, a French speaker commented that it was a relief to hear this explanation, saying 'I haven't had a decent conversation with an Australian in the twenty-five years I've lived here!' Another comment made by several of my French speaking participants was that they found it easy to strike up a conversation with an Australian, but very difficult to progress beyond anything more than being acquaintances. They remarked that this was different in France, where it is more difficult to get to know someone initially, but once people become friends, that friendship is close and loyal, and likely to last a lifetime.<sup>12</sup> Part of this process of becoming acquainted is of course to exchange opinions:

- (9) Sophie: I like to get to the heart of things. If I want you to be my friend I will also want to know who you are, so there will be times of discussion where I want to know what you really think, for example currently about the Algerian war, what happened, or about Le Pen.<sup>13</sup>

French conversation affirms the relationship between the interlocutors; Béal (2010) shows how French conversational strategies like faster turn taking, speaking simultaneously, disagreement, and finishing each others' turns are ways of showing involvement and interest and bringing the conversants closer together. When a speaker overlaps with their interlocutor or finishes the other's turn, it is because they are so interested in what the other is saying, they cannot wait any longer before contributing. (These strategies can appear quite confronting and aggressive to an Australian English speaker, who interprets them as interruptions.)

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<sup>12</sup> Byrnes also found this difference between Americans and Germans (1986, 202).

<sup>13</sup> Former leader of the *Front National* political party.

One of my other French participants also remarked on what she refers to as a lack of engagement on the part of Australians:

- (10) Carine: *Oui on s'engage pas vraiment.*  
 Kerry: *voilà. on [s'engage pas vraiment.]*  
 Carine: *[on est pas assez clair.]*  
 Kerry: *tandis que pour un Français c'est la manière de s'engager dans con[versation justement. c'est pas impoli.]*  
 Carine: *[ouais. puis c- p- j'crois -] j'crois que pour un Français c'est la pensée qui compte donc, même si quelqu'un est lancé dans une pensée, si l'autre tout d'un coup a une idée qui vient renchérir ou contrecarrer, oui c'est ça qui est intéressant dans la conversation, justement c'est les différents points de vue.*
- Carine: Yes they {Australians} don't really engage {in conversation}.  
 Kerry: exactly. we [don't really engage.]  
 Carine: [they're not clear enough.]  
 Kerry: while for a French speaker it's their way of engaging in con[versation in fact, it's not impolite.]  
 Carine: [yeah. and i- a- I think -] I think for a French speaker it's the thought that counts then, even if someone is in the middle of a thought, if the other person suddenly has an idea which comes to add to or to counter what's being said, yes that's exactly what's interesting in conversation, the different points of view.

Carine feels that Australians are 'not clear enough'. Earlier we had been talking about the way in which hedges are used in Australian English, so it may be to this which Carine is referring; perhaps she feels that these hedges confuse conversation. Note Carine's use of the verb *s'engager* ('to engage') here (cf. discussion on *engagement*), as well as her reference to *renchérir* (see below) and *contrecarrer* (literally 'to thwart'). She refers to the fact that French speakers will suddenly add to and counter what is being said, even if the other person is in the middle of speaking. This is actually demonstrated by the way in which Carine overlaps my previous comments on two occasions.

*Renchérir* ('echoing', literally 'to make dearer') is where the speaker repeats and may add to their interlocutor's comment to show enthusiasm and approval. The following exchange is an excellent example of French interactional style with overlaps and echoing:

(11) Robert: *Ils prennent les jours comme ils arrivent ... la différence chez nous c'est euh* =<sup>14</sup>

Elisabeth: = *on est tout le temps c'est [la course]*

Robert: *[on est] [tout le temps en train de courir]*

Elisabeth: *[on n'a jamais le temps]*  
*[de rien faire]*

Robert: *[on a jamais] le temps de rien faire on prend pas le temps de rien faire c'est [pas]*

Elisabeth: *[on prend] [pas le temps de vivre]*

Robert: *[qu'on a pas le temps] tandis voilà ... tandis ... tu vois c'est une connerie qu'on dit ça on dit 'j'ai pas le temps' en fait c'est qu'on ne prend pas le temps =*

