The evolution of the marker *comme qui dirait* ‘as one would say’ in French*

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The topic of this paper is the evolution of the discourse marker *comme qui dirait* from Old French to Modern French. At the beginning, the marker has the meaning of a hypothetical comparative *si comme l'en diroit / comme + qui + diroit* meaning *comme si l'on disait* ‘as if one said’. In a second stage, the marker becomes a reformulative marker with a meaning similar to *c'est-à-dire* ‘that is to say’. Finally, in a third stage, it becomes a polyphonic mitigation marker. The diachronic study of *comme qui dirait* explains its contemporary meaning and reveals its semantic features. In addition, a polyphonic analysis will allow us to understand the role of the speaker and of the enunciators in the enunciation of the marker.

**Keywords:** discourse marker, polyphony, diachrony, evidentiality, French

1. Introduction

There are several markers of *comme* ‘as’ that refer to the words of others, whether virtual or actual, such as *comme on dit*, studied for example by Anscombre (2005), *comme dirait l’autre* or *comme quoi*, studied by Lefeuvre (2003a, b). We will focus here on the marker *comme qui dirait* ‘as one would say, so to speak, as it were’, whose contemporary meaning does not appear to be compositional. We can therefore ask ourselves whether the comparison marker in *comme* guides really the meaning or whether the conditional tense plays a special role. In Spanish, for example, the indicative mood is used in this phrase (*como quien dice, como a quiél que dice, por decirlo así*). The present diachronic study of *comme qui dirait* will explain its contemporary meaning, such as in:

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1. Nous sommes comme qui dirait voisins.
   ‘We are neighbours so to speak’

2. C’est une dispute sexuelle comme qui dirait.
   ‘It is a sexual case, as one would say’

Diachrony is the perfect tool to understand the contemporary pragmatic meaning of the marker, and explains why items such as comme or the verb dire in conditional are present nowadays.

The study of the marker comme qui dirait confirms a general evolution of markers such as apparemment ‘apparently’ (Anscombe et al. 2009; Rodriguez Somolinos 2010), justement ‘precisely’, décidément ‘definitely’ (Gómez-Jordana 2011), or en vérité ‘truly’ (Combettes and Kuyumkuyan 2007), which show a similar trend, in that, from the nineteenth century onwards, they become more subjective and appear detached from the statement, operating then as adverbs of enunciation.

A polyphony analysis will allow us to understand the role of the speaker and of the enunciators in the enunciation of the marker. In the framework of polyphony studies following Ducrot (1984), we talk about the speaker who is responsible for the enunciation, for saying the sentence, taking into account that the speaker presents in their sentence one or more points of view, called the enunciators (E₁, E₂…). In addition, our work is also framed in the tradition of evidentiality studies such as Guéntcheva (1996), Dendale and Tasmowski (1994) or Anscombe (2005). These markers indicate the type of sources used by the speaker to say something.

As we will see in this paper, our hypothesis is that three diachronic values of comme qui dirait overlap and that Modern French only represents the last one of them. Even if we do not dedicate much space to syntax, we will observe that the semantic evolution is accompanied by a syntactic change. We have analyzed an extensive corpus, from the 14th century to the present day, with sources ranging from Frantext data, to the corpus of medieval literature of the langue d’oïl as well as examples found online in Google.¹

2. Comme qui dirait, the hypothetical comparison

We start from the assumption that the marker comme qui dirait experienced three values: comme qui dirait₁, comme qui dirait₂ and comme qui dirait₃. Comme qui dirait₁ does not have a set form and arises in different variants towards the middle of the fourteenth century. Comme qui dirait₁ appears mostly in the form of (si/

¹. Fuchs (2007) published a paper about comme qui dirait in Modern French. As her paper is focused on the syntax of the marker in Modern French, we won’t compare our results with hers.
aussi) comme qui dirait, but also in the forms of (si) comme l’en diroit /si comme aucun diroit, comme celi qui diroit, comme se l’en disoit, with the same meaning as comme qui dirait:

(3) Et donques se elle estoit de figure pyramide, comme peust estre un fust, il la diviseroit en pyramides. Et dire que pyramides sont divisé en pyramides et esperes en esperes, ce est chose du tout desraysonnable et est semblable comme se l’en disoit que glaives sont divisé en glaivez et falcielles en faucielles. Modern French Translation: ‘Et dire que les pyramides sont divisées en pyramides et les sphères en sphères, c’est quelque chose de tout à fait déraisonnable et c’est comme si l’on disait que les glaives sont divisés en glaives et les faucilles en faucilles’

(Oresme Nicole. Le livre du ciel et du monde (The book of the sky and the world) /1370, Page 652/book III, Chapter 13)

‘And to think that pyramids are divided into pyramids and spheres into spheres is something quite unreasonable and it is as if one said that swords are divided into swords and sickles into sickles’

(4) Il traicte une autre question; c’est a savoir, ou comme cause principal ou comme cause instrumentel; si comme l’en diroit que une espee occist et si est ce chose senz ame, ou comme l’en diroit que la main occist ou le sergent de celui qui le commande.

Modern French Translation: ‘Il traite une autre question; à savoir, ou comme cause principale ou comme cause instrumentale, comme on dirait qu’une épée tue et pourtant c’est une chose sans âme, ou comme on dirait que la main tue ou le serviteur de celui qui donne l’ordre’

(Oresme Nicole. Le livre de ethiques d’Aristote (Aristotle’s book of Ethics) 1370, Pages 314–315)

‘It deals with another issue, namely, either as the main cause or as the instrumental cause, as one would say that a sword kills and yet it is an item without soul or as if one would say that the hand kills or the servant of the one who orders him to do so’

Comme qui dirait, thus appears towards the mid-fourteenth century and is used until the eighteenth century, though its frequency decreases in Classical French, as we can verify in the Frantext database. The marker lies between two segments X and Y: X comme qui diroit, Y, and easily establishes a hypothetical and “paraphrasing” comparison – its reading being compositional – by saying X it is as if one said Y. The marker always introduces a direct object, as shown in (5) and (6).

(5) (…) mais comme il est ridicule de dire qu’il n’est pas encore temps, ou que le temps est passé de se guerir le corps, ainsi il est ridicule de dire que le temps de philosopher, c’est à dire de se guerir l’esprit, ne soit pas encore venu, ou
qu’il soit passé; puisque c’est justement comme qui dirait qu’il n’est pas encore temps, ou que le temps est passé d’être heureux. Il est étrange qu’on perde ainsi malheureusement le temps, et qu’on ne s’applique pas à ce qui sert autant aux riches, comme aux pauvres, et qui estant négligé, nuit autant aux jeunes qu’aux vieux. (Bernier, François. Abrégé de la philosophie de Gassendi. 1684:62. Livre 1 Chapitre 1)

‘(…) but as it is ridiculous to say that the time has not yet come, or that the time to heal the body has passed, it is just as ridiculous to say that the time for philosophy, that heals the mind, has not yet arrived, or has passed; since it is precisely as if one said (comme qui dirait) that the time for being happy has not yet come or has passed us by. It is odd therefore, that we waste our time and fail to apply what would be beneficial to both rich and poor and being neglected harms both young and old’

(6) si Dieu est exempt de passion, comme croyent tous les bons esprits, n’est-ce pas estre ignorant, et superstitieux, de penser qu’il soit agité de colere, et de vengeance. Ce quatrain suppose que nous depeignons Dieu furieux, cruel, et plein de trouble, ce qui est aussi faux, comme qui dirait que le blanc est noir, ou que le ciel n’est pas le ciel. (Mersenne Le Père Marin. L’Impiété des déistes, athées et libertins de ce temps. 1624: 587–588)

‘If God is free of passion, as all the good spirits believe, isn’t it being ignorant and superstitious, to think he is stirred by anger and vengeance? The Theol, this 60 quatrain seeks to portray God as angry, cruel and full of trouble, which is also wrong, as if one were to say that (comme qui dirait que) white is black or that the sky is not the sky’

