I think we need…: Verbal expressions of opinion in conference presentations in English and in French

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This paper examines the frequency and functions of English and French opinion markers in 60 presentation transcripts of the EIIDA corpus in Linguistics and in Chemistry, Geochemistry, Marine, and Water Sciences. These functions, found in all four sub-corpora, include highlighting a general or strong opinion, proposing a hypothesis or negotiating with the audience, expressing doubt, or classifying information. Several important differences can be observed. First, the English verb *think* frequently functions as a discourse marker, more so than the French *penser.* In French, adverbials, the pronoun *on* and the conjunction *que* are frequent with an opinion verb, but were largely absent in English. In Linguistics, English speakers are more likely to express the subjective opinion that a result is "interesting", whereas in the other three sub-corpora speakers are more likely to employ a modal verb, except with *think*, to hedge a statement. As regards discipline, there appear to be slightly more markers of opinion in Linguistics. In the Science sub-corpora, markers of opinion are often related to an observation (*on se rend compte*, 'one realizes'). Overall, opinion verbs tend here to be dialogic, serving to express doubt or to negotiate with the audience, rather than to confirm a forceful personal position.

Keywords: oral academic discourse, opinion verbs, English, French

1. Introduction

Conference presentations are the occasion for academics to discuss their work with peers in a highly-structured, time-limited setting. Previous research has confirmed the subjective qualities of written discourse, often highlighting "authorial presence". This paper explores the subjective discursive act of offering an opinion or point of view in the physical presence of one's peers. We draw upon the "Étude interdiscplinaire et interlinguistique du discours academique" (EIIDA) corpus in order to compare and contrast the oral

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expressions of opinions in both English and French in Linguistics and a contrasting corpus of Geochemistry, Marine and Water Sciences (referred to hereafter as Science for convenience). We posit that speakers, despite the monologic nature of conference presentations, negotiate matters of both minor and key opinion with the audience. We also expect that there may be many similarities, but also some differences due to both language and discipline.

In certain presentations, speakers offer very clear and heart-felt opinions concerning the results or the impact of their work (Hartwell, 2016). As can be read in example (1) from an introduction, speakers confirm their "view", which they substantiate during the talk. Furthermore, they verbally interact with the audience, as in this example, by noting "this community" and "our children's children".

(1) so today what I want to do is share with you a view that comes from my personal experience to some extent of twenty-five years of working on large open ocean animals and a need that I I sense in this community to get the message out that there is an urgency to do something now or else your children and our children's children won't be able to see many of these critters // (EN-S-O-03)[1]

This proximity with the audience is in striking contrast with the same researcher's neutral statement in a published research article on the importance of her results: "These data are critical for the future management and conservation of bluefin tuna in the Atlantic" (EN-S-W-03). It would appear then to be erroneous to rely uniquely upon written resources to evaluate the academic use of opinion verbs, despite more extensive research in that mode of communication. Hence, a review of expressions of opinion during conference presentations is of particular pertinence.

Opinion verbs, such as *think* and *penser* ('to think'[2]) are used to give weight, hedge, and personalize an opinion. Again, in example (2), the speaker adopts in this concluding sentence an inclusive *we* to embrace the audience, but the modal

1 Quotes from the EIIDA corpus are identified by a four-element code. The first two letters indicate the language ('EN' for English and 'FR' for French), the second letter stands for either Linguistics ('L') or Science 'S', the third letter represents either written ('W') or the oral ('O') mode. Finally, the number represents the author(s) by alphabetical order. This enables the reader to identify the original sub-corpus. See also the introduction to this issue of *CHIMERA* for more information on the EIIDA corpus.

2 For French words, expressions, or phrases in this article, the English translation is provided the first time it appears between single quote marks, i.e. *penser* ('to think'). We have used a backslash when discussing expressions that encompass both languages, i.e. *think/penser.*

verb hedge *could* attenuates this discursive move. In French, this inclusiveness is often embodied by the pronoun *on*, as in example (3). This point of view follows logically from previous elements, as signalled by *donc* (‘thus’).

(2) I think that we we could conclude by saying that we have the same genre but different voices // (EN-L-O-05)

(3) on peut donc estimer que la distinction sémantique n'a pas joué // (FR-L-O-11) ‘one can thus consider the semantic distinction did not come into play’

We adopt a generous definition of opinion that stretches beyond firm opinions to correlated functions related to point of view. These functions include highlighting more general opinions often on lesser points, expressing doubt or uncertainty about a specific point or detail, negotiating an opinion or a hypothesis with the audience, suggesting a hypothesis, and finally classifying information in a given category. At the center of this study is the frequency and grammatical characteristics of opinion verbs (*cf.* Table 1) or verbal expressions, of which the most frequent are *think*/*penser*, used in a range of functions and lexico-grammatical sequences.

In this paper, we first offer a review of the literature on the scholarly oral discourse in a conference setting, stance, and parenthetical verbs. We then highlight methodological questions that complement other descriptions of the EIIDA corpus found in this issue of *CHIMERA*. Within the results section, we examine the presence of opinion verbs and to what extent they represent a characteristic element of scholarly oral discourse. We also discuss their multiple forms and functions across both languages and disciplines. These functions include a general or strong opinion, hypotheses or negotiated opinion and doubt. Following the trends found by the *Cultural Identity in Academic Prose: national versus discipline-specific Corpus* (KIAP) research team[3], we hypothesize that there will be greater differences between disciplines than between languages.