Elisabeth: = *oui [on prend pas]*

Robert: *[on prend pas] le temps de faire les choses comme ... on devrait les faire*

Elisabeth: *oui*

Robert: They {Australians} take each day as it comes ... the difference with us is that er =

Elisabeth: = *we're always in [a race]*

Robert: *[we're] [always running around]*

Elisabeth: *[we never have the time] [to do anything]*

Robert: *[we never have] the time to do anything we don't take the time to do anything it's [not]*

Elisabeth: *[we don't] [take the time to live]*

Robert: *[that we don't have the time] rather that's it ... rather ... you see that's crap saying 'I don't have time' in fact it's more like we don't take the time =*

Elisabeth: = *yes [we don't take time]*

Robert: *[we don't take the time] to do things as ... we should*

Elisabeth: *yes*

<sup>14</sup> = indicates latching speech: speaking immediately the interlocutor has finished the turn without a pause.

The interlocutors reaffirm and add to the others' statements, showing that interruptions and overlaps can be co-operative strategies as they construct the exchange together, finishing and adding to each other's turns.

While some of my Australian participants were sometimes unable to answer a question, or paused for some time before answering, the French speakers were never short of an answer. Cadiot et al. (1979, 98) claim that a French speaker 'tries hard to push his idea, to say something rather than to keep quiet ...—and sometimes whatever the content'. As one of my participants commented, a French speaker will often prefer to hear some kind of answer than none at all or '*je ne sais pas*' ('I don't know'), which they find disappointing. This compulsion to answer and assert one's opinion was seen frequently in my data. Interestingly, one of the French participants remarked that French speakers often contradict themselves, and suggested that this might represent a lack of sincerity. In fact I would argue that French speakers are equally committed to their new opinion even if it contradicts their previous one, and that the issue here is not a lack of sincerity, rather *engagement*.

### **Australian English interactional style**

My wife, who is French, speaks English perfectly, but it took her many years of residence to appreciate that the English used words ... in very different ways ... from the literal meaning to ... precisely the opposite of what they appear to mean. Even now, after a quarter of a century, it surprises her that 'It's been most enjoyable, we must meet again soon,' actually often means 'Under no circumstances do I wish to see you again, and if I did, I would be most put out and embarrassed.' A native would understand this instantly.

(Dalrymple 2006)

Where expressing opinions is extremely important for French speakers—'things must be enjoyed, appraised, discussed and judged; nothing is too great or small to escape a verdict' (Platt 1998, 271)—this is not always the case for Australian English speakers. When Australians express their opinions, there are certain constraints for doing so, they should not be presented as fact, and they should not offend or be imposed on others; it is important not to appear better than anyone else or to take oneself too seriously (Goddard 2009).

These constraints are connected to the valued notions of autonomy and egalitarianism in Australian culture. While Lewis refers to Australian egalitarianism as a ‘cherished myth’ which is not entirely true (1996, 182), Hirst argues that egalitarianism is not the absence of difference of class or status, but rather ‘the means by which we live more comfortably with those differences’, ‘mak[ing] them less disruptive and demeaning’ (1990, 8). In other words, although it is generally recognised that true equality does not exist in our society, we aim to minimise the differences through various behavioural and linguistic means. Hirst traces the first display of linguistic egalitarianism to the goldfields in the 1880s and 1890s, when Australians rejected formality and deference, and began to address each other as equals, using the term *mate* (1990, 7). Renwick also refers to what he calls ‘strong levelling tendencies within Australian culture’ (1983, 21); for example, orders are presented as suggestions in Australia. This is not the case in France, where hierarchy in the workplace is viewed somewhat differently from Australia; cf. Béal (2010, 273–278; 339–345) for an interesting discussion on this topic.

