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**Computer-mediated communication in  
French as a lingua franca**  
Fred Dervin & Béatrice Fracchiolla

**Introduction**

This article is based on a corpus of chats involving university students from a joint course between the University of Turku (Finland) and the University of Paris 8 (France). The course took place over 2 months and was undertaken simultaneously via digital technologies (e-platform, chats) and face-to-face interaction (videoconferencing). The course objectives were the following:

- a/ To develop the students' intercultural competences
- b/ To allow the students to communicate in French with students from other countries through Computer Mediated Communication
- c/ To allow them to discuss burning global societal issues.

On the Finnish site, none of the students were native speakers of French while in Paris some of the students were. Approximately 25 major and minor students at BA/MA level were involved in the project and worked online in teams of 3 to 5. The students were required to use French when interacting and they were told that some code switching/mixing would be "tolerated". Semi-directive formal/informal tasks, which will not be detailed here, were set.

In this paper, we concentrate on a group of four students who took part in the experiment: a male MA student (A) from the Middle East who had been studying in France for two years (Paris site); three female BA and MA students (B, C, D from Finland, all Finnish speakers; it should be noted that D has spent many years in France). In this chapter, we analyse three chat sessions which contained the following interlocutors:

- Chat 1: A+B+C
- Chat 2: A+B+C+D
- Chat 3: A+B (+D partly)

Previous research on chatting in language learning and teaching has mostly concentrated on interactions between native and non-native speakers (Liang, 2008 ; exceptions are to be found in Vlad et al., 2009; Dervin, forth.; Demazière & Hyeon, 2008). On the advantage of using chatting with native speakers, Toyoda & Harrison (2002) write: “Many researchers regard this type of communication as a promising tool for language learning, as it allows learners to interact with native speakers from the country where their target language is spoken”. Interacting with a native speaker can have as many advantages as drawbacks. For many students, chatting with a native speaker can lead to difficult face threatening situations as hierarchy cannot but be established between them, as the “native speaker” is “always right”, which can add to the stress of having to use a foreign language. In this chapter, therefore, we wish to examine a specific situation of contact in French between non-native speakers.

Our research questions are the following:

1. Does communication in FLF seem to trigger certain problems? As the students are all non-native speakers of French, can misunderstandings or non-understandings be identified or is communication smooth when they interact in the language? If problems occur, what role does CMC seem to play?
2. As a specific case of intercultural communication, what intercultural identities are negotiated? How and by whom? For what purpose(s)?

In this study, we look at chatting in French as a lingua franca from two perspectives: on the one hand, we focus on linguistic and interactional features and on the other, we examine identification and the use of French as a lingua franca.

### **1. Technological aspects of chatting**

Like any technology, chatting has an impact on the way people interact, their input and the language they use. Chatting presents the following positive and negative aspects (Lamy & Hampel, 2007: 77) which impact on interaction:

\* Chats can allow: equality of participation, more turns, learner empowerment and autonomy, less anxiety thanks to the “anonymity” involved, greater opportunities for collaboration, authentic exchanges, creativity and synchronicity;

\* On the other hand, the following potential negative aspects should be born in mind: lengthy monologues, short delays, increased performance anxiety, lack of paralinguistic cues and contextual deprivation (which can lead to misunderstandings and non-understanding) and finally technological problems (slow/delayed turns).

In terms of linguistic production, according to Lamy & Hampel (2007, 115), the language used in chats is closer to oral discourse than written discourse, or at least the boundary between written and oral forms can be fuzzy – which can be a plus for non-native speakers (Blake, 2000). Moreover, the location of the interlocutors when they communicate (at home, school, a cybercafé, etc.), the type of tool they use (e-platform chatting module, Skype, MSN...) and the purpose of the interaction (school learning activities, informal chats...) have a role to play and may explain some of the phenomena presented in this study.

## **2. English as a Lingua Franca as a template for studying French as a lingua franca?**

In recent years, many applied linguists have concentrated on English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), as it is the type of lingua franca which is most commonly used amongst people who do not share a first or second language worldwide. Very little research has been done on FLF in the educational context (cf. Behrent, 2007; Dervin, 2008; Dervin & Vlad, 2010). We suggest that research on ELF can serve as a template for studying cases of FLF use.

