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Towards a Discursive Representation of Public Opinion.

The Problems Involved in Building and Analysing Corpuses of Open-Ended Poll Questions.

Summary :

Progress regarding the theory and methodology of public opinion polls is now allowing us to envisage experimental survey devices which give more room for open-ended questions, or for sequences which combine open and closed questions. They thus make it possible to build veritable corpuses of “expressed public opinion”. This article attempts to present the collections formed by the responses to these devices, by examining their pretension of constituting political *corpuses*. We do not set out the tools or the methods – in particular the analysis of textual data applied to this type of corpus – but instead we identify the socio-political and linguistic conditions which govern the creation of such corpuses and which also partly determine the strategies for analysis and interpretation.

Such an enterprise means looking first of all at the notion of “the political discourses of ordinary citizens”, and then examining the survey from a socio-technical angle by analysing, in particular, its pretensions of constituting an enunciation device. Can an opinion poll constitute a “stage” for public debate? This initial question involves, on the one hand, thinking about the survey’s interactions and the skills that it mobilises, along with the types of gain in generality created by the survey “stage”, which would enable us to liken a response to a survey’s open-ended question to a type of political discourse; and, on the other hand, to think about the statistical representativeness, linked to a conception of political representativeness, of these collection and processing devices.

After clarifying these conditions, I will suggest we define corpuses “enunciated public opinion” as sequences of open and closed questions, composed of a chain of interactions created by the succession of question-answer couplets¹; I will also provide an example of a device.

In both the United States [Gamson and Modigliani, 1989 ; Zaller, 1992 ; Page and Shapiro, 1993 ; Fishkin, 1999²] and in France [Quéré, 1990 ; Kaufmann, 2002]³, theoretical reflection on public opinion is undergoing a major paradigm change which, in particular, is focusing upon the competency of “ordinary” agents and upon the importance of situational and

discursive (or even deliberative) aspects in the development and expression of public opinion. At the very least, this change means significant alterations to the “behavioural” paradigm [Zask, 1999] which takes public opinion to be the sum of all individual “private” opinions. This theoretical progress has also benefited from or led to methodological innovations relating to new types of devices⁴ (referred to as “experimental”) which pay more attention to additional information and to the effects of context and framing [Grunberg, Mayer and Sniderman, 2002]. Over the last twenty years, convergence of the concerns of statisticians, linguists [Rastier,1991]⁵ and computer scientists has led to progress being made in the analysis of textual data [Lebart and Salem, 1994], which has led in turn to new ways of processing natural language, of dealing with major texts and, singularly, with open-ended questions⁶. This progress in methodology enables us to envisage hybrid survey devices which will allow more room for open-ended questions, or for a mix of closed and open-ended questions [Brugidou, 2003 ; Brugidou *et al.*, 2004]. It thus makes it possible for us to create veritable corpuses of “expressed public opinion.

This article attempts to present the collections formed by the responses to these devices, by examining their pretension of constituting political *corpuses*. We do not set out the tools or the methods – in particular the analysis of textual data applied to this type of corpus – but instead identify the socio-political and linguistic conditions which govern the creation of such corpuses and which also partly determine the strategies for analysis and interpretation⁷.

Such an enterprise means looking first of all at the notion of “the political discourses of ordinary citizens”, and then examining the poll from a socio-technical angle by analysing, in particular, its pretensions of constituting an enunciation device. Can an opinion poll constitute a “stage” for public debate? This initial question involves, on the one hand, thinking about the poll’s interactions and the skills that it mobilises, along with the types of gain in generality created by the poll “stage”, which would enable us to liken a response to a

poll's open-ended question to a type of political discourse; and, on the other hand, to think about the statistical representativeness, linked to a conception of political representativeness, of these collection and processing devices.

After clarifying these conditions, I will suggest we define corpuses of "enunciated public opinion" as sequences of open and closed questions, composed of a chain of interactions created by the succession of question-answer couplets and I will provide an example of a device.