The tendency to distinguish facts from opinions in Australian English is contained in Schiffrin’s definition of *opinion*: ‘an individual’s internal, evaluative position about a circumstance’ (1990, 244). She explains that although opinions relate to an external situation, they cannot be verified by another person since they represent an internal subjective position and not an ‘objective statemen[t] of fact’. These features suggest that ‘the very existence of an opinion implies uncertainty over the circumstances addressed by the opinion’ (1990, 244). We can see that this underlying difference between opinion and fact is crucial, as for the following Australian participant, who considers as opinionated<sup>15</sup> and unhealthy presenting opinions as facts (my emphasis):

- (12) Fiona: There’ll be lots of people, you read their opinions, when they write to *The Age* or to *The Herald Sun*, whoever they write to, and they say ‘this is my opinion and this is the way it is’ and you sort of think ‘mm is that ..’ it’s sort of, they say it as if it’s fact, yeah like very opinionated ... either that or they don’t really think it’s their business, and I think both of those two extremes are really quite unhealthy.

<sup>15</sup> It is significant that this pejorative term referring to someone who has a tendency to always express strong opinions has no exact equivalent in French.

According to Peeters (2000, 203), assertions not based on fact expose the speaker to unnecessary risks, and this is the reason that many English speakers prefer not to express an opinion. One Australian made the following observation:

- (13) Kylie: I think the most important thing I've learnt is, if you're gonna have an opinion on something, know what you're talking about, and when you were saying people should know when to shut up, I think that's true, if you get really opinionated about something and you actually have nothing to back it up, like you don't really know what you're arguing about? I mean like that's when I've taught myself to shut up ... unless I know, or think I know, what I'm talking about.

For Australian English speakers, it is generally preferable that opinions are only expressed when they have been considered or well thought out; in some cases, it may be difficult to even have an opinion if one does not know much about the topic:

- (14) Darren: You don't necessarily have opinions if you haven't taken the time to think about a topic, {if} you don't know much about the details.
- (15) Heather: It depends on the situation, in certain situations, I would want people to have an opinion. I think it would be important, but it would depend on the importance of the subject. If it's really irrelevant - well to me, irrelevant, then I'm not really fussed about having an opinion either way, so to me I s'pose it depends how important I think the subject is.

These comments are in stark contrast to the remark below, made by Darren's French interlocutor.

- (16) Carine: You're bound to have, I think, an opinion on, er on everything, normally, you're bound to, or sometimes you might have doubts, why, how, but you always have a bit of an idea, I think.

It is highly significant that Carine sees this tendency to always have an opinion as normal. Similarly, in example (8) Beth assumes that sometimes not being

honest about what one is thinking is ‘natural for people anywhere’. These comments illustrate to what degree we assume these interactional norms to be universal.

In an article on the history of multiculturalism in Australia, Hirst claims that ‘the old dinner party rule that religion and politics should not be discussed had been the principle on which the formation of civil society had proceeded. Matters which were known to be divisive had to be kept at a distance’ (1990, 8). This tendency to avoid divisive topics of conversation is still widespread in Australian English interaction—and a source of frustration for some French speakers:

(17) Louis: Well what strikes me here actually is that the conversations stay very very ‘soft’, quite light. I’ve never heard anyone talking about politics, I’ve never heard anyone talking about any topic which could anger people really. The protests – the only demonstrations – protests that I’ve been able to see were in front of the Nike shop in the city, where there are more police than demonstrators, and ... it’s true that there’s a sort of weak consensus, I find, where everyone agrees with everything, yeah that strikes me, I don’t find that normal.

People should have more beliefs and express them, because not everything is perfect, because it’s not enough to say ‘anyway what can we do about it in our position, there’s no use in expressing oneself, because it’s not me who will change things by myself’, but I think it’s important to express it.

Here on the other hand it’s true that they stick to topics which are very s-, well very soft, and which don’t anger anyone, when you’re with men it’s true it’s er, it’s sport, it’s cars, I don’t know what. But it’s true that you won’t talk about politics, you won’t talk about, well, for example in France, I inquired about a few things, there’s an enormous debate at the moment about the French version of Big Brother, the for and against reality TV. In Australia no, in Australia no, it’s er, even if it’s crap, in any case the people don’t say so, and even if they think it pff, in any case, well if it’s on the TV it’s on the TV, you know, but there won’t be any debate about it and at a pinch even in the newspapers, that’s what strikes me, even the newspapers stay er...

