

ELEGANT VARIATION IN FRENCH NEWSPAPER STYLE

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The aspect of French journalistic style called "elegant variation" can be introduced by these remarks by French newspaper humorist Claude Sarraute:

"Ce qui est tuant dans ce métier, c'est d'écrire des papiers. Autrement, ce serait parfait. Mais écrire. Et écrire en français, c'est d'une difficulté ! Vous ne pouvez pas l'imaginer. Pourquoi ? Simple : le français interdit les répétitions. [...]"

"Vous parlez de Defferre, mettons. Defferre, une fois ça va, pas deux. Alors, après vous dites le maire de Marseille. Après, le ministre du Plan. Après, le mari d'Edmonde. Après, Gaston. Après, Gastounet et après... Ben, après, vous arrêtez d'en parler parce que vous ne savez plus comment l'appeler."

"Les Anglais, eux, sont beaucoup plus relax. Comme le fait remarquer mon confrère John Harris, ils n'éprouvent pas le besoin de parler du député de Finchley East ou de la fille d'un épicier qui a épousé M. Dennis Thatcher pour éviter de citer le nom du premier ministre. Ils ne se gênent pas. Ils emploient souvent le « she », elle, ou un « Mrs T », désinvolte et mal poli. Tout ça pour gagner de la place, économiser du fric et brader leurs canards à moitié prix. Ce sont des rats, je vous dis."

"Bis repetita," Le Monde 22 mai 1985, p. 48.

"What's killing in the newspaper game is to have to write articles. Otherwise, it would be perfect. But to write. And in French. You can't imagine how hard it is to write French. Why? Simple: French does not permit repetitions. [...]"

"Let's say you are talking about Defferre [the late French Socialist leader Gaston Defferre]. It's OK to say Defferre once, but not twice. So next you say the Mayor of Marseille. Then, the Minister of Planning. Then, the husband of Edmonde. Then, Gaston. Then, Gastounet and then... Well, then you stop talking about him because you don't know what to call him next."

"The English, on the other hand, are much more relaxed. As my colleague John Harris points out, they don't feel the need to talk about "the member from East Finchley" or "the grocer's daughter who married Mr. Dennis Thatcher" in order to avoid using the name of the Prime Minister. They don't bother. Often they just use "she" or an impolite and impertinent "Mrs. T." By doing that, they save space and money, so they can peddle their papers at half price. They are rats, I tell you."

There is humorous exaggeration in Mme Sarraute's tirade. The very dignified Le Monde would never have referred to the late Socialist leader of Marseille by his first name 'Gaston', certainly not by the Marseillais nickname 'Gastounet'. Otherwise, Sarraute has described,

with characteristic verve and wit, the tyrannical hold on French newspaper style of the device Cornish (1986:26) has called "elegant variation"--the use of paraphrase and circumlocution to avoid repetition.

In this paper, I will first give examples of some kinds of elegant variation used as anaphors in French newspaper prose, including journalistic clichés, generic anaphors, ad hoc variations, and productive formulaic variations. Next I will show how these variations fit into texts alongside other kinds of reference. Then I will look at a few short passages that are particularly rich in elegant variations to show how readers interpret them. Finally, reasons for the prominence of elegant variation in French newspaper style will be considered briefly.

Examples of Elegant Variation:

Journalistic Clichés. Many of the clichés of French journalism seem to be perpetuated because of their usefulness as elegant variations for referring to recurring entities. A few examples of hackneyed expressions seldom found outside the press are l'hexagone 'the hexagon = France', les soldats du feu 'the soldiers of fire = firemen', le sinistre 'disaster, fire, accident' le billet vert 'the green bill = the dollar', or les édiles 'authorities, public officials'.

Generic anaphors are noun anaphors which are semantically more general than their antecedents, such as:

I saw Roger at the station last night.
The man looked positively exhausted.

I reread War and Peace over the summer.
The book was well worth the time and effort.

An example of their use in French newspaper prose is in a brief story about Alain Delon in Le Quotidien de Paris (3.22.86, p. 9) in which, after he is introduced by name, he is referred to the second time as 'l'acteur' and the third as 'le comédien', a synonym for 'actor' in French.

Ad Hoc Variations. While generic variations can fit many antecedents, the ad hoc ones are custom-made to fit a particular antecedent in a particular situation. They differ from the productive formulaic variations treated below in that they do not follow any set patterns or procedures. In a story about ex-prime minister Laurent Fabius in Libération (19.3.86, p.4), for example, he is referred to first by full name, as l'ancien [former] premier ministre, and thereafter with the ad hoc variations of le « fils spirituel » [spiritual son] de François Mitterrand, and l'homme du président [the President's man].