Public discourse and the public's discourse

Since the late 1980s, sociologists and politists⁸ have been showing a renewed interest in the political dimension of the discourse of "ordinary citizens", taking care to highlight the critical and discursive skills of the "layman". In the USA, the works of William Gamson are symbolic of this change: based on an interactionist approach, they show that citizens are not content with merely applying the interpretative frameworks reported by the media; they want to mobilise their own experiences and interpersonal discussions, in order to negotiate the meaning of political questions [Gamson, 1992]. In France, and within the context of pragmatic sociology, Luc Boltanski's work demonstrates the same desire, offering a "sociology of criticism" rather than "critical sociology": ordinary citizens have to justify themselves, and to achieve this they dispose of resources in terms of moral and discursive skills which enable them not only to "gain in generality" and denounce what they feel to be unfair, but also to build veritable "political causes" [Boltanski, 1990, Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991]. Although these works fall within different sociological traditions and configurations of scientific discussion (in some cases a reaction against determinist and top-down approaches to the media's agenda-setting function [Rogers and Dearing, 1988]), in others [Boltanski,

1990; Corcuff, 2005]) a new formulation of the question of inequalities : the poorest people have certain skills which enable them to denounce that which they feel to be unjust. The consequence of these works is that it is not only comments by politicians that are deemed to be “political discourses” ; so are comments by “ordinary citizens” with regard to topics that feed public controversies⁹. The fact that ordinary citizens have moral and critical abilities must affect the way in which we represent public opinion as a theoretical and practical device. Indeed, it is paradoxical to recognise at a micro-sociological level that ordinary citizens have abilities, only to see them evaporate at a macro-sociological level : yet where polls are concerned, opinion, as it is gradually added up and averaged, would appear to lose in universality (in the sense of “gain in generality”) and intelligence everything it gains in number and statistical representativeness.

This is undoubtedly due to the fact that opinions, decontextualised and deindexed from situations, are objectivised by a survey device and standardised question format which is believed to be received in the same way by all concerned. They are thus rendered equivalent and quantifiable by a process of dematerialisation proper to the political nominalism that triumphed in the 18th century [Kaufmann, Guilhaumou, 2003]¹⁰. We know that as from the 1960s, in the USA [Cicourel 1963] and then in France, these methodological positions were virulently criticised; the method used by statistician-sociologists was countered by an “ethno-methodology”, i.e. the “way in which the interviewees themselves understand, describe and categorise their own activities” [Desrosieres, 1996 ; Maynard and Schaeffer, 2001]¹¹. It is also – and this second point, a theoretical one, is linked to the problem of “method” that I mentioned earlier – because there is simply no public arena corresponding to what is commonly known as public opinion. There is no real “unified national arena” dealing with important collective matters – or if there is, only on an occasional basis [Favre, 1999]. Most of the questions of opinion covered by published polls are meaningless to ordinary citizens –

not because they are “cultural dopes”, to use Garfinkel’s famous expression, but because the questions are not the subject of national public debate as these polls presuppose. This means that ordinary citizens have no information (or only very fragmented information) and no type of political language (nor any ideosystem, i.e. cognitive and symbolic tools [Bon, 1985]) with which to grasp and process these problems as political questions [Brugidou, 1995]. This can be explained by the failure of political mediations [Damamme, Jobert, 2001] (intellectuals, parties, unions, associations, media, etc.), responsible for “translating” such problems in order that ordinary citizens may understand them [Boltanski and Chiappello, 1999]¹². Here we find – albeit in a different theoretical perspective – some of the standard criticisms of polls : Pierre Bourdieu believes that polls too often ask (or impose) questions which are meaningless to the interviewees and which the latter have never considered [Bourdieu, 1973].

These criticisms would appear to be damning for polls, in as much as they call into question their ability to hear and comprehend the discourse of ordinary citizens, and *a fortiori* to restore the opinion of the public as “public opinion”. But before making such a definitive judgment on a poll’s capacity for representation, we need to examine the opinion poll as a socio-technical device and define its limits in order to be able to suggest improvements.

The opinion poll as a socio-technical device

The first difficulty relates to the institutional and material device that a poll represents. Such a socio-technical device [Callon, 1986] is first given form by a questionnaire¹³, i.e. a progression through a series of questions, the themes of which are to varying extents combined and linked. Every instruction and every question and answer couplet gradually builds a representation for the interviewee of the purpose and “meaning” of the poll. The “effects of context” and “of order” are the most well-known manifestations of these successive framings, theorised as “effects of information” and of context, especially in experimental polls [Popkins, 1991, Sniderman, 1991 ; Page and Shapiro, 1992 ; Mayer 2002].