Some studies on ELF actually show that very few misunderstandings take place between ELF interlocutors in educational contexts (e.g., Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005). As such, researchers have demonstrated that a high degree of collaboration, cooperation, meaning-negotiation and consensus take place in ELF communication (cf. Firth, 1996; Kordon, 2003; Meierkord, 2002) and that in some cases, some ‘let it pass’ behaviours are adopted



(Firth, 1996: 243-245) to save face. Both Meierkord (1996) and House (1999) have shown that lexicogrammatical “incorrectness” (one of the characteristics of ELF according to the doxa<sup>I</sup>) doesn’t mean communicative ineffectiveness. Maingay (2007) has even found some “correct use of errors”, which shows that incorrectness can lead to successful interaction. This strategy is also referred to as accommodation (Hülmbauer, 2007), where for example incorrect constructions serve as accommodative elements/‘known-in-common’ resources, demonstrating that multilingual influence can serve purposeful goals. Such examples include the use of *didacture* instead of *didactorship* by a Spaniard talking to a German person or the use of true/false friends between non-native speakers: the word *card* instead of *map*, which can be understood by many non-native speakers and considered as more explicit.

Finally, phenomena of code-switching/-mixing can help interlocutors accommodate and compensate for e.g. lack of words<sup>II</sup>. Code-switching/mixing, which can be composed of e.g. idiomatic phrases and function words, can serve pragmatic purposes in ELF interactions (Cogo & Dewey, 2006) in order to specify an addressee, appeal for assistance, introduce another idea... (Hülmbauer, 2007).

This is where the notions of rapport establishment and maintenance play an important role. According to Kordon (2006: 78) and contrary to what is usually stated regarding ELF, “ELF is not only transactional in its use but (...) it also carries a phatic function, i.e. it also serves to establish and maintain rapport between speakers of all kinds of different cultural backgrounds”. This is an important aspect of the use of LF in general.

The current movement of research on ELF is potentially very useful for dealing with FLF in the context under scrutiny, as no previous research has looked at these interactions. How many of these general rules are applicable in a context involving the use of FLF?

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<sup>I</sup> ELF is often described in such terms as: « half-English », « garbled English », « ‘polluting’ the standards of English » (Görlach, 2002: 10-13).

<sup>II</sup> It should be remembered that these phenomena can also be extremely common in first-language interaction.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1. Linguistic and interactional features

##### 3.1.1. Rapport building

In the chats, rapport is gradually constructed and reaches a peak by the 3<sup>rd</sup> and last chat, when the use of “chat language” (and e.g. smileys) is more systematized. According to Malinowski (1972), the establishment of rapport is undertaken through « phatic communion ». As such, in the chats, ritualised formulas are found at the beginning and at the end of, but also during, every chat, with rapport increasing for each chat, as shown below.

##### *Greeting rituals:*

(Chat 1<sup>III</sup> = canonical rapport building)

B: Bonjour

C: Bonjour B!

A: Bonjour les finlandaise

A: comment ça va?

B: ca va

C: Ca va assez bien et toi?

A: ça va

(chat 2 = friendly rapport building)

A: bonjour les amies

(chat 3 = « friend-like » rapport)

D: je vous écris avec mes chats à côté de moi

A: tu les passe le bonjour

Taking leave :

(chat 1)

C: Il était très intéressant et agréable de parler avec vous mais maintenant je dois aller. Mon filleul a son anniversaire et j'ai été invité faire la fête. Le chat 3 sera entre 12.3 et 29.3. Nous devons faire les tâches en avance et B, tu peux proposer le date et l'heure pour le chat suivant. Au revoir!

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<sup>III</sup> Excerpts are (sic).

(chat 2)

C: Je suis désolée mais maintenant je dois aller. C'était très intéressant. Je vous souhaite un bon wee-end.

D: salut! Bon tampere!

A: C Bon courage

A: bon WE

C: Merci!

B: salut

B: et à toi aussi

A: take care

As can thus be seen, rapport and rapport maintenance are undertaken in an extremely "normal" fashion and become more personal as the chats advance in time. It is even the case that in the third chat, one episode shows that the students are worried that their rapport might have been too familiar or casual for the context (which is an educational one, regardless of the sometimes informal tone that seems to be used in the chats). This can be evidenced by the introduction of the impact of "third voices" on rapport (the institution represented by the teachers) as in the following excerpt:

B: il faut que tu rediges un peu cette discussion. il y a des parties "moins" officielles

B: ok

D: je ne sais pas le faire

A: gardez le comme il est

A: cé bien

B: d'accord

A: on as rien dit

A: tu veux supprimer que quelques chose ?