3 The KIAP corpus was created at the University of Bergen (Norway) under the direction of Kjersti Fløttum. This collection of 450 research articles in three languages (English, French, and Norwegian) covering three disciplines (economics, linguistics, and medecine) allows researchers to examine, among other axes, the language-specific or discipline-specific manifestation of academic voices in research articles (Fløttum, Dahl & Kinn 2006; Fløttum, Jonasson & Noren 2007).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conference presentations

Swales (1990) reminds us that conference presentations are often in dynamic tension with a corresponding written publication, which may range from a work-in-progress, a preliminary trial, a published or unpublished research article, or the conference proceedings. Both the written publication and the oral presentation are shared within a common discourse community. However, there are a number of qualities inherent to oral presentations, in comparison to the written counterpart: progress report (instead of a final project), narration (instead of exposition), and allowance for humor (but a distaste for figures). During a conference, "the presenter is much more of a person, indeed on who can tell tales against him-or herself to good rhetorical effect, while the writer is much more of an abstracted, calculated persona" (*ibid*, 1990 : 186). Hood and Forey (2005) also note that conference presenters retain an immediacy with an audience, but the preparation in parallel with a written text introduces a highly reflective quality. The differentness and sameness of written and oral discourse are also reviewed by Leech (2000), who finds that within spoken performance, especially conversational communication, there is a tendency to reduce length and complexity of utterances.

A seminal study on biomedical conference presentations was conducted by Dubois (1980) who proposed a speech structure framed by listener and content-oriented elements of this "real-time face-to-face character of the genre". She concludes on the variation found in these talks due to the speaker's touch that takes precedent over other forces:

> Thus, it is quite often the scientific person, rather than the scientific *persona*, who reads a paper at biomedical meeting. Under identical conditions of presentation, wide variation in tone and organisation and lesser variation in key show that some features of the speech are determined internally be the scientist's personal choice more than by external, or social, pressures (Dubois, 1980: 166).

In a more recent and one of the few studies on the introduction sections of conference presentations, Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2005) conclude that speakers set up an interpersonal framework in which a "modest, co-operative fellow-researcher" *persona* is frequent. Within their discussion of increased use of personal pronouns compared to research articles, they note the more open expression of evaluation (*I believe*), but also hedging through the use

of subjective comment clauses (*I think that*). Yang (2014) identifies three grammatical characteristics of conference presentations: the indicative personal pronoun *you*, determiners (*the*, *this*, or *that*), *just* in association with a hedge, and finally *if*-conditionals often to introduce an alternative arguments or a research claim.

Finally, in his comparison of class-size on teacher discourse within higher education, Lee (2009) found a greater frequency of personal pronoun use in small class lectures. He suggests that the presence of *I* and *you* may be due to closer relationships between the lecturer and students in small class lectures, reducing the need to maintain positive politeness. In their review of the research on university lectures, Fortanet Gómez and Bellès Fortuño (2005) offer in conclusion several characteristics of this specific genre, notably stance being marked by the pronoun *I* and mainly epistemic verbs, disciplinary differences of lecture delivery strategy (Law, Business and Sociology), and of American lectures being more interactive than the formal British ones.

These studies situate conference presentations as a unique discursive event, bringing together speaker and audience around often shared disciplinary traditions, methods, and concerns. It would appear that the speaker is expected to position themselves, negotiating a perspective relative to the discussed research.

2.2 Stance, making a claim, and situated genre

The question of positioning in scholarly discourse has benefited from much research. In his corpus-based study of academic English oral and written registers, Biber (2006) pays considerable attention to expressions of feelings and assessment. These expressions of stance cover attitudes, levels of certainty, sources, or perspective on the given propositional information. Among the grammatical devices available to express stance, adverbials (i.e. *obviously*), modal verbs, and complement clauses (i.e. *I doubt that*) are frequent (*ibid*: 88). Epistemic stance verbs cover "certainty" (*conclude*, *know*, *realize*, *understand*) and "likelihood" (*assume*, *believe*, *suppose*, *think*). As he notes, stance explicitly attributed to the first person is more overt than when attributed to the second or third person or in presence of unattributed modality (for example, *both of those things might be true*, *It seems fairly obvious…*) (*ibid*: 91).

Hyland and Sancho-Guinda (2012) define *stance* as "a continuum of evaluative meaning which varies along two axes: one epistemic and interpersonal (i.e. from feelings and attitudes to a status of knowledge) and the other linguistic (i.e. from lexis to grammar)" (2012: 4). The range of rhetorical

elements of this continuum are called upon in both oral and written contexts to position one's work within a situated context. Hyland (2005) points out that the interpersonal aspects of this discursive negotiation found in written contexts:

> That is, in pursuing their personal and disciplinary goals, writers seek to create a recognizable social world through rhetorical choices which allow them to conduct interpersonal negotiations and balance claims for the significance, originality and plausibility of their work against the convictions and expectations of their readers (Hyland, 2005: 176).

Within the scope of stance, the central resources of academic discourse are hedges, boosters, attitude markers, and self-mention. Fischer (2007) reviews the many types of hedges, a rhetorical strategy that may allow the scholar to "appear modest, conciliatory, or open for disagreement" (2007: 33). Hedges include *plausibility shields*, such as *I think we can just slow him down…* or *as far as I can tell, you don't have…*, which are expressions conveying a level of uncertainty or doubt (2007 : 19). However, as discussed in the following section on parentheticals, *think* may also be used as a filler or structuring device. Thus, the unit *I think* encompasses a wide range of functional flexibility depending upon the situation, including serving as a booster (*ibid:* 258). Although stance also includes discursive elements such a self-reference, which are beyond the scope of this study.

The breadth of academic voices in research articles in different languages, disciplines, and texts was the focus of the *Cultural Identity in Academic Prose: national versus discipline-specific Corpus* (KIAP) project. In their enunciative and polyphonic approach, four distinctive author roles (*researcher, writer, arguer,* and *evaluator*) were identified and correlated to certain verb groups. Interestingly, the KIAP research team decided that leaving the *arguer* role open to the multiple dimensions of positioning would not permit a full understanding of the *evaluator* role, which covers emotional and evaluating constructions, containing, for example, *feel* or *be sceptical about.* In the KIAP English articles, the verbs *argue* and *claim,* but to a lesser degree *believe* were found to be the most typical position verbs of the *arguer* role. However, certain verbs, such as *conclude,* can be used in both a *writer role* ('*I conclude by + ing*-form') and also to argue a position (*I conclude that there is a clear correlation.…*). Although *find* may be considered as belonging to the *researcher role,* the example of a concluding statement, *I found that when a model is formulated…* was considered a manifestation of the *evaluator role.*

Analysis of the KIAP corpus revealed that articles in Linguistics exhibit a greater degree of authorial manifestation, followed by economics and then

medicine. Articles in English had more frequent manifestations of authorial presence, close to the frequency in Norwegian, but French articles had a weaker degree (Fløttum, Dahl & Kinn 2006).