Most of these questions are said to be “closed”, offering scales of attitude along which the interviewees must place themselves whilst integrating the hierarchical order and the semantic distances separating the response items that are deemed by *convention* to be stable (for example, *totally agree, agree, not really agree* or *not agree at all*, referring to an ordinal scale). The interviewee must therefore integrate this type of expected response, and, to achieve this, employ specific skill in order to format the response within the framework provided, without “spilling over”¹⁴, adapting to the rhythm of the questionnaire and to thematic changes that can sometimes be abrupt (“*We are now going to talk about ...*”). This is demonstrated in a documentary filmed in 1994 by a television crew who followed several researchers carrying out a face-to-face poll for a survey company [Anspach, 1995]. In order to explain an instruction to certain interviewees who were disconcerted by the form of response required, one of the researchers used his hand to demonstrate the various degrees of the attitude scale within which the responses had to fall. He wanted to make it clear at which level of the scale “totally agree” was found, using the palm of his hand to symbolise a marker on an invisible scale hanging in mid-air, and moving it a few centimetres at a time to demonstrate “agree”, etc. The examples of “spoiled” responses which pepper the documentary demonstrate the type of semiotic world and the rules that an interviewee must mobilise in order to answer an opinion poll. He/she must get a “hold” on the poll (its form and subject) by integrating, in particular, the metrology and the “calculation space” used by the opinion poll¹⁵ - to use Francis Chateauraynaud’s terms [Chateauraynaud, 2004]. They also show, *a contrario*, the processes of dematerialisation and abstraction that the interviewees have to adopt if their activity is to have meaning. The question of measuring this specific skill within the population remains very wide open. It can only be appreciated in a very indirect manner through the proportions of “no answer given”. Polls and their presuppositions being so much part of our everyday world¹⁶ we can suppose that it is a

widespread skill type : for example, the abstract formulations of the questions and of the possible answers, apparently far removed from our everyday experiences, that we nevertheless find in adverts, magazine tests, interactive telephone switchboards, etc.

Answering an opinion poll thus involves mastering specific skills (following the line of a questionnaire, using item scales, etc.) and performing a series of actions, both symbolic and physical. In addition to obeying the instructions, the interviewee's stance involves a form of corporal discipline and attitude, in the physical sense of the word, made necessary by the abstraction of the interaction, or, at least, by its duality: one part is played out in the wings, in private with the researcher, the other takes place in public, in the abstract public arena of the opinion poll, with the interviewee talking to the interviewer at a private level, whilst at the same time talking to a "universal audience" at a public level [Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1958]) within the context of the poll. Both the physical bodies and the discourses are here pushed into the wings (even with face-to-face) due to the machinery proper to surveys, because *the entire answer* must fit within the item in order to ensure the artificial nature of the *data*. As Ian Hacking [2003] reminds us with regard to the problem of induction: "modern facts are ugly ducklings, awkward, disorganised, raw facts". The rest, be it clarifications, or unspoken glosses or marks – shrugs, raised eyebrows, doubting pouts, laughs, etc. – which make up the margin notes and the ordinary non-text of interactions, is considered to be out-of-frame¹⁷. For both the interviewer and the interviewee, an opinion survey means acting as if people meet Hume's description that "all of our impressions are particulate facts"¹⁸ [Hacking, 2003, 296]. Over the years, polling has ended up making this an effective manner for modern individuals to report on their activities via (for example) attitude scales. What might at first glance appear to be a mere artefact has proven itself to be a way of responding and persisting that is adapted to survey devices. In fact, "qualitative research suggests that both parties undertake a work of joint interpretation, in order to decide, or "negotiate", the appropriate

character of the responses given” [Maynard and Schaeffer, 2001¹⁹]. Indeed, this is what the concluding paragraph of Loïc Blondiaux’s renowned work on the social history of surveys means: “Various indicators also suggest that it is by accepting to play the game, to open the door to interviewers, to answer questions, to refrain from lying when asked for whom they are going to vote, to make the effort to put into words their opinions on a vast range of subjects, in other words to become objects of research and investigation, that the people have participated in producing this public opinion, this new definition of themselves”. [Blondiaux, 1998, p. 583]

The characteristics of opinion surveys and the efforts made by the interviewer and interviewee to coordinate and adjust, therefore make it possible to produce representations of public opinion which are congruent with the theories (that we know to be divergent, in part) of the experts (professionals, researchers, etc.) who support this device: in methodological individualism, these theories define opinion as an intention to act or as a motivation shaped deep within a strategic player; in the sociology of attitude, opinion comes, to an extent that varies in accordance with the manner in which it is phrased, from classic holism, as the product of interiorised standards and values. Yet these theories converge with regard to elements of definition of opinion that are both mentalist and substantialist, “internal mental state”, to agree on a device that can get close to identifying²⁰ public opinion by calculating the sum of all individual mental states.