A more elaborate ad hoc variation from Le Monde (18.3.86, p. 2), is a paraphrase referring to conservative former Prime Minister Raymond Barre as celui qui apparaissait jusqu'ici comme son [= François Mitterrand] principal rival, ou du moins, aux yeux des socialistes, comme le plus dangereux des prétendants à la prochaine élection présidentielle [the one who appeared up until now as [Mitterrand's] principal rival, or at least the most dangerous of the claimants to throne in the next presidential election].

Productive formulaic variations. The majority of the elegant variations found in French newspapers are not constructed ad hoc like the description of Raymond Barre just cited. They are made up according to certain formulas, such as the following examples:

1. Governments of foreign countries = the name of the capital city.
2. Countries separated from France by a body of water = outré + the body of water.
3. Languages = la langue de + the classic writer of the language
4. Governmental and public institutions = the building or street in which they are located.
5. Politicians = their elective or appointive titles.

Here are a examples and details on each formula:

1. Foreign governments. Governments of foreign countries are routinely referred to by the name of the capital. Paris, London, Bonn or Washington present no difficulties for the reader, but when the government of Chad is referred to as N'Djamena, elegant variation becomes a test of the reader's geographic knowledge.

2. Countries. The (apparently exhaustive) list of examples for outré 'beyond' + a body of water is: outré-Atlantique = 'the United States', outré-Manche = 'Great Britain', outré-Méditerranée = 'Algeria' and outré-Rhin = 'Germany'.

3. Languages can be referred to by the formula la langue de plus the name of the language's acknowledged classic writer. French is thus la langue de Molière, English la langue de Shakespeare and German la langue de Goethe.

4. Governmental and public institutions. Just as American newspapers talk about 'the White House' or 'the Pentagon', French papers often use the name of a building to designate the institution housed in it, such as le palais de l'Élysée (the French President's official residence), or l'hôtel Matignon (The Prime Minister's office), le Palais-Bourbon (seat of the National Assembly) or le palais Brongniart (the Paris Stock Exchange). More characteristic of French newspaper practice, however, is the use of the name of the street on which an institution is housed. Some frequent examples are: Ministry of Foreign Affairs = quai d'Orsay, Ministry of the Interior = place Beauveau, Ministry of Justice = place Vendôme.

The Ministry of Finance was long referred to by newspapers as the rue de Rivoli from its offices in the north wing of the Louvre facing on that street. To provide more exhibition space in the Louvre, the ministry is to be moved into a gigantic new building on the rue de Bercy (Libération 3.12.86, p. 12). (From the old wine warehouses that used to be there, the phrase rue de Bercy carries a connotation of drunkenness. In French police slang, "un Bercy" is a drunk. It remains to be seen whether the name of the new location will replace the older designation, or whether it will simply be known henceforth as the Ministère des Finances.)

Political parties are also alluded to by address, if the location of their headquarters is well-known, such as place du colonel-Fabien for the French Communist Party headquarters on that square and rue de Solférino for Socialist Party headquarters.

Newspapers can be referred to by le journal de + their addresses. Thus, for instance, Le Monde becomes in second reference le journal de la rue des Italiens and Libération is le journal de la rue Christiani. An amusing exception is the venerable satirical and investigative paper Le Canard enchaîné, whose title means literally "the duck in chains" and more colloquially "one lie after the other". Le Monde sometimes refers to it as notre palmipède de confrère 'our web-footed colleague'.

5. Politicians. The common practice of varying reference to French politicians by citing the names of their current or past offices is facilitated by a feature of the French political system called the cumul des mandats, which means that it is possible to hold more than one political office at once. Cornish cites as examples of elegant variation the following references to Jacques Chirac used in a story in Le Monde (8.5.81, p. 11) successively as le fondateur du RPR [the Neo-Gaullist party], le maire de Paris, le député de la Corrèze (1986: 24-25), thus illustrating that, when there are repeated references to the same politician, there is a tendency to use his titles more or less in order of descending importance.

How elegant variations fit into texts and paragraphs

Do elegant variations replace direct reference by name or do they replace pronouns in a text? In Claude Sarraute's terms, do they replace "Mrs. Thatcher" or "she"? In order to see how variations are used along with direct references and pronouns, twenty political articles were selected from the Paris dailies Le Figaro, Libération, Le Matin and Le Monde during the parliamentary election period of March 1986. Each of the twenty articles used was primarily about one politician--basically the first person mentioned in the article. The first three references to that politician in each article are tabulated in Table 1 below. Ninety-one paragraphs from the twenty articles form the corpus for Table 2 below. Each paragraph contained at least two references to the first person mentioned in the paragraph.