The authorial presence within research articles is also discussed by Hyland (2001) who found, especially within the "soft" fields of science, a "rhetorical strategy of promotion" that allows writers to take custody and personal ownership of their research:

> Writers must display appropriate respect for alternatives, but back their views with a personal warrant where necessary. The personal voice here works to address readers directly through firm alignment with their views, pledging certainty and an interpersonal assurance of conviction. […] This use [of summarising a viewpoint or making a knowledge claim] not only serves to metadiscursively guide the reader through the discussion, but once again explicitly foregrounds the writer's distinctive contribution and commitment to his or her position. With this use the writer and the claim are strongly coupled, soliciting recognition of both (Hyland 2001: 221-222).

This tendency to take linguistic ownership in the Humanities was also confirmed in French through the study of authorial positioning within the Scientext[4] corpus of scholarly discourse, including the specific existence of opinion verbs, such as the French *penser, croire, considérer, juger* (Tutin & Grossmann 2014). These forceful opinion verbs are found to be hedged as in: *on peut penser que* ('one may/can think that'). They suggest that this could indicate a negotiation with the reader as the authors refer to the given data, encouraging other researchers of the academic community to adopt a similar conclusion.

Also within the framework of the Scientext project, Tutin's (2010) study on verbs of positioning in French scientific articles in the humanities took into account three broad classes of verbs: a) verbs of 'opinion' (*penser* 'think', *croire* 'believe', including agreement/disagreement verbs, b) verbs of 'choice' and 'intention' (*choisir* 'choose', *supposer* 'assume'…), and c) verbs of 'scientific contribution' (*montrer* 'show', *prouver* 'proove'). Her work showed that although authorial position through positioning verbs exists within the humanities, it is not pronounced, but varies strikingly across disciplines. Of these three verb types, opinion verbs are the less frequent and often mitigated by the presence of the indefinite *on* as a human subject or the use of modal verbs (for example: *on pourrait penser* … 'one/we might think'), which would suggest a negotiation with the reader as the authors refer to the given data, encouraging

4 The Scientext corpus was created at the laboratory LIDILEM and is available at: http://scientext.msh-alpes.fr/scientext-site/spip.php?article9.

other researchers of the academic community to adopt a similar conclusion. Hartwell and Jacques (2014) also queried the Scientext corpus for authorial presence and roles in English and French. They found that among the ten most frequent verbs found within verbal expressions of self-reference, the French sub-corpus included the opinion verb *penser*, but none among the top ten verbs pertaining to self-reference in English were linked to opinion verbs.

However, as we will discuss further, many verbs that express an opinion have multiple discursive purposes, including parenthetical use.

2.3 Epistemic parenthetical verbs and their translation

Opinion verbs are often used in parenthetical sructures, and especially in oral discourse (i.e. “it's higher, I guess”). Epistemic parenthetical verbs, found in both written and oral discourse, are frequently mentioned in relation to more informal oral discourse. English epistemic parenthetical verbs, such as *think*, *believe*, *suppose*, *guess*, *deduce* were systematically discussed by Urmson (1952, cited by Gachet 2009, Hedberg & Elouazizi 2015, Mullan 2010), who highlighted the absence of the continuous tense, their placement at the beginning, middle or end of a sentence, and who defined their semantic role as guiding “the hearer to an appreciation of the matrix statement in its social, logical, or evidential context” (cited by Hedberg & Elouazizi 2012). As Schneider, Glikman and Avanzi (2015) propose, the debate over the characterization of parenthetical verbs stems from diverging syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic approaches. Parentheticals have been considered mere formulaic stance markers, dependent on context, incomplete constructions, varying in function with prosaic elements or their syntactic subject or position or the host’s word order. In the same volume, Newmeyer (2015) argues that these “apparent main clauses” of a subject-verb pair, are actually “real” main clauses taking a subordinate clause.

Examining French parenthetical verbs, Gachet (2009) evokes “weak governors” (*verbes recteurs faibles*), arguing that these verbs (such as *penser* ‘think’ or *croire* ‘believe’) do not have atypical syntactic constructions, but have those of double object verbs. Gachet (2015) also suggests that the absence of *que* between certain peripheral clauses and the main clause, such as in *je crois il va pleuvoir* (‘I believe it is going to rain’), stems from an analogy with mitigating adverbs (i.e. *peut-être il va pleuvoir* ‘perhaps it is going to rain’); inversed units such as *paraît-il* (‘appears it’) and *semble-t-il* (‘seems it’) would appear to support this argument.

Much attention has been accorded to the development and flexibility of the English unit *I think*. Aijmer (1997) distinguishes between grammaticalization and pragmaticalization, in her argument that the recurrent oral phrase *I think* has "developed into a discourse marker or modal particle which is syntactically a speech-act adverbial" (Aijmer 1997: 1). She cites the seminal work by P. Kiparsky and C. Kiparsky, *Fact* (1970), which argues that non-factive, structurally-flexible verbs, such as *think*, *believe*, *guess*, *suppose*, have developed syntactically and semantically. She argues against the notion of a grammaticalization as put forward by Thompson and Mulac (1991), noting that the highest density of *I think* is found in informal face-to-face conversation and the least often in prepared speech. Her work confirms Biber's (2006) findings of greater *that*-deletion in informal conversation and greater presence of *that* in prepared speech (Aijmer 1997: 10). Drawing upon the Longman corpus of spoken and written English, Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan, (1999) found more frequent *that*-clauses in newspaper texts and conversations than in fiction and academic prose. These clauses also tend to be more frequent when the main-clause verbs is either *say, think*, or *know*, the introductory *that* being more frequently absent in speech. Finally, in his study of the British oral component of the International Corpus of English, Kaltenböck (2007) notes that *I think*, one of the most frequent comment clauses, similar to *I mean* in oral discourse, may also serve as a simple filler, containing very little connection to the content or to other expressions of certainty (*Uh, that I think is uh uh certainly a new factor*). This bleaching and its frequent presence with disfluency features (i.e. *uh*) may indicate its use as a pleonastic structuring device that links purpose and information flow (*ibid*: 251).