On the one hand we need to suggest theoretical formulations on public opinion which are more in phase with what some political sociology theory tells us about the competencies of ordinary citizens, and, on the other hand, survey devices which leave more room for context and for taking interaction status into account.

Opinion polls as tests

This analysis leads us to see opinion polls no longer as “devices”, but as “tests” with a partly *normative* purpose (and not simply *descriptive*). For this I would like to provide a reminder, based on Laurence Kaufmann, of certain aspects of what a discursive theory of public opinion constitutes. It involves a total reversal of perspective, in as much as public opinion is no longer defined as being the sum of mental states encapsulated deep inside individuals, but is recast in the exteriority of culture [Rastier, Bouquet, 2002] and in its “institutions of meaning” [Kaufmann 2001, Descombes, 1996]. Opinion is thus defined as a “speech act, the eminently conditional validity of which depends on the recognition of the other person” [Kaufmann, 2003, 283]. From this standpoint, a survey does not only aim to describe individual opinions which always already exist, but to arouse a communicational action (which involves an experimental device). This is governed by a specific grammar, that of public opinion which aims to fit together the world and a singular point of view: In their responses, interviewees affirm their roles as citizens : they offer a formulation of a “common world” (that which they believe to be good for the community) which must be “likely” in the sense used by Aristotle. This formulation must correspond to community values in order to be accepted by the majority.

With this conception, a survey (seen as a test) must henceforth call upon the moral and introspective skills of the agents. The device must therefore be carefully developed, which justifies the use of experimental surveys that contain open-ended questions and contextualised closed questions. Only data developed from the responses to these sequences can be considered as real “political corpses”. Before giving a detailed description of their characteristics from a statistical and linguistic point of view, in particular by demonstrating how lexical statistics can be considered as a “political metric”, we need to look at the theories on public opinion (above and beyond democracy) that support them.

Laurence Kaufmann's thesis on public opinion, which analyses under this heading the emergence, reconfiguration and stabilisation of discursive practices and methods of legitimisation, constitutes one of the central elements of this theoretical investigation [Kaufmann, 2001]. It highlights the emergence of a new "linguistic jurisdiction", that of public opinion, the grammar and rules of which are obligatory for anyone wanting to talk about the public good.

We know that in the second half of the 18th century, the emergence of popular criticism of the royal government helped bring about a new political culture: opinion as the principle of legitimisation (and of criticism outside of the government) is here defined as a "court of reason" and an "invisible and irresistible force" [Blondiaux, 1998, p.46].

Following on from the work done by Louis Quéré, Laurence Kaufmann describes two characteristics of this linguistic jurisdiction, by on the one hand demonstrating that through its expressive dimension ("*I think that ...*"), expressed opinion allows the interviewee to "*appear before* the other person as a *subject* of thought and action²¹", and, on the other hand, by stressing the fact that expressed opinion aims to create agreement and to do so it bases itself "on that which is acceptable within a given community" [Perelman, 1984 quoted by Kaufmann, 2003 p277]²². To achieve this, the agents mobilise common spaces, culturally sedimented *topoï*, forms which are conventional and socially acceptable in order to simultaneously organise and express their attitudes towards an object of public debate. "This 'common space' is the opinion of everyone, not in the sense of any factual sum of the opinions of all individuals, or of a catalogue of opinions, but in the sense of what anyone must say in order for his/her discourse to be considered to be probable" [Kaufmann,]. Yet in this sense, the "opinion of everyone" cannot avoid being targeted. Whilst it is true that the speaker relies on the force of semantics proper to opinion, which means that everyone has to acquiesce to "standard" and "prevailing" ideas²³, opinion as a speech act is always in danger

of failing: “in the short time the utterance takes, the subject of opinion gains a privileged albeit provisory position: it imposes itself as “the standpoint and point of coordination which ensure that the world is *his* world, and, in particular, that his thoughts and representations are *his own*” [Bouveresse, 1987, p. 167] [Kaufmann, 2003, p. 278]. Opinion is here defined as an act governed by a specific public grammar²⁴ that the speakers must use.