Well it's true that in France there are maybe too many demonstrations, I'll grant you that, but in Australia there aren't enough (laughter).

Yeah, well I think it's important to express oneself yes, it's very important.

It's just consensus, weak consensus as we say well which we're finding more and more everywhere I think, but it's a pity. I find that a pity.

While this example has been slightly edited, it is an excellent illustration of a French speaker expressing his opinion. Louis explains what he has noticed about conversations in Australia, and states that people should have more beliefs and should express them. His use in the original French conversation of the English word *soft* is a direct translation of the French word *mou* ('soft', 'weak', 'dull') he uses later. *Mou* is often used to describe consensus in French, which is generally perceived as something negative and weak in French conversation. Louis later reiterates what he said about conversations in Australia, i.e. that they are 'soft' and the topics do not anger anyone.<sup>16</sup>

To avoid imposing their opinion, Australian English speakers use a wide range of hedges and qualifiers. Expressions such as *I think, that's just my opinion, possibly, maybe, relatively* minimise the force of the statement and ensure that we do not come across as opinionated. To a French speaker however, this frequent use of hedges, the apparent lack of commitment and engagement in conversation can appear 'wishy-washy';<sup>17</sup> cf. the following example from one of my participants:

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<sup>16</sup> This is reminiscent of an anecdote where a Frenchman living in America comments on the American way of interacting:

'Here, the moment anyone disagrees with someone else, they change the subject—just when it's getting interesting. Usually all anyone talks about is something very safe like baseball or the latest movie. For us French, passionate discussions are the stuff of life ... You know the story: two Frenchmen meet and one says "Ah," and the other says the contrary and then they have a long and perhaps violent discussion. Two Americans meet and one says, "Ah," and the other one says, "Ah, I see what you mean," and immediately changes the subject.' (Platt 1998, 254).

<sup>17</sup> One of my own participants used this term to refer to his fellow Australians; when I remarked that every time he said something, he subsequently backtracked and changed his opinion, he replied 'I do—that's the wishy-washiness of us guys'.

(18) Beth: Mm, um, yeah I, um, I mean, I think – I mean – I’m just – I keep thinking about college, ‘cos I interact with a lot of people from, from different places and, um, ... I think perha – I mean, I think it’s very important to have an opinion, and to be honest, and true to yourself, but I – probably in Australia – I think we’re very open, but perhaps we don’t, always r – (2 second pause) I’m not sure actually, about Australians if we, if we actually, if there might just be a level of, sort of, um, ... what’s the word, you know, some protective thing or some thing, that shields us a bit. We do – we might not always speak out, like, ... about what you’re thinking, ‘cos of to avoid trouble, or to avoid um, you know, like conflict or something ? ... but I’m not sure, I don’t know if that’s, um, general or not.

While this might seem exaggerated, it is not. As Australian English speakers, our utterances are full of pauses, hesitation markers, false starts and hedges, especially when we answer a question and give our opinion on a topic we may never have previously considered. The pauses and false starts here are a result of the speaker formulating her thoughts, but the hedges are to ensure that she does not come across as sounding overly opinionated.

Other co-operative strategies used by Australian English speakers include interrogatives for offers and requests, and the ubiquitous tag question, such as (*it’s cold today*) *isn’t it?* Wierzbicka points out how this is designed to invite agreement while leaving open the possibility for an opposing point of view: ‘it seeks consensus while explicitly leaving room for a possible lack of consensus’ (2002b, 100). This is in name only, however, since, as I have argued elsewhere (Mullan in press), English speakers often view disagreement as a kind of personal criticism or attack of their opinion. A personal anecdote will illustrate this point.