Further to this, in her discussion of the lexicalization of 'believe-type'-verbs such as *guess*, Fischer (2007) argues that the semantic change from a verb of cognition into an epistemic evidential, found in combination with the first person, has resulted in what she considers should be categorized as formulaic tokens. In their more recent generative grammar and prosaic approach, Hedberg and Elouazizi (2015) note that while epistemic parenthetical verb phrases receive an analysis similar to that of epistemic adverbs, these verb phrases, which mitigate the epistemic force of the subject or the predicate or the entire clause, have an expressed first-person subject.

Mullan (2010) compares the Australian English epistemic and organizational uses of the conversational discourse markers *I think* with the French *je pense, je crois, je trouve* ('I think', 'I believe, 'I find'). He notes Persson's (1993: 5-9) identification and examples of the three main functions for *think:* "cogitation" (*Are animals able to think?*), "opinion", which is divided into "probability-based

opinion" ('I think he is in the bathroom') and "pure opinion" (*I think we should help him*), and finally "impression" (*I think she is beautiful*), which corresponds more closely to the French *je trouve* (*ibid*: 61-62). He also cites Doro-Mégy (2008), who suggests the following translations of *I think: je crois* in cases of untestable uncertainty, and *je pense* for indicating an opinion. The verb *believe* may be translated as *penser* or *à mon avis* ('in my opinion') (*ibid*: 128). His results highlight the contrasting means of expressing opinion in both languages and the polysemy of these opinion verbs.

Hence, there is considerable discussion around the linguistic status of many of frequent opinion-related verbs. The near grammaticalization and pragmaticalization of many of these verbs, and their closeness to the quality of pragmatic particle, complicates their analysis. Furthermore, they occupy a range of functions that we develop in the latter section of this study.

3. Methodology

The EIIDA corpus contains renowned specialists in their domain, as well as young researchers. The settings of these 60 presentations (30 transcripts per language divided between the two fields) totalling 194,800 words are detailed in Appendix 1. For each of the four sub-corpora, there are fifteen transcripts representing an equal number of talks for language and field of study. It should be noted that the corpus is relatively small and so conclusions should be considered with caution. The corpus does not include the metadata that would allow an analysis of factors such as the speaker's professional status, age, or conference size, but all speakers are native speakers of the target language. General tendencies are known, for example, the Science sub-corpus in French is composed of transcripts of talks given by doctoral students, while the Linguistics sub-corpus in English is mainly drawn from talks by seasoned researchers. In many cases of all four sub-corpora, speakers appeared to know other participants and members of the audience as they referred to participants by first name. This was notably true for the John Swales Conference Corpus, at which many of the speakers have had professional connections over the decades. See also the introduction to this special issue of *Chimere* for more details on the corpus.

The Science sub-corpora are relatively similar in word size (*cf.* Table 1). In contrast, both of the Linguistics sub-corpora are larger[5] than for Science sub-corpora. These figures include fillers (i.e. *uh*), repeated words, and spoken

5 We did not include the question-and-answer sections of the EIIDA corpus.

examples. However, opinion words present within examples have not been included in the results discussed in the next section, as they do not represent an opinion of the speaker.

	Linguistics	**Science**
English	66,400	36,600
French	54,000	37,800

Table 1: Number of words per sub-corpus

For this study, we first read the transcripts of the oral presentations in English and French to manually identify verbs and other markers of opinion, including markers already identified in previous studies conducted at the LIDILEM laboratory (*cf.* Tutin, 2010). Then, we used Oxygen[6] and Antconc[7] software to query the corpus for verbs and adverbial expressions of opinion that we had identified through reading the transcripts. These queries resulted in considerable noise that was manually removed. Furthermore, certain opinion verbs were absent from the corpus or their meaning was not related to expressing an opinion, these include: *conclude/conclure, disagree, put forward, need, see/voir,* and the French *souscrire* (*subscribe)* and *penser à* (‘to think of’). By using these procedures, we believe that we have identified nearly all or all of the relevant occurrences (*cf.* Table 2).

Concerning the adverbial expression, evidence adverbs such as *obviously* or *of course* are strong markers of opinion. In the EIIDA corpus, especially in the linguistics sub-corpus in French, we observed a variety of adverbial expressions also referring to the author such as *pour moi/nous* (‘for me/us’) (8 occurrences), *à mon avis* (3 occurrences), *selon moi* (‘according to me’) (3 occurrences), as in example (9).

(4) cette approche macro-syntaxique permet **à mon avis** de résoudre quelques cas de conscience et donc je vous incite à regarder l'occurrence trente-six cinquante // (FR-L-O-05) ‘this macro-syntactic approach makes it possible **in my opinion** to resolve certain dilemmas and so I invite you to look at occurrence number thirty-six fifty’

6 Oxygen software, available at: https://www.oxygenxml.com/.
7 Antconc 3.5 software, available at: http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/.