Examination of the two tables shows that, unlike American newspapers, French papers seldom introduce a politician by both title and name. Elegant variations are usually used as the second or, less often, the third reference, whether in an article as a whole or in an individual paragraph. Thus, in their position in the text, they turn out to occupy an intermediate status between references by name and references by pronoun. The longer an article or even a paragraph continues, the more likely that either name or variation will be replaced by a pronoun.

Table 1: First 3 references to politicians in 20 political articles:

	<u>1st reference</u>	<u>2nd reference</u>	<u>3rd reference</u>
Title and full name	2	0	0
First and last name	15	4	5
Title of office	1	10	7
<u>Ad hoc</u> variation	0	1	0
Last name only	0	0	1
Generic anaphor	0	0	1
Pronoun	2	5	6

Table 2: First 5 references to politicians in 91 paragraphs:

	<u>1st ref.</u>	<u>2nd ref.</u>	<u>3rd ref.</u>	<u>4th ref.</u>	<u>5th ref.</u>
Title and full name	1	0	0	0	0
Title and last name	2	0	0	0	0
First and last name	48	22	7	3	1
Last name	10	3	2	0	0
Title of office	16	25	5	0	0
<u>Ad hoc</u> variation	3	2	1	2	0
Discourse anaphor*	0	3	0	0	0
Generic anaphor	0	0	1	1	0
Pronoun	11	36	25	16	6
Total	91	91	41	22	7

*Discourse anaphors are nouns that are entirely dependent on context for their meaning, such as ce dernier 'the latter' or son interlocuteur 'the person he was talking to'.

Interpreting elegant variations

How are elegant variations processed by the reader? According to Charolles (1983:71) competent readers assume that texts are coherent and try to manipulate the text in front of them in order to interpret it in such a way that it makes sense to them. In order to interpret elegant variations correctly, readers have to draw on two resources: their ability to make inferences from sentence sequences in a text and their pragmatic knowledge of the real world. There are problems with relying on either resource.

Bellert (1970: 350-351) discusses how pragmatic knowledge is used in interpreting generic anaphors. She points out that our correct understanding of a sequence of sentences like

Picasso has left Paris.

The painter went to his studio on the Mediterranean.

depends entirely on shared assumed knowledge of the world. The reader may not know that Picasso is a painter, or may not be certain whether the writer is referring to Picasso or to

some other painter. The reader has to be able to draw the inference that Picasso is a painter by assuming that the text is supposed to be coherent and make sense (Bellert 1970:350).

Hirst (1981) found that readers do not always successfully draw the correct inferences from text. He took an example of an ad hoc anaphor from Time (May 15, 1978):

Most of the city's federal buildings were dark, but chandeliers shone brightly from the National Portrait Gallery. Inside the building in which Walt Whitman once read his poetry to wounded Union troops and Abe Lincoln held his second Inaugural Ball, a black-tie assemblage of guests stood chatting.

Hirst says that many readers assumed incorrectly that two separate buildings are being spoken of, "apparently due to the difficulty of detecting the paraphrase in such convoluted prose" (1981:26).

Either pragmatic knowledge or knowledge about how inferences are made from a text could be used in understanding Passage 1, which is about whom President Mitterrand saw the morning after the Socialist government was defeated in the March 16, 1986, elections. A well-informed French citizen could have interpreted it correctly if he knew Pierre Joxe was then Minister of the Interior and Roland Dumas was Minister of Foreign Affairs. Failing that, the normal sequence of reference in French newspapers makes it likely that when a politician's name is mentioned, the next reference to a title of office refers to him. (The reference to Pierre Joxe's short night alludes to the fact that the Minister of the Interior is responsible for overseeing the collection and announcement of election results.)

Passage 1: Libération March 18, 1986, p. 2

Lundi matin, dès 9h, Pierre Joxe, qui a eu une nuit plutôt courte, se retrouve à nouveau à l'Élysée pour un entretien d'1h20. Au menu, naturellement, l'analyse des résultats définitifs. Plus ? Mystère. Le ministre de l'Intérieur est suivi dans la foulée par Roland Dumas. La conversation qui dure près d'une heure porte sur le sort des otages du Liban. À sa sortie, le ministre des Affaires étrangères explique que « les initiatives gouvernementaux ne se relâcheront pas. Mais il faut attendre quelques heures ou quelques jours avant que tout puisse être repris. » Cette déclaration faite, Roland Dumas retourne au Quay [sic] d'Orsay pour une réunion avec trois des émissaires français au Proche-Orient.