In the examples in (5), the marker introduces a direct object clause. It makes a hypothetical comparison between X, for example in (5) saying that there is no time to philosophize, and Y, that the time to be happy has gone. The speaker is responsible for the comparison between X and Y, but not for the content of Y. The speaker features an enunciator E₁, a hypothetical linguistic community, to whom he does not grant his agreement and rejects its point of view. As a matter of fact, most of the instances exhibit an explicitly criticized X or are presented as unreasonable or false. What the speaker does is comparing this X with a hypothetical speech which is false too.

All occurrences of comme qui dirait have the same polyphonic structure in which the speaker features an enunciator, whose point of view he rejects. Occurrence (6) is a good example of this: the marker introduces a hypothetical reported speech. The speaker features an enunciator E₁, a hypothetical linguistic community, which says: white is black and that the sky is not the sky (le blanc est noir, le ciel n’est pas le ciel.) The speaker does not agree and rejects his point of view. The speaker is responsible for the comparison between X and Y, between
portraying God as angry, cruel and full of trouble (dépeindre Dieu furieux, cruel, et plein de trouble) and to say that white is black (dire que le blanc est noir). However, he is not responsible for Y, he just shows the point of view that he rejects. The comparison of Y with X allows him to reject X as well.

In the case of comme qui dirait₁, a reference is made to an utterance that a linguistic community could have held in a given situation. Indeed, the relative pronoun qui that refers to this community and the conditional enunciative alterity reflect the fact that Y has not been really asserted, although it could have been the case.

3. Comme qui dirait₂, the paraphrastic rewording

Comme qui dirait₂ appears in pre-classical French towards the mid-sixteenth century. The first example comes from a historical text published in 1577:

(7) (…) là où tournoyans de costé et d’autre, sans prendre pied nulle part, ains portans quant et eux leurs loges et maisonnettes sur des chariots, se départirent et habituèrent par les villes et bourgades du pays: Dont est advenu que cette manière de gens ont depuis esté appellez Turcs, comme qui diroit Pasteurs: les autres veullent qu’ils soient sortis de Turca, une fort belle et opulente cité en la Perse: et de là s’estre jettez sur ces pays bas de l’Asie qu’ils conquirent entierement, et les rengerent à leur obeyssance.

(Vignenère Blaise de. L’Histoire de la décadence de l’Empire grec, et establissement de celuy des Turcs 1577: 11)
‘(…) there where we spun around from one side to the other, without gaining foothold anywhere thus carrying about their lodges and cabins on carts, left until they got used to living in the cities and towns of the country: this way they happened to be called Turks, as one would say (comme qui diroit) Pastors: others believe them to have come out of Turca, a very beautiful and wealthy city in Persia, and hence having thrown themselves on these countries of lower Asia, which they conquered, entirely subjecting them to their obedience’

The value of comme qui dirait₂ is found in structures like X as they would say Y, where Y seems to rephrase X. In (7) the marker comme qui dirait₂ links X – Turks and Y – the pastors – creating a relation of equivalence between them. Under this value the comparative aspect shows up again and the speaker says something like: dire Turcs c’est comme si on avait dit Pasteurs ‘to say Turks it is as though we had said pastors’. He presents an enunciator E₁ who enunciates «Turcs c’est comme qui dirait Pasteurs» ‘saying Turks is like saying pastors’ and agrees with him.
In pre-classical French and at the beginning of the classical period (until the beginning of the eighteenth century) most of the *comme qui dirait* occurrences contain an X in a foreign language and Y provides the translation in French:

(8) (...), Du latin, avis, vient ce mot, avete, *comme qui dirait* petit oiseau.
(Serres Olivier de. *Le Théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs*: t. 1. 1603: 465)
‘From latin, avis, comes this word, avete, as one would say, small bird’