Markers of this type are far less varied in the English sub-corpus. We found 13 occurrences of *to me* and six occurrences of *for me*, but only in the Linguistics sub-corpus. It should be noted that eight were in the expression *it seemed to me* and a ninth occurrence of *to me, that seems*, 'seem' being an agentless verb. Also in each of the English sub-corpora there is one occurrence of *needless to say*, relying upon the verb *say*, which we discuss below. In English, we did not find any occurrences of the opinion adverbials *in my view* or *in my opinion*. This difference in usage of adverbials may be a stumbling block for non-native speakers of English. For example, Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas (2014) observed an overrepresentation of *according to me* (a literal translation of *selon moi*) in research articles written in English by francophone speakers. However, given the sparsity of data related to opinion adverbials in the EIIDA corpus, the present study focuses on opinion verbs.

We retained all of the verbal occurrences in which the speaker is clearly identified by a personal pronoun (*I/je*, *we/nous*, *one/on*) followed by a verb of opinion (for example, *think*, *penser*, *croire*) and a complement clause. The selective criteria of a notional clause means that the speaker is not simply filling space or structuring the talk as the sequence necessarily carries meaning. We did not include statements in which the agent is not human (example (5)), nor rhetorical questions (example (6)), nor pronouns that might not include the speaker, because our specific focus is authorial presence. However, both examples (6) and (7) support the notion that there is an attempt for verbal negotiation with the audience around the stated opinion based on supporting facts produced either elsewhere in the talk or evoked in the same sentence.

(5) so what **this paper** says now is that // (EN-S-O-02)

(6) **should we** seriously think about conserving microbes? // (EN-S-O-02)

(7) **you can** […] **say** okay based on what's in these reservoirs // (EN- S-O-09)

We did not include occurrences in which the meaning of the verb did not relate to opinion, for example when ‘think’ referred only to the cognitive act (example (8)) or ‘say’ referred to a speech act (example (9)).

(8) the types of questions that **I and my colleagues think** about right now are // (EN-S-O-03)

(9) what I'm plotting **as I said** is mean displacement // (EN-S-O-10)

4. Results

4.1 Overview of opinion verbs

Overall, given the differences in corpora size, opinion verbs are found more frequently in English than in French. In English, we find similar approximate frequencies of one opinion verb for every 460 words in Linguistics and one opinion verb per 515 words in Science (*cf.* Table 2). However, because the English corpus of Linguistics is larger than of Science, more opinion verbs are present in the corpus. In French, the Linguistics corpus is considerably larger, but in contrast, the approximate frequency of opinion verbs falls to a mere one per 1006 words. In Science, there is a frequency of one opinion verb per 822 words in French. Because the French Science sub-corpus has both a low ratio of opinion verbs and a small corpus size, this sub-corpus has the smallest number of total opinion verbs.

An analysis of the overall ratio of opinion words shows that language determines frequency more than discipline does. In French, there are only 1.07 opinion verbs per 1000 words in Linguistics and 1.11 for Science. The ratio is almost doubled in English with 2.19 and 1.83 opinions verbs respectively by field. In English, *think* contributes to this greater presence of opinion verbs. In French, speakers are more likely to announce that they *dire* ('say') or, in Science, that they *se rendre compte* ('realize') (*cf.* Table 2).

Although *think* and *penser* were by far the most frequent verbs of opinion, a range of opinion verbs are found in the EIIDA corpus. Table 2 displays all of the opinion verbs occurring with a personal pronoun as subject, including parentheticals, past opinions, and negatives (i.e. *I didn't believe*). When a literal translation was not available, we used an equivalent term. In order to visualize the similarities and contrasts between English and French, Table 2 lists the verbs or verbal expressions and the closest literal translation (i.e. *believe*/*croire*)[8] by order of frequency. We can see English speakers are more likely to employ *think* than any other verb (57% of the opinion verbs in Linguistics, 60% in Science), than the French employ *penser* (28% of the opinion verbs in Linguistics, 35% in

8 For example, according to the bilingual concordancer Tradooit (https://www.tradooit.com/index.php), the most frequent translation of 'argue' is *dire*. As *dire* is already paired with 'say' here, we have paired 'argue' with *soutenir*, the second most frequent translation of 'argue' according to Tradooit.

Science). There is also one occurrence of *I think*, that can be considered a filler, but that was included in the data as the complement contained both a subject and a verb (‘but I think we can uh uh uh uh we we we really haven't taken into consideration’).

Table 2. Verbs of opinion including parenthetical usage, past tenses

	Linguistics in English	**Linguistics in French**	**Science in English**	**Science in French**
Think:Penser	66	20	39	15
Say:Dire	6	15	10	11
Believe:Croire	11	16	4	2
Realize:se rendre compte, se dire	2	3	0	13
Find:Trouver	10	1	0	0
Guess:Deviner	8	0	1	0
Suppose:Supposer	2	2	2	1
Consider:Considérer	0	5	2	0
Agree:Être d’accord	1	3	1	0
Be sure:Être certain.e	3	0	2	0
Suggest:Suggérer	4	0	0	0
Argue:Soutenir	1	0	2	0
Suspect:Soupçonner	0	0	3	0
Defend:Défendre	0	2	0	0
Other*	4	3	1	0
Sub-totals	**118**	**70**	**67**	**42**
Normalized frequency per 1000	2.19	1.05	1.83	1.11
Number of different verbs	15	13	11	5
Approximate token count	54,000	66,400	36,600	37,800

* One each for the following: Linguistics in English (*I’m not claiming, posit, second, should not forget*), Linguistics in French (*estimer* (‘estimate’), *être dans l’idée* (‘have the idea’), *souscrire à un point de vue* (‘hold the point of view’)), Science in English (*stress*).

We also found differences of individual verb frequency across the four sub-corpora. The larger corpus size in Linguistics in both languages correlates with a greater range of different verbs (15 lemmas in English, 13 in French), compared

to the Science sub-corpora (11 in English, 5 in French). The presence of transcripts from doctoral students' presentations in the French Science sub-corpus may have introduced this lack of verbal variety. Although the French Science sub-corpus shows little variety, it is worth noting that seven verbs of the English Science sub-corpus are represented by only one or two occurrences, although it was, in contrast, elaborated from the talks of advanced specialists. Hence, it appears that there is, in the sciences, a tendency towards less variety in the use of verbs of opinion compared to their usage in Linguistics.