'Monday morning, at 9:00, Pierre Joxe, who had had a rather short night, was back at the Élysée [the Presidential Palace] for a conversation of an hour and twenty minutes. On the menu, naturally, was the analysis of the definitive [election] results. Anything more? That's a mystery. The Minister of the Interior was followed by Roland Dumas. The conversation, which lasted nearly an hour, concerned the fate of the hostages in Lebanon. On leaving, the Minister of Foreign Affairs explained that "the government's attempts will not be abandoned. But it will be necessary to wait several hours or even several days before everything can be started again." Having made this statement, Roland Dumas returned to the Quay d'Orsay for a meeting with three of the French emissaries to the Near East.'

Passage 2, on the other hand, cannot be interpreted without substantive knowledge of French politics because of the writer's reluctance to repeat words used earlier in the text--'Prime Minister' and 'Socialist Party'--or even to repeat the code word 'Hôtel Matignon' to designate the Office of the Prime Minister.

Passage 2: Le Monde March 22, 1986, p. 6

La veille, M. Pierre Mauroy, ancien locataire de l'hôtel Matignon, avait déclaré, devant les parlementaires membres de son courant, que les pays allait découvrir que c'est bien rue de Varenne que se décide la politique du gouvernement.

'The day before, M. Pierre Mauroy, a former tenant of the Hôtel Matignon [a former Prime Minister], had declared, before the Parliamentary members of his group [the Socialists], that the country was going to find out that it is indeed on the Rue de Varenne [where the Hôtel Matignon is located] that government policy is decided.'

Passage 3 shows a mixture of names, variations and pronouns in the first two paragraphs of an long article of political analysis. Because of the length of the passage and the complexity of reference to three different political figures, I have numbered the sentences and used subscripts to help track references to the same person.

Passage 3: Libération, August 22-23 1987, p. 4.

1. Laurent Fabius₁ dont l'âge est une carte maîtresse peut envisager de faire l'impasse sur 1988. 2. Le discours qu'il₁ a prononcé hier, à Villeneuve-les-Avignon, devant l'Université d'été des jeunes socialistes, montre que l'ancien premier ministre₁ se projette déjà vers « le changement de siècle ». 3. Avant même que le PS n'adopte ses propositions, il₁ a tenu à dresser lui-même le tableau des enjeux de fond des prochaines années.

4. Cet esprit, résolument prospectif, n'empêche évidemment pas Fabius₁ d'avoir son idée sur la prochaine présidentielle. 5. Alors que Michel Rocard₂ s'efforce d'occuper le terrain, il₁ s'est fait chaleureusement applaudir en espérant que François Mitterrand₃ « acceptera de continuer sa mission ». 6. Au motif que l'actuel chef de l'État₃ a les « qualités » requises pour la période actuelle : « La sureté de jugement, l'expérience, la capacité à refuser les exclusions et à saisir les nouvelles chances, enfin l'esprit d'unité ». 7. On imagine aisément que, dans l'esprit de Fabius₁, Rocard₂, en matière de sûreté de jugement, d'expérience politique et d'esprit d'unité, ne possède pas les qualités requises... 8. L'ancien chef du gouvernement₁ s'est toutefois gardé de répliquer, par quelque « petite phrase » que ce soit, au maire de Conflans-Sainte-Honorine₂. 9. Celui-ci₂ ne l₁ avait pourtant pas ménagé dans sa récente interview à Libération. 10. Le forçing de Rocard₂, et la liberté de parole qu'il₂ s'accorde, incitent simplement les miterrandistes du PS à réaffirmer de plus en plus fort leur souhait d'une nouvelle candidature de l'actuel président de la

*République*₃. 11. *Comme l'a dit Fabius*₁, « sept ans, n'est-ce pas trop long pour un président médiocre et trop court pour un très bon ? »

1. Laurent Fabius₁, whose age is a strong card, can consider the possibility of passing up 1988. 2. The speech he₁ gave yesterday in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon before the Young Socialists' Summer School shows that the former prime minister₁ is already looking forward to the turn of the century. 3. Even before the Socialist Party adopts his proposals, he₁ insisted on sketching out himself what is basically at stake in the coming years.