In some of the chats, clues were also found which confirm that interaction also took place outside « official chats » between the students. For instance, when D. explains what usually happens in Finland on May 1<sup>st</sup>, she refers to a previous discussion, which could not be found in the chats that the students sent us, suggesting that they had been talking about it outside of this context:

D: on met notre casquette de bachelier et on fait la fête avec plein de serpantin, baloons, vin mousseux etc

A: tu m'as parlé de ça

D: obs, la photo de l'année dernière =)

A: je me souviens

Let us now look at how the students deal with the tasks through the transactional and interactional features used. At the beginning of the experiment, the way the students interacted and dealt with the set tasks was quite mechanical and more transactional than interactional (Brown & Yule, 1983), i.e., dealing with the tasks rather than establishing meaningful rapport:

B: alors, est-ce que nous passons directement à la tâche? je crois qu'elle va prendre du temps

A: avez-vous que les textes ne doivent pas passer les 400 mots ?

As in any type of group work (with non-natives or not), some of the participants seem to hold certain roles (leading and secondary). As a first example, let us look at how B plays the following roles:

She asks questions, guides the tasks and synthesizes:

-B : nous nous orientons donc tous vers enseignement

-B : La première question concerne la compétence interculturelle. Qu'est ce que vous en pensez? (est-elle important? pourquoi? êtes-vous compétent interculturellement?)

She plays the gatekeeper when the others seem to be deviating from the task:

A: j'ai pense à vous rendre visite cette été, vous les trois (...)

B: mais pour retourner au thème (je sais que C doit partir) avez-vous de problèmes lors de l'entretien?

A is also multitasked:

He positions himself as a Motivator/Support:

D: eh ouij'essaie de rentrer dans la discussion

B: bien sûr nous aimons nos familles, mais les amis sont d'une manière plus proches

B: vas-y, D

A: bon courage D allé gooo

He asks questions:

A: Alors, est ce que c'est facile à dire que A, C ou B est compétent?

He sometimes uses humour with the others:

C: Peut-être nous sommes un peu timides. Je le suis quand je rencontre des personnes inconnus pour moi. Mais entre amies, je parle sans arrêt!

A: hhhh C

In the following extract, C comes into the chat room, straight after A had explained that a word document that C had sent him left a virus on his computer. He tried to joke about it:

A: tout ça cé à cause de quelqu'un qui s'appelle C

B: ok. je dois dire que je n'avais pas de temps de lire tous dans les blogs, mais je les ai regardés

A: tu la connais B

C: Ah, pourquoi?

A: ah C, tu es là avec nous

B: mais bon. je prends mon café et nous pouvons commencer?

A: ok take your time

C: Oui, je suis là

A: je te takine

In this except, the fact that C doesn't understand is not related to the use of FLF but to the fact that they lack intertextuality.

### 3.1.2. Relationship to errors

As has been shown in what precedes, the conversation is quite fluid, and includes very few repetitions or clarifications. The students use abbreviations which can be understood by most students of French (*par ex., qn, qc...*), the tense problems in the sentences they write never impact on communication, and the rare

neologisms (ex. « stéré(o) » for *stéréotype*) or the influence of English (?) (as in « consumer de l'alcool »; to consume alcohol) do not seem to hinder the interaction.

Some acts of hetero-repair/help and auto-corrections were noted. For example, in the first excerpt, B uses the English word for “a flash”, which triggers a subtle hetero-correction from A:

B: mais tu n'as pas un “memory stick” pour usb? pour tes travaux

A: j'en aimais je te jure que j'ai perdu tous une fois

A: j'ai perdu tous ce qu'il y a sur ma clé USB

This hetero-correction could also serve as a way of confirming understanding. Despite “language errors”, the students seem to understand each other. As in the misspelled word *peu* (little) for *peau* (skin) in the following:

C: A Saint-Denis, la plupart des habitants ont le peu noir?