Furthermore, excluding *think/penser*, there is a greater mean frequency per represented verb in French (4.2 occurrences per verb present in Linguistics, 7.5 in Science), compared to English (3.7 per represented verb in Linguistics, 2.5 in Science). However, correlated to corpus size, it is actually in Linguistics in French that there is the lowest overall presence of opinion verbs other than *penser* and in English that there is a relatively greater presence of opinion verbs other than *think*. This may be due in part to the frequent use of adverbials in French.

4.2 A note on syntax

A characteristic of opinion verbs is that they can be followed by the complementizer *that*/*que*.. In French, the proportion of verbs followed by *que* is very high, as 68.9% of the opinion verbs in Linguistics are followed by *que* and 80% in Science. In English, the ratio is nearly reversed, as only 13.6% of the opinion verbs in Linguistics are followed by a conjunction *that* and 18.3% in Science. Within the context of oral discourse, one might expect the conjunction *that* to be employed with strong opinion verbs (*cf.* section 4.4.2) as a means to discursively grant them weight. However, although an opinion verb + *that* does introduce strong opinions in this corpus, there are also strong opinions that do not contain this conjunction. Interestingly, after an opinion verb, we found only one occurrence of the conjunction *that* followed by the pronoun *that* (example (10)), despite the frequent presence of the pronoun *that* (example (11)). This suggests that there may be, in some cases, stylistic choices in English that dominate over the notion of parenthetical status. However, the parenthetical nature of many of these opinion verbs may account for the relative absence of *that.* This is especially true for *I think* that often serves as a grammatical or pragmatic marker.

(10) we realized **that that** wasn't the major issue // (EN-L-O-10)

(11) I thought **that** would be perfect // (EN-S-O-6)

Finally, we observed some noteworthy contrasts between the pronouns used with opinion verbs in the two languages. In French, the pronoun *on* (‘one’) has a large variety of uses, especially in academic writing (Fløttum *et al*. 2007, Tutin 2010) as it can refer to the author(s) (“authorial *on*”), to the author(s) and the audience (“inclusive *on*”) or even to the scientific community as a whole (“exclusive *on*”). In Linguistics, there are 25 occurrences in French of *on* (35.7% of all pronouns with an opinion verb) and 30 in Science (65.2% of all pronouns with an opinion verb). This versatile pronoun is at times employed as one would use *je* (‘I’), often associated with hedges such as *pouvoir* (‘can’) or the conditional tense, offering, for example, greater inclusiveness. We found that the frequent expression *on peut/pourrait penser que* (‘one can/may/might think that’) does not express in this corpus a strong expression, but rather either a hypothesis or an invitation to the audience to be included within the discussion. Also, the French *je* is never used here with the modal verb *pouvoir* and does not have the same dialogic function. In the English corpus, *I* is very frequent, but we found only rare occurrences of an inclusive *one*, essentially concerning methodology. For example, although the verb *think* is found in example (12), it embodies a cognitive notion of imagining and thus was not included in our data.

(12) **One can think** in terms potentially in the future of going to *ab initio* MD (*molecular dynamics*) where one recomputes via electronic structure calculations at every time step // (EN-S-O-10)

This frequent French use of *on* in relation to an opinion verb is a salient discursive element of the EIIDA corpus.

4.3 Functions and forms of opinion verbs

As described in the literature (Section 2.2), opinion verbs assume several roles in scholarly writing. In oral presentations, it would be reductive to consider the presence of opinion verbs as uniquely markers of strong authorial positioning, since these verbs are used in varying contexts with different functions. The qualities or strengths depend upon several criteria including the semantic content of the verb, the syntactic construction and the enunciative properties of the pronoun. The different functions, including expressing a point of view, an evaluation of the given information or concept, but also a doubt, are listed in Table 3. Some occurrences did not fall clearly into one of the categories and can are indicated as “Other”.

Overall, the most frequent function for both languages and fields is proposing a hypothesis or negotiation with the audience, but this is especially true for Linguistics in French. General opinions are found within the four sub-corpora. However, strong opinions are much more frequent in English in both domains. In Linguistics, there are more frequent expressions of doubt, and this across both languages. Finally, the function of classification was more prevalent in French in Science, which contains more than half of the occurrences despite a small sub-corpus size. In this section, we will examine these functions and the corresponding lexical, contextual, and syntactic characteristics.

Table 3. Functions of the verbs of opinion

	Linguistics in English	**Linguistics in French**	**Science in English**	**Science in French**	**Total**
General opinion	30	9	10	14	63
Strong opinion	29	6	28	0	63
Hypothesis/ negotiation	38	36	19	12	105
Doubt	16	11	4	2	33
Classification	2	3	5	14	25
Other or hybrid	3	4	1	0	8
Sub-totals	**118**	**70**	**67**	**42**	**297**
Word count	54,000	66,400	36,600	37,800	194,800

4.3.1 *Highlighting a general opinion*

An opinion verb can clearly be used to announce or to claim a general point of view. In this context, the opinion is expressed with a pronoun referring strictly to the author or authors. The English *think* and its French *penser* are both omnipresent in the EIIDA corpus. In French, the verbs are conjugated in either a present or past form and without the modal verb *pouvoir*, but there is a wider variety of tenses and modality in English, including the present perfect. General opinion verbs can perform pragmatic functions such as qualifying data (examples (13) and (14)) or when agreeing or disagreeing with other researchers, as in example (15).