4. This resolutely forward-looking spirit obviously does not prevent Fabius₁ from having his own ideas about the upcoming presidential election. 5. While Michel Rocard₂ tries to gain ground, he₁ was warmly applauded in hoping that François Mitterrand₃ "will agree to continue his mission". 6. For the reason that the current Chef of State₃ has the "qualities" required at the present time: "Sureness of judgement, experience, the ability to refuse to narrow the party, [the ability] to grasp new opportunities, finally a spirit of unity". 7. It can be easily imagined that, in Fabius₁'s mind, Rocard₂, when it comes to sureness of judgement, political experience and the spirit of unity, does not possess the necessary qualities. 8. The former head of government₁, in any case, refused to reply, with any "little phrase" whatsoever, to the mayor of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine₂. 9. The latter₂, however, had not spared him₁ in his recent interview in *Libération*. 10. Rocard's₂ attacks, and the freedom of speech he₂ allows himself, simply inspire the Mitterrandists in the Socialist Party to reaffirm more and more strongly their desire for a new candidacy by the current President of the Republic₃. 11. As Fabius₁ said, "Isn't seven years too long for a mediocre president and too short for a very good one?"

The first paragraph shows the normal pattern of reference to the principal person being discussed in a political article, introducing Laurent Fabius by his full name, then alternating pronouns with his former official title. The second paragraph refers to him more briefly by last name, while introducing another well-known rival in the Socialist Party, Michel Rocard, by full name. Out of context, the sentence that introduces Rocard would lead to a wrong reading of the pronoun:

Alors que Michel Rocard s'efforce d'occuper le terrain, il s'est fait chaleureusement applaudir en espérant que François Mitterrand « acceptera de continuer sa mission ».

'While Michel Rocard tries to gain ground, he was warmly applauded in hoping that François Mitterrand "will agree to continue his mission".'

The fact that the paragraph started with the name Fabius establishes that the il [he] refers to him, not to Rocard, as does the sense of the paragraph, which is about Fabius' support for Mitterrand. Note that no attempt was made at this point to use a name or a variation to disambiguate the pronoun reference in the sentence.

Continued references to Fabius and Rocard are paired in such a way that in sentence 7 both are referred to by last name only, while in number 8 both are given their official titles. Using the last names only--Rocard in 10 and Fabius in 11, continues the pattern of alternating names and titles and pairing references to the two. The third person mentioned in the passage, President Mitterrand, is introduced by first and last name, while the conventional variations current Chief of State and current President of the Republic are left for second and third reference.

Reasons for using elegant variation in newspaper style

Several explanations have been suggested as contributing factors to the widespread use of elegant variation in French journalistic prose. Cornish says it is "used to create variety and hence sustain the reader's interest" (1986:26). Or is the motivation some French horror of repetition, as alleged by Claude Sarraute? Is it merely journalistic routine, the kind of unquestioned professional practice acquired by each generation of journalists through imitation and professional training?

I suggest three more explanations.

1. Identification. As has been seen above, French newspapers generally introduce politicians by full name, but not by title. This contrasts with American journalistic practice of giving full particulars of title, state and party on first mention, even with well-known figures --for example "Senator Robert Dole (R-Kansas)". In general, French newspapers make more demands on the general knowledge of their readers and give less background information than American newspapers, but they still need to remind readers about the offices held or the party affiliations of the people they are talking about. These identifications can be made through the use of elegant variations, provided that readers can make the right discourse inferences.

2. Indirectness. Journalists must often be indirect in reporting rumors and opinions that have been gathered informally and cannot be attributed to a named source. In this situation, substituting the names of capitals for foreign governments and addresses for domestic government agencies can be a useful strategy. The reader is given to understand that "Au quai d'Orsay, on pense que..." means more than just "On the quai d'Orsay, people think that..." It means something like "Some officials that the reporter talked to in the Foreign Ministry think this, but for professional and political reasons they cannot be quoted directly." In the same way, the climate or consensus of opinion within a foreign government can be attributed to Washington, Moscow or Bonn without having to refer to the multiple, and perhaps confidential, sources from which that consensus was gleaned.

3. Facilitating coherence when composing quickly. Like other journalistic clichés, the stereotyped, formulaic elegant variations may be looked upon as part of a tradition that facilitates the work of the creator of routine journalistic texts by facilitating the task of keeping track of discourse reference to several entities during rapid composition, when repeated use of pronouns might lead to ambiguities. This could be compared to the way formulaic Homeric epithets provide ready-made phrases for use by the singer of tales in oral poetic improvisation (cf. A. Parry 1971: xxvii). Certainly, like Homeric epithets, elegant variations are not always used in a way that is felicitous or relevant to the passage in which they are found. For instance, in passage 3 above, it is of no importance to sentence 8 or to

any other aspect of the story that Michel Rocard is the mayor of the little town of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, yet that is how he is referred to there.

Elegant variations are a lot of trouble. As Mme Sarraute has shown, they are a lot of trouble to write, and for the apprentice newspaper reader they are a lot of trouble to understand. It remains to be seen if they have a function or functions that justify the trouble.

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