A: quand je prend le bus, ils me regard bizarrement

A: ou à Saint denis, il y a 74 nationalité différentes

A: il y a beaucoup de noir

Some instances of auto-correction were present in the following and were presented through the use of a star (\*). B started this « trend » in the first chat:

B: Salut. Je m'appelle B, j'ai 22 ans et j'habite à Turku. J'étudie français et allemand à l'université de Turku et c'est ma deuxième année. J'ai choisi le français parce que j'aime les langues et la France m'a plait depuis longtemps

B: \*m'a plu

We clearly have here an act of identification which shows that the writer wants to be seen as competent, in other words, she realises that she has made a mistake and indicates that she is aware of it. B then A use this strategy whenever they make a mistake. The mistakes that are auto-corrected fall into the following categories<sup>IV</sup>:

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<sup>IV</sup> The use of chat may also lead to misspellings linked to fast typing.

B:

**Tenses:** *m'a plu* instead of *m'a plait* / *je serai acceptée* vs *je suis acceptée*

**Spelling:**

*mais qu'on* vs. *mais que on* / *qu'avec* vs *que avec*

*Est* vs. *et*

*Là* vs. *l'È*

*Échange* vs. *écahnge*

A:

**Gender:** *une semaine* vs. *un semaine*

**Insertion of verb:** *est comme un* vs. *comme un*

**Spelling:**

*saint* vs. *saintz*

*France* vs. *farnce*

*Décidé* vs *digidé*

**Morphoverbal:** *j'ai fais* vs. *j'ai fait*

Etc.

Errors are not corrected by others in the chats. This may be explained by the fact that the students do not notice them or simply because they may want to allow their peers to save face.

### 3.2. Collaboration and cooperation

One of the representations of LF is that interlocutors do not really understand each other and, because LFs are hybrid and imperfect, they lead to many non-understandings. What we have noticed in our corpus is that the interlocutors are very cautious and try to avoid such situations. This is the case with B when she notices that her opinion about stereotypes didn't come across as she expected and led A to ask for clarification:

B: il ne faut pas croire à tous qu'on lit, entende

B: il faut penser

B: faire attention

A: je suis tout à fait d'accord avec vous

A: faire attention? à quoi

B: ce n'était pas une bonne expression. ce que je voulait dire était en fait qu'on doit se détacher des stéréotypes

Some non-understandings (which are always clarified eventually) are mostly based on unknown words used by some of the participants, as is the case with C's use of "recomposés":

C: Je voudrais bien savoir ce que tu A penses des familles recomposées?

A: comment recomposées,??

D: papa + nouvelle femme + les enfants des 2

C: alors, si les parents sont divorcé et la mère par exemple a un nouvelle homme dans sa vie.

Or in the case of abbreviations (this can happen even between first-language speakers... though probably not with the abbreviation in question here):

A : attend STP

C : STP ???

A: s'il te plaît

This event can lead to potential co-learning and have a positive impact on language learning as a whole.

As far as culture is concerned, or rather cultural knowledge, one moment of non-understanding was noted in the whole corpus and that is when the students are trying to agree on a final meeting date for the last chat and mention May 1<sup>st</sup> (which is an important holiday in Finland which marks the beginning of the summer):

D: le 30.4. et le 1.5. je ne peux pas

B: D, je ne crois que personne peut...

D: c'est pour ca =)

A: **de qui vous parlez**

B: mais nous discutons ici, et nous t'envoyons le date et l'heure

A: **qui est la personne qui ne peut .....**

D: non, le 30.4. tout le monde fait la grosse fête un Finlande, et le 1.5. on continue, c'est pour ca que c'est pas bon pour chatter

B: pardon, de ne pas t'expliquer avant

B: c'est un fête des étudiants (et des travailleurs)

D: soit le 1.5 et le 2.5 c'est pour se remettre en forme après la fête, donc...



A: le premier mai

This triggers a long explanation by A in order to show how important May 1<sup>st</sup> is and why the Finnish students may not be available for chatting on these days.

We sometimes felt that non-understanding was related to the chat format and to the fact that multiple voices appeared quickly on screen:

B: en fait, je crois que les gens sont pressés partout

A: je suis devenu comme ça au bout d'un an

C: Oui, c'est vrai

B: comme quoi, A? je suis un peu perdu maintenant...