(9) Scot le subtil tient que c'est plutôt le syllogisme, que les Latins appellent Ratiocination, *comme qui dirait* Raisonnement.
(R723. Duplex Scipion / *La Logique ou l'Art de discouvrir et raisonner*. 1607: 41–43 / Book I, Chapter 5)
‘Scot, the subtle, takes into account that it is rather the syllogism, that the Latins call Ratiocination, as one would say Reasoning’

In the utterances in (8) and (9), the speaker enunciates a word in another language (X) and provides a translation into French, as one would say (*comme si on disait* [in French]) Y. He sets an enunciator, his linguistic community, which proposes the French version of the word X and gives his agreement. The speaker is responsible for the comparison *comme qui dirait* Y, but he is not responsible for the contents of Y, as it is explained in the polyphony theory of Ducrot (1984).

The marker *comme qui dirait* can always be replaced by *c'est-à-dire*, which means ‘namely’ or ‘that is to say’. The difference between the two lies in the polyphonic structure that is subjacent to *comme qui dirait* and which already appears in the conditional form of the verb to say (*dire*). The speaker does not state in a direct way that Y is the translation of X. He sets an enunciator which could have named Y instead of X in this situation and he grants his agreement to him. However, in *c'est-à-dire* this polyphony is not reflected and the speaker assumes Y straight away. From the above-mentioned description we can derive the semantic difference with *comme qui dirait*. Unlike *comme qui dirait*, in the first value of the marker the speaker featured an enunciator whose point of view he rejected.

From the beginning of the eighteenth century onwards, we find fewer and fewer occurrences in which the marker is linked to a word in a foreign language and its translation in French. From then on *comme qui dirait* links a word X and a gloss which intends to specify X. In the following occurrences the term Y provides a specification for the term X:

(10) (...) en attendant, envoie-moi une partie de ton petit trésor, *comme qui dirait* une vingtaine de ducats... (Sénac de Meilhan Gabriel. *L'Emigré*. 1797: 1705)
‘(...) in the meantime send me a part of your little treasure, as one would say twenty ducats...’
(11) Nous faisons encore un peu de folies, comme qui dirait de casser, de briser tout, de faire enrager les chiens, de les jeter à l’eau, etc.

(Sand, George. Correspondance. 1822: 37)

‘We yet make some follies, as one would say, breaking, shattering everything, infuriating the dogs, throwing them into the water and so on’


‘We ask you to come for dinner that is to say after Christmas Eve, not on Christmas Day but on the evening of Christmas Day, as one would say (comme qui dirait) the night of the 25th to the 26th’

(13) –eh bien, moi qui n’ai pas peur, mon vieux Robinson, que des fouines me rognent mon or, je viens à ta suite, et je demande au notaire, – comme qui dirait M. Maurice, – quinze cents francs, deux mille francs, n’importe, ou plutôt la somme que tu as portée toi-même. Sous garantie, il me la prête, et je lui baille deux cents francs: c’est cent francs qu’il a récoltés dans la journée.


‘Well I, who am not frightened of the weasels who gnaw at my gold, I obey you, and I ask the notary, or as one would say M. Maurice, – for fifteen hundred francs, two thousand francs, it does not matter or rather the amount you have brought yourself. Under warranty, he lends it to me and I lend him two hundred francs: this makes a hundred francs he has collected during the day’

In all these occurrences, the term Y of the structure X comme qui dirait Y, specifies the term X. For example, in (12) le soir du jour de Noël ‘the evening of Christmas Day’ the marker is used to specify the exact date dans la nuit du 25 au 26 ‘the night of the 25th to the 26th’.