(13) I've found these levels extremely useful // (EN-L-O-O4)

(14) l'idée c'est de ne pas euh retenir a priori un environnement plutôt qu'un autre puisque euh justement on est dans l'idée que toutes les informations pourraient être pertinentes // (FR-L-O-08)
'the idea is to not uh to retain *a priori* one environment over another because uh rightly one has the idea that all the information might be relevant'

(15) nous sommes en accord avec François Rastier selon lequel // (FR-L-O-15)
'we agree with François Rastier according to whom'

Strikingly, the French Science sub-corpus contains eight occurrences of *on se rend compte* ('one realizes') plus one occurrence of *on a pu se rendre compte* ('one has been able to realize'). In contrast, there are only two occurrences in English (*cf.* example (10)) and one occurrence of this type in Linguistics. This expression allows the speaker to introduce a conclusion based on the literature or experiment. In this case, they may downplay their own personal presence by integrating the presence of the audience through the use of the personal pronoun *vous* ('you') and by adopting the pronoun *on* as in example (16).

(16) **si vous regardez** bien **on se rend compte** qu'en fait euh l'évolution des deux molécules est à peu près comparable // (FR-S-O-09)
'**if you look** closely **one realizes** that in fact uh the evolution of the two molecules is approximately the same'

Another salient difference within the EIIDA corpus was the frequent use by English speakers in Linguistics of the verb *think* to highlight their interest in certain findings of their study, as in example (17). Of these seven occurrences pertaining to this personal interest, the level of interest may be hedged (*kinda interesting*) or boosted (*very very interesting*). This interest may also refer to actual research steps, as in example (18).

(17) **so I thought** that was **interesting** // **(**EN-L-O-O6)

(18) some of them which **I I think** are **interesting** // (EN-L-O-11)

A closer examination of the corpus reveals that in all four corpora, the researchers repeatedly evoke an exclusive or inclusive interest in the data, methods, and conclusions (*passons tout de suite maintenant à ce qui nous intéresse* 'let's turn now to what interests us'; *c'est un enregistrement euh qui est qui est assez intéressant* 'it's a recording, uh, that is that is rather interesting'). The scope of what actually interests these researchers is beyond the limits of the present study. However in this corpus, while all researchers express interest, only the English speakers in the field of Linguistics highlight their personal interest by introducing it with an opinion verb.

4.3.2 *Expressing a strong opinion*

Stronger opinions are indicated by verbs such as *argue, believe*, *défendre* ('defend'), *souscrire* ('adhere'). Although rarer in French, *penser* can also express this type of opinion. Here, speakers firmly claim a specific point of view, employing a pronoun that refers only to the speaker. As with more general opinions, we find a range of verbal forms, including a reference to the future, as in example (19). We find in these examples ((20), (21), and (22)) the personal warrant that Hyland (2001) evokes.

(19) one of the things we're going to argue here is that we actually need a Talmy // (EN-L-O-14)

(20) but it's also **I believe** pedagogically problematic // (EN-S-O-02)

(21) donc c'est pourquoi **nous défendons** la seconde option // (FR-L-O-13) 'so that's why **we defend** the second option'

(22) **je souscris** à ce point de vue // (FR-L-O-04) '**I agree** with this point of view'

Although *believe* can also be considered to refer to an impression, this is not the case in this corpus. In this corpus, a strong opinion introduced by this verb is supported by the analysis of data over time that have led to their conclusion, as in example (23).

(23) **I've come to believe** that it's a deeper assumption than that // (EN-L-O- 04)

We have seen that there are overall more opinion verbs in English than in French. Furthermore, there also appear to be more occurrences of strong opinion verbs in English than in French. The subjective line between a general opinion and a strong opinion is porous. However, the recurrent use of the pronoun *on* with an opinion verb in French is a marker of a weaker use of opinion verbs. In English, speakers may also give discursive emphasis to an opinion employing expressions with the verb *want* (*want to say, want to suggest, did want to stress*) or the modal booster *do* (*I do think it is*).

4.3.3 *Hypotheses and speaker negotiated opinion*

When not stating a firm opinion, the speaker can also put forward a hypothesis or attempt to negotiate with the audience about a given opinion. The boundaries between these two types of function are not always very clear. In the case of a negotiated opinion, we find *think/penser* and *believe/croire*, frequently as a parenthetical. Although the first person personal pronoun is frequent in both languages with *think/penser*, in French, we also find a frequent use of *on.*

Opinion verbs are also used to express hypotheses of possible explanations. In French, these verbs are employed quite frequently with an inclusive *on*: *on peut/pourrait penser/supposer/*(*se*) *dire que* (‘one can/could think/suppose’/‘say to one’s self that’). With French verbs such as *penser*, the presence of the modal *peut* is frequent. This modal verb hedges the statement, which becomes a hypothesis open to discussion or confirmation by the audience. We also observe the presence of several conditional tenses (*on pourrait penser/dire*, ‘one could think/say’). In the case of offering a hypothesis, expressions such as *je considère* (‘I consider’), *je soutiens* (‘I argue’) are semantically impossible. In examples (24) and (25), we can see how, once again, the speaker builds upon previous elements to substantiate the hypothesis.

(24) il est désormais **je crois** admis et acquis après les travaux de de de Sophie // (FR-L-O-01) ‘it is now **I believe** recognized and accepted following the work of of of Sophie’

(25) alors au départ on pourrait se dire que euh les termes les plus fréquents // (FR-L-O-08) ‘so, to begin one could say (to oneself) that uh the most frequent terms’

In other cases, the opinion verb appears to be used not only to express an opinion, but to engage in a discussion with the audience. In French, the negotiating opinion verbs are often *je crois*, *je pense*, often in parenthetic constructions, or *nous pensons* ('we think'), but less often *on pense* ('one thinks'). In English, we find expressions that specifically address the audience, calling upon them to agree with the speaker (example (26)) or referring to their knowledge of the subject (example (27)).