A: je suis capable de vivre tout seul, même sans sortir de chez moi un semaine

A: une semaine\*

B: A, tu veux dire que tu es devenu une personne trop pressé?

In this case, B frankly tells the others that she's confused because of the amount of sentences that appear on her screen, making it difficult for her to follow.

Some "let it pass" strategies were also noticed as in the following excerpt, in which A inserts a smiley of a monkey in his turn and then comments on it (*il est drôle mon sang*). In his comment, he mistakes the word blood (*sang*) with monkey (*singe*), with the effect that nobody reacts to his smiley – probably because they didn't understand:

D: et nous ça nous énerve quand l'ordi met 3 secondes à ouvrir une page  
(smiley)

D: Drôle de vie quand même

A: (smiley: singe)

A : Il est drôle mon sang

D: j'aimerais essayer une vie dans la brousseloin de tout

A: tu n'arriveras pas

### 3.3. Limited plurilingualism

In comparison with research on ELF, our FLF context is less plurilingual as there seem to be real boundaries between languages, code-mixing/switching is rare and we identified very few words from other languages/influences from other languages. In the chats, the following words and expressions from other languages were found:

- Finnish: *mökki*/summer cottage and *makkara*/sausage
- Italian (? – though this is fairly common in French): *ciao*
- English: B: *incredible!* (but this could be an error, i.e. an interference from English)
- A: *Take your time* (several times)
- A: *See u later*
- B: *memory stick*

It is important to note at this stage that in some cases it was impossible to say if the students used these mistakenly. Surprisingly enough, we didn't find any Arabic words (which is A's first language...) nor did we find any Swedish (though the language was mentioned several times, B being a speaker of it).

One excerpt that includes some Finnish will be detailed here as it shows perfectly how one can accommodate through plurilingualism when using FLF. In chat 3, D is talking about how she usually spends her summer and uses a Finnish word (*mökki*/summer cottage) that she forgets to translate (could this be a sign that she forgets that A is not a Finnish speaker?):

- D: déjà 1 mois à mökki sans eau courante ni toilettes modernes....sans eau chaude
- A: tu as fait quoi
- B: nous sommes un peu de prisonniers de l'hypermodernité même si nous le détestons
- D: la superette à 15 km, en vélo...
- B: peut-on bien y voir des effets de l'hypermodernité?
- A: où?
- D: j'étais au mökki (= cabane d'été des finlandais) pendant 1 mois l'été dernier

Though A clearly shows that he doesn't understand the Finnish word by asking "tu as fait quoi?" ("what did you do?"), D explains the word *mökki* after several turns. In the same chat, later on, even though D seemed to have forgotten the presence of a non-Finnish speaker in what we presented above, she remembers to translate/explain her use of a Finnish word (*makkara*/sausage) by explaining it between brackets:

D: même après ce cours, je pense que beaucoup de finlandais aiment le sauna et le makkara (saucisses qu'on mange l'été)

In a very interesting case, the same student uses a Tahitian word (she had lived on the island for a few years) in her speech:

D: qui pourrait encore vivre sans son vini?

B: on ne sait jamais. et en fait, il fait peur

D: sans ordi et tele satellite, les cd etc

A: pas de vie

D: vini= portable en tahitien

As nobody seems to notice the inclusion of the word (*vini* = mobile phone), and probably because a word that looks like it in Finnish (*viini*) means wine, in the last line, she decides to tell her comrades that *vini* is a mobile phone in Tahitian (even though nobody asks her). There are of course several possible explanations for this act: she might resort to an act of identity as a way to remind the others that she has lived in this context and that she is in a way different from them. It might also be a mere automatism: the student has "integrated" the word into her French and forgets that others may not understand and/or be used to code-switching with this language.

All in all, except for the instances commented on above, plurilingualism is limited. Some hypotheses can be evoked here: is it because the students are specialists of French and want to appear to be very able speakers of the language, thus creating a corresponding identity? Is it because they are chatting within an institutional context? Is it because they are not used to blending in languages (this habit – boundary fetishism - is highly prohibited in Finnish language education)? Or is it because they simply do not

know what languages to integrate? (i.e. they are unaware of the languages they share – especially with the Parisian student).