In other cases, Y is another way to say X such as in:

(14) Apprends qu’on n’en jouit souvent qu’à la fin de ses jours, comme qui dirait à l’article de la mort. (Marivaux. Le Cabinet du philosophe. 1734: 340–341)

‘Learn that one often merely enjoys it at the end of one’s life, as one would say (comme qui dirait) at the verge of death’

(15) Le colonel n’a-t-il pas voulu nous persuader, en sortant de chez cette Madame D’Hocquincourt, qui n’a pas cessé de rire en nous regardant, qu’au fond nous avions été reçus avec bonté et gaieté, comme qui dirait sans façon, comme des amis, quoi! … morbleu! (Stendhal. Lucien Leuwen. 1835: 134–135)

‘Did the colonel not want to persuade us, when leaving the house of Madame D’Hocquincourt, who did not stop laughing while looking at us that ultimately we had been welcomed with kindness and cheerfulness, as one would say (comme qui dirait) unceremoniously, like friends?…damn it!’
À l'article de la mort ‘at the verge of death’ is another way of saying at the end of one’s life. Likewise être reçus avec bonté et gaieté ‘to be welcomed with kindness and cheerfulness’ is another way of saying être reçus sans façon ‘unceremoniously’. The marker connects a term and a gloss which is a different way of saying être reçus sans façon ‘to be welcomed unceremoniously’. In any case comme qui dirait is replaceable by c’est-à-dire ‘that is to say’.

In the twentieth century the use of comme qui dirait becomes increasingly rare.

4. Comme qui dirait, mitigating distances

Comme qui dirait is a marker that mitigates Y. The comparative aspect has vanished, and only the setting of distance is left, conveyed by the combination of the indefinite pronoun qui ‘who’ and the conditional form of the verb dire ‘to say’. This proves that the different items of the phrase have not become fixed at the same time. In addition, comme qui dirait and comme qui dirait require a structure in X comme qui dirait Y, whereas comme qui dirait does not necessarily present the element X anymore. In the occurrence where an element X exists, the marker does not establish a periphrastic reformulation between two elements and only serves to mitigate Y.

The first proof of comme qui dirait dates back to 1648, in Classical French. But it is not until the eighteenth century that the marker becomes established in French alternating with comme qui dirait. In the nineteenth century comme qui dirait becomes the dominant form and there are fewer and fewer occurrences of comme qui dirait. Finally in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries comme qui dirait is extremely rare and we begin to find comme qui dirait in a detached position, as an incision or in a final position.

(16) Il y a parmy eux une academie de certaines gens qui s'appellent les humoristes, qui est, à peu prés, comme qui diroit bizarre, et en effet, ils le sont tant, qu’il leur a pris fantaisie de me recevoir dans leur corps, et de m’en faire donner avis par une lettre que m’a escrite un de leur compagnie. Il faut que je leur en fasse une autre en latin, pour les remercier, et voilà ce qui me met en peine.

(Voiture, Vincent. Lettres. 1648: 542)
‘There is among them an academy of certain people who call themselves comedians, this is as one would say [comme qui diroit] bizarre, and indeed they are to the extent that they have taken to seeing me in person, after one of their company has given me written notice. What troubles me is that I am forced to reply in kind, in Latin’
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Here the marker accompanies the adjective Y in order to mitigate it. The speaker does not assert categorically that the comedians are bizarre. Although the first speaker features a first enunciator E₁ who says that the comedians are bizarre, which he agrees with, he also introduces a second enunciator E₂, his own linguistic community, who says that the comedians are, as one would say, bizarre.

*Comme qui dirait* does not introduce a hypothetical comparison, unlike what happened in *comme qui dirait*₁ and *comme qui dirait*₂. The new value of *comme qui dirait* is to mitigate a term or a whole phrase which the speaker cannot affirm categorically.

(17) Il n’ y avait pas, je crois, longtemps que je pionçais, quand un bruit m’éveille en sursaut : c’était le Maître d’école qui causait *comme qui dirait* amicalement avec un autre. (Sue, Eugène. *Les Mystères de Paris*. 1843: 91–92)

‘I believe I hadn’t been snoozing for long, when a noise woke me up with a start; it was the school teacher who was talking as one would say *comme qui dirait* in a friendly way with another’

(18) Ils se sont engueulés, si ça peut vous rendre service, monsieur le commissaire.