(26) **I think you'll all agree** they're quite quite significant uh // (EN-S-O-12)

(27) **I'm sure you're** familiar with both // (EN-L-O-04)

4.3.4 *Doubt*

Beyond the notion of hypothesis, probability or doubt is clearly embodied in verbs such as *guess/supposer*, *to be sure* and again with *think/penser*. The verbs *croire* and *supposer* are often used in an interactive way in order to express doubt, especially about factual elements. In this function of doubt, the pronoun is always *I/je*. In French, they are clearly parenthetical, but this tendency is less clear in English.

In the four sub-corpora, doubt may refer to practical issues related to the presentation (example (28)) or conclusions (example (29)).

(28) vous avez euh je suppose oui l'exemple sous sous les yeux // (FR-L-O-01)
'you have uh I suppose yes the example in in front of you'

(29) I think we've kind of got I guess two extremes // (EN-S-O-05)

Other doubts pertain to minor factual details. In example (30), the speaker indicates his or her uncertainty about a date of publication.

(30) alors bon ce vers euh a été beaucoup critiqué par les grammairiens et euh corrigé par Corneille dans l'édition euh c'est la dernière édition celle de seize cent quatre-vingt-deux je crois // (FR-L-O-03) 'so well this line uh has been much criticized by grammarians and uh corrected by Corneille in the edition uh it was the last edition the one from sixteen eighty-two I believe'

In English in Linguistics we find two other occurrences of a doubt related to a date of publication. In French, in Science, a researcher has a doubt about the precise location of a study. However, the English-speakers in Science do not signal any doubt related to minor factual information. The absence within the English Science sub-corpus of doubts related to minor facts may be due to the small size of the corpus. However, it may also be due to a disciplinary difference.

4.4.5 *Cognitive function of classifying information*

Finally, the cognitive function of classifying or evaluating information is operated through certain verbs, such as *consider/considérer* (example (31)). In these cases, the position of the speaker is downplayed. In the unique occurrence of the English *consider* in this function, it is introduced by the modal verb *might* (example (32)) as the speaker invites the scientific audience to adhere to her analogy.

(31) nous considérons le pronom et le verbe comme un seul domaine // (FR-L-O-15) 'we consider the pronoun and the verb as a single domain'

(32) on a warm core ring we might consider this the watering hole // (EN-S-O-03)

5. Discussion

We found many similarities within the four sub-corpora, notably the presence of all the multiple functions of introducing either a general or a strong opinion, proposing a hypothesis and more generally negotiating with the audience, but also expressing doubt or classifying information. Thus, while opinion verbs are employed to confirm one's personal "warrant" (*cf.* Hyland 2001), in this corpus, they are more often employed to express a range of subjective positions around the doubts, research process, results, and conclusions. These positions were often signalled when discussing minor points or, in Linguistics, when the speaker had a doubt related to minor factual information.

This study of verbs of opinion confirms the dialogic nature of scholarly discourse. As a general trend, verbs of opinion were not used to express a strong position, but more frequently to serve the function of interacting with the audience or of expressing a doubt or a hypothesis. This is especially true for

French where hedges such as *pouvoir* or the inclusive *on* are frequently used. This can be seen in examples such as *on pourrait penser que* (‘one could think that’), which do not have direct counterparts in English.

Comparatively, the English speakers more often employed verbs of opinion, and particularly the unit *I think*, which appears to have a special status, as highlighted in the literature. The polyvalent English unit *I think*, which does not appear to have a French equivalent, is found as a general discourse marker, but also serves in the various functions, including strong opinions (*finally in concluding I think it’s really important*). In Linguistics, English speakers are more likely to express a doubt about a minor detail, but are also more likely to note when they *think* a result is “interesting”, whereas in the other three sub-corpora, speakers are more likely to employ a modal verb, except with *think*, to hedge a statement.

As concerns disciplines, some differences between Linguistics and Science can be observed, although the restricted size of corpus should be considered. While interactions and doubts seem to be more freely expressed in Linguistics, we also noted stronger theoretical positionings in this discipline with examples such as *je souscris à ce point de vue*, which would correspond to Hyland’s notion of personal “warrant” (2001) and also to a more formal discourse style, approaching a written style. In Science, speakers also tend to more often confirm that their opinions are supported by their own results and experiences, for example, with *we have come to believe* or *on se rend compte* (‘one realizes’).

It should also be noted that speakers of the two languages use different kinds of grammatical elements to express opinion. In French, adverbial opinion markers such as *à mon avis*, *selon moi*, but also the pronoun *on* and the conjunction *que* are frequent with an opinion verb, but were largely absent in English. In English, there is an extensive presence of *I think*, often used as a discourse marker. These differences complicate a comparison of the two languages as many factors can be taken into account.

In both languages and fields of study, speakers negotiate with the audience, inviting them to adhere to their methodology, findings, and conclusions. Hence, while these results confirm the subjective and dialogic quality of scholarly discourse, they also highlight the relative rarity of announcing strongly held opinions via an opinion verb.

We hope that this study will help to better understand the range of discursive options available to express opinions in this essential, but often unrecorded, genre of the scholarly experience. A very interesting perspective on this work would be to compare these results with the written counterparts or with the Spanish sub-corpus of the EIIDA corpus.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 : Settings of the presentations included in the EIIDA corpus

	Linguistics	**Science**
English	• *John Swales Confere*nce (2006) University of Michigan, USA. • *Verbes et Complexités Verbales Conference* (2010) Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle, France.	• *International Symposium on Plasma Chemistry* (2001) Université d'Orléans, France. • *Novatech Conference on Planning and Technologies for Sustainable Water Management* (2010) INSA de Lyon, France. • *Oceanography Conference on Marine Diversity* (2002) Scripps Institute, USA.
French	• *Quand les Genres de Discours Provoquent la Grammaire... et Réciproquement Conference* (2011) Université de Dijon, France. • *Congrès Mondial de Linguistique Française Congres* (2012) Lyon, France. • *Cohérence Discursive et Prosodie* (2012) Université de Lille, France. • *La Réanalyse seminar* (2012) University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland	• *French Researchers in Organic Geochemistry Conference* (2012) Université d'Orléans, France.