### 3.3. Acts of identification

This last section looks at what can be considered as acts of identification in the chats. We define acts of identification as discourses used in the chats to categorise and boost the *Self* and the *other* (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2003). We start by looking at what can be labelled as *performative identities*, how identities are “*mise en scène*” (expressed).

In terms of language use, resorting to FLF plays a major role in performing the self and Otherness. First of all, the use of French idioms, i.e. expressions which are considered as “native”, informal and related to daily-life<sup>v</sup> when they appear in the interaction, tend to send a signal of competence, maybe even potential “nativeness”. The following examples are from A and D, two very competent speakers of French.

A: **Chapeau B!**

D: bon je verrai quand le ‘jules’ rentrera tout à l’heure

These performative identities, which emerge from the two ablest students, can also be accompanied by *declared identities* or *declared competences*. As specialists of French, the students need to feel competent about their language skills and are sometimes urged to acknowledge (or not) this fact. When they peer-assess the final documents that they had to produce, students A and B flatter D on her skills:

A: D a une niveau très élevé que moi

B: en fait, je n’avais pas vraiment compris qu’on doit ajouter tellement de commentaires personnelles sur l’expérience

A: elle été en france pendant 10 ans

B: oui je le sais

D: eh eh vous voulez savois comment je parle suédois?? =)

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<sup>v</sup> Of course, we need to bear in mind that these may have been “assimilated” by the students in their own French.

D's reaction is interesting as she diminishes their "admiration" by suggesting that her skills in another language (Swedish... a language learnt by all Finns at school) are less impressive and thus resorts to an act of identification: that of a lesser-able speaker of a third language ("I might be good at French but my Swedish is bad").

The comments on each other's productions can potentially be rather face-threatening and this is why many of the students soften their discourses by using generalizations (e.g. use of the French identificatory pronoun *on*) or by encouraging each other to allow the others to save face:

D: bon en tout cas je trouve que C a très bien écrit aussi, malgré quelques fautes d'orthographe et de grammaire. On apprend tous et le français n'est pas une langue facile à écrire.

B: je suis désolée, mais je ne sais pas comment écrire les cedilles...

C: Moi non pas, B

A: ne t'inquite pas, tu va apprendre

In the case under scrutiny, A has an interesting position as he's not French but studies in France. He is at the centre of many and varied acts of unstable identification throughout the chats. The identity which is imposed on him by the others or which he puts forward is extremely changeable throughout the chats:

\* First he is depicted by the Finns as a **representative of several cultures/countries** (A thus represents the other(s))

C: Je pense qu'il est très intéressant à chatter avec A parce qu'il nous donnent des idées **sur la culture XXX et aussi la française.**

A: Dites-moi, y a-t-il des banlieues chez vous?

B: oui, mais elles n'ont pas la même caractère que **chez vous**

These identifications sometimes lead to confusions about colour, nationality, immigration... as is clear in the co-constructed "specialised discourse" of A in what follows:

B : est-ce que les groupes de jeunes se forment donc entre de différentes nationalités y incluant des Français blancs ?

A: oui, mais pas toujours qu'on trouve des français parmi les jeunes

A: d'après vous, les banlieues françaises? comment vous les imaginez?

B: ils sont plus grande que celles en Finlande. il y a beaucoup d'immigrés mais aussi bien des Français (des personnes de l'origine française). il y a des problèmes de chômage, de pauvreté, de jeunes frustrés entre autres

B: leur condition est mal

A: quel type de français?

A: quelle classe?

B: elles sont dégénérées

B: travailleurs, sous la classe moyenne

A: tout à fait, B

A: mais tu sais que la plupart des personnes sont gèreux

A: généreux

A: et sont sympa

\* On the other hand, sometimes in the chats, A is questioned about his position as an Other in France

**C: A, est-ce que tu penses que les Français sont désagréables contre les personnes qui ne parlent pas de français? C'est un stéréotype aussi.**

A: Alors, on peut dire que les stéré font parti de la réalité de la société même s'ils ont par fois exigeants

B: en ce qui concerne les stéréotypes en général, je n'en suis pas d'accord. on ne peut pas généraliser et en fin du compte, nous sommes tous des individus et différentes personnes

A: oui, C c'est vrai mais ce n'est pas le cas avec tout le monde

A: il y a des jeunes très sympa

A: B, bravo!