– Engueulés?


‘They shouted at each other, if that is of any help to you, Superintendent.

– They shouted at each other?

– Well, yes, that is the impression I got. He and Díaz, in a nutshell, have exchanged as one would say [*comme qui dirait*] insults.

(19) Vers le soir, voilà qu’il se décide à lui demander: « Tu te sens pas bien, la mère? T’es peut-être ben, *comme qui dirait*, un peu échauffée ? »

(chevalier, Gabriel. *Clochemerle*. 1934: 70–71)

‘Towards evening he decides to ask him: “Don’t you feel well, mother? Maybe you are, well as one would say, [*comme qui dirait*] a little hot?”’

In all these utterances, the structure does not correspond anymore to X marker Y, where a reformulation of X and Y would take place. The speaker does not affirm categorically that the school teacher was talking in a friendly way (*le Maître causait amicalement*). He portrays an enunciator E₁ who says “the school teacher was talking in a friendly way” (*Le Maître causait amicalement*) and from whom he distances himself. In (18), the speaker does not affirm categorically that they have exchanged insults. He mitigates that they have exchanged insults by means of *enfin* and *j’ai l’impression*.

In certain occurrences the marker not only establishes a mitigating distance, but also implies that at an informative level Y is wrong, whereas at an argumentative level it stands as being true. It is the same phenomenon as when we say “He has
almost finished". Actually in this sentence “he” hasn’t finished – informative level – but at an argumentative level, it is presented as if he had finished. This phenomenon occurs with the denominative use such as Je suis Y, Il est Y ‘I am Y, he is Y’.

(20) – Ton petit frère et ta petite sœur?
– Oui; d’aujourd’hui il faut que je sois pour eux comme qui dirait leur père. Tu comprends, ça me donne des devoirs, ça me range, je suis obligé de me charger d’eux. On voulait en faire des brigands finis; pour les sauver je les emmène. (Sue, Eugène. Les Mystères de Paris. 1843:862)

‘– Your little brother and your little sister?
– Yes, as from today I have to be for them as one would say [comme qui dirait] their father. Do you understand, it gives me responsibilities, it suits me, I am forced to take care of them. They wanted to turn them into thieves; in order to save them I take them with me’

(21) Je te dis merci pour la connaissance. Est-ce que nous nous reverrons encore?
Elle détourna la tête en souriant.
– Parce que j’habite comme qui dirait porte pour porte avec toi.
– En vérité ! Et de quel côté ?
– Là-bas dans le tournant du chemin. Pour certain que tu connais Bienaimé et Délira : je suis leur garçon.

(Roumain, Jacques. Gouverneurs de la rosée. 1944: 30–31)

‘Thank you for the acquaintance. Will we see each other again?
She turned her head and smiled.
– Because I live so to speak (comme qui dirait) next-door to you.
– Really! And on which side?
– Over there, round the corner. I am sure you know Bienaimé and Délira: I am their son’

Meussieu votre époux ? Ne rougissez pas, madame. Je suis comme qui dirait un confesseur, muet comme la pierre tombale et discret comme une périodique.

(Queneau, Raymond. Le dimanche de la vie. 1952: 128–129)

‘And the photo? You left it inside. Gosh, what a handsome young man. An Adonis. Your husband? Do not blush madam. I am as one would say a confessor, Silent as the grave and discreet as a periodical’

(23) (…) si j’étais enfin belle ! J’en suis certaine! Il viendrait!
– Qui?… Quel prince? Qu’est-ce que vous me chantez là?
– Chut! Vous êtes mon ami, n’est-ce pas ? Vous êtes comme qui dirait mon troisième père ? Puisque c’est le vieux juge de paix, mon tuteur, vous savez, qui est le deuxième.

(Delattre, Louis. Carnets d’un médecin de village. 1910: 175–176)
‘(…) If only I were beautiful! I’m sure he would come!
– Who?… Which prince? What are you talking about?
– Hush! You are my friend, aren’t you? Are you as one would say [comme qui dirait] my third father? Since the old justice of the peace, my tutor, is the second one.’