While waiting for a tram last winter, the lady next to me struck up a conversation, saying ‘it’s been cold, hasn’t it?’, to which I replied, ‘yes, freezing’. I was quite put out when the lady came back with ‘well, not freezing, but it has been cold’. This exchange and my reaction to it illustrate several things: firstly, my reply was not only showing agreement with the original question, but an attempt to *renchérir* or strengthen it with what I considered an appropriate addition. Secondly, my interlocutor’s refusal to accept this addition as a simple figure of speech and her correction of my obvious inaccuracy is unusual—most Australian English speakers would have recognised the intent

behind this reply and simply agreed or let the exchange come to an end. Thirdly, the fact that I was offended at having been corrected and disagreed with indicates that, while we have such linguistic mechanisms in place which allow for lack of consensus, they are not meant to be used! (Cf. the expression *I beg to differ!*)

Another frequent co-operative strategy in Australian English is the high rising tone found at the end of turns, used to establish common ground with the listener and seeking their involvement in the conversation. It is interesting to note that the interlocutor's involvement needs to be sought. This contrasts with how French speakers readily indicate their engagement in the conversation with regular feedback, overlapping, latching, and finishing the other's turn (example 11). Interestingly, Béal describes how these strategies annoyed the Australians in her study when employed by their French colleagues (2010, 168–172); despite being intended as co-operative, when the French speakers finished their Australian interlocutor's turn, this was seen by the Australian either as a sign of impatience and/or indicating prior knowledge on the part of the French speaker.

## Conclusion

Some entertaining advertisements are running in Paris cinemas at the moment for a popular daily called *Le Parisien*. They show male and female Parisians of assorted shape, size and social standing behaving with the breathtaking rudeness for which Parisians have earned a world-wide reputation. [...] These ads conclude with a slogan so devastating that it has now become something of a catchphrase at dinner parties: '*Le Parisien, vaut mieux l'avoir en journal.*' Which could be translated as: 'The Parisian—you're better off with the newspaper version'.

(Henley 2000)

We have examined French and Australian English interactional style, in particular the relative importance of expressing opinions in these two cultures. It was argued that for French speakers, the notions of *engagement* and *franchise* are crucial to their interactional style; consensus and compromise are not valued as much as defending one's point of view and creating an exchange. As Steele says, 'the French attach special importance to conversation, which they

consider a skill that can be learned and developed to the level of an art' (1995, 17). Expressing one's opinion is an important part of the art of conversation, and differing opinions are valued and encouraged; 'instead of avoiding their differences, French people confront them, discussing, arguing, honing their critical skills' (Platt 2000, 11). One of my French participants remarked that 'the French are not really arrogant, they like answering back'. Adamson Taylor states that 'it is unnecessary, in fact, undesirable, to seek a common point of view with your interlocutors. To distinguish is an intellectual aim.' (2000, 42) However this intellectual aspect of expressing opinions and disagreeing is in contrast to the Australian ethos of anti-intellectualism and egalitarianism: no-one should set out to prove that they are better than anyone else—cf. the specifically Australian expressions 'to big-note oneself' and 'cutting down tall poppies'. For Australian English speakers therefore, it is more important not to impose one's opinion on others, thereby not impeding the other's sense of autonomy. It is crucial to respect the notion of egalitarianism (at least linguistically), and to avoid conflict. Opinions must also be presented as just that, and not as facts.

We saw that French speakers exhibit what could be described as a 'high-involvement style' in conversation, made up of a combination of strategies showing enthusiasm, interest and involvement; these include overlapping speech, finishing the other's turn, and disagreements. This is contrary to Australian English interaction, where overlaps and interruptions are considered 'rude', and where speakers qualify their opinions and hesitate to disagree. These norms and interactional rules are so deeply engrained that we are usually unaware of them, and understandably view our interlocutor's interactional style through our own cultural framework, which we consider universal.

While it will be difficult to eliminate the image of the 'breathhtakingly rude' Parisian referred to above, it is hoped that we can encourage an awareness of the relationship between cultural values and interactional style, and avoid some of the negative labels and stereotypes we attach to other cultures. We need to understand the values behind our own and others' interactional styles. This does not mean that we need to become like our interlocutor, but to become more aware and open to these differences. In the words of Bennet:

Cultures can only be understood relative to one another. There is no absolute standard of 'rightness' or 'goodness' that can be applied

to cultural behaviour. Cultural difference is neither good nor bad. It is just different. One's own culture is not any more central to reality than any other culture, although it may be preferable to a particular individual or group.

(Bennet 1986, 27)

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