\* A himself sometimes gets the wrong impression, i.e. he is not categorised properly by his comrades (though he gave the impression before the following episode that he was "French"). For the Finnish student (B), this conversation could be potentially face-threatening and this is why she repairs her discourse:

B: donc, **vous consommez aussi alcool**. en fait, il s'agit aussi de la manière de consommer.

A: j'ai entendu à la télé

B: donc, si on veut devenir ivre ou pas

A: **moi, je ne prend pas d'alcool**

B: pardon, j'ai parlé des Français

A: ok

A: ne t'inquite pas

\*In chat 2, A explains how he is othered by people in the French suburbs and turned into a French person:

A: ils me regardent bizarrement parce que je suis élégant

A: et j'ai la tête européenne

A: c'est à dire je suis blond, yeux verts ...

A: **pour eux, je suis français** et un homme riche

\* In the following excerpt, A is clearly othered by the other chat participants (who categorise him more like an Arab than a "Frenchman" in what follows). In other words, the Finnish student (C) who insists on obtaining an answer to her question (does A accept recomposed families?), may be clearly demonstrating here that she is biased towards A's country:

C: **Je voudrais bien savoir ce que tu A penses des familles recomposées?**

A: cela dépend de la personne lui même

D: les 2 peuvent avoir des enfants de leur relation/mariage d'avant

A: le père et la femme

D: + les enfants qu'ils ont eu ensemble

C: **Mais est-ce que tu accepte les familles comme ça?**

A: imaginez la nouvelle femme n'aime pas les enfants

D: eh oui, ça arrive...

C: C'est possible.

A: **je les accepte**

C: D'accord

A: **mais peut-être je ne le fais pas**

D: **il y a des familles comme ça chez toi?**

A: oui, à G., il y en a

\* In one instance, A otherizes himself (I am from the Middle East) to explain his differences with his Finnish partners:

B: j'ai besoin un peu de distance quand je parle avec qn

B: mais j'ai des expériences quand j'ai parlé avec qn et il/elle a voulu être trop près de moi

A: **pour nous les moyen-orientaux c's=est contraire**

C: Peut-être nous sommes un peu timides. Je le suis quand je rencontre des personnes inconnus pour moi. Mais entre amies, je parle sans arrêt!

All in all, these excerpts show that much identification is taking place in the chats and that the selves presented by the speakers (esp. A) are unstable and constructed.

### Conclusion

The analysis of exchanges between non native speakers of French and their use of FLF presented in this chapter confirms various phenomena.

First of all, what seems to count is what the students say to each other, in the widest sense, rather than how they say it. Specifically, how they express themselves, the mistakes they make, etc. are not really taken into account by the others. This means that semantics, the meaning of words and sentences matters more than morphosyntax, spelling and grammar, and that the exchange aims to create a relationship of trust and exchange, despite the distance and use of technology. This doesn't mean, however, that FLF is a neutral, "identification-free" means of communication. As such, we have also examined how some of the students play "identification games" when they put forward an image of competent speakers of French. For student A, the fact that he is a foreigner studying in France complexifies the ways in which he is identified by the other participants and leads him to adopt contradictory positions.

Compared with ELF, some of the phenomena that have been pinpointed by ELF researchers were identified in our corpus. The following features were obvious: there was a certain degree of collaboration and cooperation between the students, reaching



consensus and accommodation (cf. 'let it pass' behaviours), but also rapport building took place beyond mere transactionality...

In our corpus, the students tend to stick to the French language and avoid using other languages, which might show a quest for performance – i.e. a desire to show the others that they are good at French (as they should, since they all want to be French teachers). When reading the chats, one gets the impression that chatting appears to be a genuine way to practice and improve their French together, especially since the exchange has an academic aim and takes place in a university context.

As a result of the analysis, one may be led to ask the following set of follow-up questions: in which way(s) does what is taking place between non-native speakers differ from what would occur between natives or non-native speakers and natives in a similar context? Also would the results be different in other contexts of FLF use? Our context certainly is hybrid; it has some traits of both formality and informality (it is a university context, but exchanges took place outside of this context). Would "self-regulation" happen in the same way in other contexts, with other users? What about in comparison with face-to-face interaction? Finally, would we have found similar/different characteristics if the students had been from other countries?

The field of research on the use of lingua francas is just emerging, and with its emergence a host of new and exciting research projects.

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