The performance constituted by the expression of public opinion within the context of an ordinary conversation or a public debate (or even a survey) is a “trial” form²⁵ in Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s sense of the term [Boltanski and Thévenot, 1989]. The combination of a device which is to a greater or lesser extent formalised, such as a poll, and a performance, produces two types of “institutional facts”: on the one hand it is an individual trial for the interviewee established as a “responsible” and “rational” subject; on the other hand it is a collective trial for the political community which “counts as” a democratic community. Given the performative power of the expressions of opinion and their actualisation within a representation device that is both statistical and political, the poll produces both of the two types of “institutional facts” as understood by Searle [Searle, 1972]. It is this pragmatic dimension of survey devices (i.e. the production of these institutional facts) that makes it possible to build a political corpus. Yet this “rational” citizen is not the one described in the “rational choice” theory. As Bernard Manin explains, *homo oeconomicus* “does not enter into discussion, does not justify his choices, does not try to persuade. On the contrary, the central idea of the deliberative democracy theory is that it is neither normatively desirable, *nor empirically justified*²⁶, to consider that when citizens enter the forum in to make decisions on public matters, they already have fully formed preferences which will not be affected by contact with others” [Manin, 2002, p.46].

But a new difficulty arises: the correlate of the non-existence of any deeply felt opinion or attitude – in the sense of an integrated schema generating mental states – is the existence of

one or more levels of public space and of “political languages” making it possible to evolve at these levels and d’être familier avec the entities which populate them (*nation, people, left-wing, right-wing, public interest, etc*). It is in fact these languages that allow the analyst to identify – from fixed phrases and stereotypes – traces of textual structures such as topoï, intrigues, enthymemes etc. So these developments regarding discursive public opinion cannot do without reflection on the construction of devices and of the different levels of public space which make them possible (mediations, political languages, etc.). It is in fact a question of providing a discursive representation of public opinion, not only at a micro level (interpersonal conversations), but also at meso (territorial/local) or even macro (i.e. national or European) levels. This chapter of research remains to be built; it is beyond my scope, and I will settle for saying that whilst the existence of local public spaces is more or less accepted, [François, Neveu, 1999], that of a national public space is strongly disputed [Favre, 2001].

Whatever the case may be, this reflection on the levels of public space (which partly echoes onto works on the multi-level governance of public policy analysis) needs to be stepped up, with a study of the different types of public discussion – those pinpointed by F. Chateauraynaud for example: ordinary interactive procedures (conversation, argument, negotiation²⁷), arguments based on devices (such as public debate, social dialogue, etc., characterised by a form of symmetry between players – equality of treatment – a formalisation of arguments and major procedural constraints²⁸) and the “power of expression” which is the discussion regime proper to the political space where problems are translated by political languages and become trials of strength between players with highly asymmetrical standpoints²⁹ [Chateauraynaud, 2004].

Daniel Cefai’s work on the sociology of the constitution of public problems is an interesting avenue for the perspective on public spaces that I have sketched out above: he states that a “public arena” “opens up by finding support and by creating bridges between the various

public stages” [Cefaï, 2005]. My hypothesis here is that public survey opinion constitutes both a stage and a specific test for the public arena [Brugidou and Escoffier, 2005].

Yet the standard conception of a survey device fails to represent and combine the different speech acts proper to each of the stages of the public arena³⁰ and hence to constitute a test. It does not take into account the normative and discursive dimensions of public opinion, and sees the moral skills of agents as being of secondary importance. This intuition is fundamentally that of Fishkin and Luskin [Fishkin and Luskin, 2000, Martin, 1996 ; Mayer, 2002]. In building an essentially normative tool with a deliberative poll, they draw conclusions from a normative dimension which already exists in standard surveys but which is poorly taken up by the device. They nevertheless fail to meet part of their objective and condemn the deliberative survey to remaining no more than an experimental device with very limited descriptive scope, by basing the normativity of the device purely on “argued opinion”³¹ and neglecting “right opinion”, “probable opinion” and even “conventional opinion” as normative bases.

Presentation of a device capable of taking these dimensions into account must also carefully combine the theoretical considerations set out above and reflection on methodology.

Developing an experimental poll in order to build a corpus “of expressed public opinion”

Before describing the device in more detail, we need to reset the context of the study [Brugidou and Escoffier 2005] so that we are able to present it. It is an opinion poll on a regional planning controversy³², among people concerned about a project to build a very high voltage electricity line.

The poll took place in June 2003 after ten years of strong opposition to the project, and several months after local public debates (eight public meetings) [Drocourt and Ras, 2004], which had led to major coverage by the regional media.