In all these cases, comme qui dirait, Y implies that Y is wrong. However, at an argumentative level the sentence has the same direction as Y. This function corresponds to that of the operator presque ‘almost’. If one says J’ai presque fini ‘I am almost done’, the informative content refers to ne pas avoir fini ‘not having finished’. Presque ‘almost’ implies that what follows is wrong. However, argumentatively presque fini ‘almost finished’ tends towards avoir fini (to be done). (See Anscombre and Ducrot 1983). The same holds for the occurrences je suis comme qui dirait votre troisième père and je suis comme qui dirait votre confesseur. Comme qui dirait has therefore become a mitigating adverbial marker.

Up to the first half of the twentieth century, the marker most often accompanies a segment and works as a constituting adverb, modifying only this term. However, from the 1930s and especially from the 1970s onwards, the marker appears increasingly on its own, in a detached position, as an incision or in the final position and the marker then labels the enunciation of the whole statement, in the same way as an adverb of enunciation.

(24) (…) que j’disais à l’instant, quand j’m’épate de disparaître, c’est pas que j’pense à la survie ou à l’âme au ciel ou en enfer ou à des imaginations de c’t’ordre. J’en parle, comme qui dirait, de haut. Quand n’importe quoi disparaît, c’est déjà drôle. (Queneau, Raymond. Le Chiendent. 1933: 172)

‘(…) I was saying a while ago, when I am amazed at disappearing, it is not because I am thinking about survival or the soul in heaven or in hell or imaginations of that kind. I am talking about, as one would say [comme qui dirait] from the top. When anything vanishes, it is funny’

(25) (…) mais toujours est-il que j’étais avec mon jonc et je les entendais qui s’injuriaient à travers la porte.
– Une dispute sexuelle ?

‘(…) but the fact is that I was with my reed and I could hear them cursing each other through the door.
– A sexual fight?
– No, rather about politics so to speak [comme qui dirait]. Namely one was calling the other a Marxist. Or a revolutionary. I did not pay much attention’
The marker in a detached position no longer relates to a single term, but to the entire enunciation. Thus, when it appears in incisions it would be quite possible to move it to the final position without changing the meaning: *J’en parle, comme qui dirait, de haut* ‘I am talking about it, as one would say, from the top’ and *J’en parle de haut, comme qui dirait* ‘I am talking about it from the top, as one would say’.

Finally, the scores found in the Web have the marker mainly in the titles of the blogs:

(26) «Il y a *comme qui dirait* un problème… et un problème de taille.»
    ‘There is, as one would say, a problem… it is problem of size’

(27) «J’ai *comme qui dirait* deux mains gauches»
    ‘I have, as one would say, two left hands’
    (www.deslautsetdebats.com/wordpress/index.php/…/lavis-de-miss-hello-jai-comme-qui-dirait-deux-mains-gauches)

In sum, the marker *comme qui dirait* has experienced a semantic and syntactic evolution. In X marker Y the reading of *comme qui dirait* was compositional and the structure was not fully frozen – *comme se l’en disait, comme qui diroit, comme l’en diroit*… *Comme qui dirait* became a paraphrase reformulation marker, invariably linking two items, X and Y. Its equivalent is *c’est-à-dire*. Finally it is the distance marker *comme qui dirait*, which prevails.

5. Conclusion

In this paper it has been shown that the three uses of *comme qui dirait* witness a clear evolution towards mitigation. Interestingly, the different elements of the construction played their role at specific stages of the evolution. We see that different elements of the marker evolved at different times. *Comme qui dirait*, and *comme qui dirait*, contain both a degree of distancing through the use of the conditional form of the verb *dire* (to say) as well as an underlying comparison through the word *comme*. However, the marker has evolved into *comme qui dirait*, where this comparative function is no longer apparent. The X segment has been eliminated, leaving only the distancing function.
References


Web sites and CD-Roms

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