In order to avoid criticism relating to “public polling” [Blumer, 1948 ; Bourdieu, 1973 ; Blondiaux, 1998 ; Gerstlé, 2003], it is important to explain how the proposed device moves away from published opinion polls to constitute a test as defined above:

- on the one hand, this device sounds *territorial* opinion. The level of public interest and involvement is quite closely linked to territorial attitudes. The poll was therefore designed to differentiate between *publics*, using territorial sub-samples. As with polls taken *in situ* from people taking part in a demonstration [Favre, Filleule et Mayer, 1997], we are thus able to distinguish between the “identification group”, the “attention group” and the “concerned publics” group as described by Cobb and Elder, and a “mass public”, “an indistinguishable whole made up of individuals brought together for the purpose of opinion polls” [Gerstlé, 2003 p. 869]. From this standpoint, the sample is not representative in the generally accepted meaning of the expression. It is first of all *diversified* in such a way as to represent the *political* diversity³³ of points of view – here determined by territorial stages (from a statistical “strata” point of view). The sampling (despite being “non-proportional” between strata) is of course statistically “representative” within each stratum. In our opinion there is no point in rectifying these samples, because there is no real “reference population” – there is a diversity that must be accurately portrayed. Quantification is not used here to measure the *weight* of groups or opinions (and thus to place them in any hierarchical order), but to identify the discourses (through recurring patterns) and the publics who are characterised by their structural differences – in particular by the *topoi* that they mobilise – and not by their *weight*. To sum up, it is not a case of

reducing differences between opinions (perhaps by placing them in a hierarchical order) but of finding a way of representing them that will maintain the diversity.

- on the other hand, the aim of the poll is to reconstruct *discursive* public opinion. Some of the questions asked are “open” questions, designed to collect not only spontaneous answers (as opposed to choosing between a limited and number of standardised responses) but also a *discourse* on the controversy in question. The reflexive dimension is vital here, because it is the interviewees’ ability to *justify* that are requested. These responses mobilise real “motive vocabularies”, to use Mills’ term [Mills, 1940 ; Trom, 2001]; it is not a question of identifying “intimate convictions” which determine a person’s involvement in a collective action, but rather the “acceptable ways of showing one’s heartfelt beliefs, acceptable and intelligible ways of projecting oneself into a given context of action” [Cefaï, 2005]. The advantage of the technique used to analyse the open questions (analysis of textual data, Alceste methodology [Reinert, 1995]) is that it does not reduce the discursive aspect of the responses. It does not merely identify the themes, but also allows us, on the one hand, to partly recreate the speech markers, and, on the other hand, to rebuild the linguistic and cognitive patterns behind the enunciations [Brugidou, 2001].

The poll device³⁴ has several remarkable technical characteristics:

The three sub-samples were built through quotas. In addition to the classic quotas (age, sex and profession of head of household), the sample build took into account the *head of household’s level of education* and the *zone of residence*.

The device also made use of most of the possibilities offered by the computer-assisted telephone interview system (CATI):

- the shared sample technique allowed us to test the order of the questions (cf. the order of use below) and the effects of context (particularly in the argumentation),
- micro-narratives were recorded in order to help homogeneously assess their strength of conviction (the narratives were not read by the interviewers),
- the questionnaire included several sequences made up of closed and open-ended questions allowing us to combine standpoints and justifications. The sequence is considered as a whole (a series of interactions) and is processed as a “discourse” combining the response to the closed question and the verbatim of the open-ended question.
- finally, by recording all answers to the open-ended questions we were able to perform a textual analysis of the verbatim texts.

A discussion between the interviewers and the researchers with regard to the purpose of the poll, examining the meaning of the different questions, and on-site attendance to listen to the interviews, made it possible to monitor the way in which the poll was handled.

The way in which responses are collected is one of the main criticisms of textual analysis as applied to corpuses of open questions. But the exhaustive recording³⁵ of responses during this poll allow us to fully compensate for such defects. A study of the linguistic characteristics of the corpus, and in particular a systematic comparison with the corpuses that were transcribed and entered by the interviewees still remain to be done³⁶.

It is especially pertinent to use textual data analysis for this type of poll and these corpuses of expressed public opinion. I believe it is important to put forward two reasons which are based on the “consistency of attitudes” (or of the *topoi*) on the one hand, and on the unequal weights of the different groups on the other hand:

- The stereotypical nature of the response upon which the analysis of *textual data* is based (and which requires responses to recur and to have a format in order to be processed) does not necessarily mean an empty stereotype for the theoretical perspective defined above; it is based on the “grammar” of the enunciation of public opinion: the reasons for involvement put forward by the interviewees are argumentative topoi that are culturally sedimented and socially available³⁷. I have shown in other studies that it was possible to use different case studies and an interpretive approach [Le Queau, 2001] to demonstrate the presence of argumentative patterns or schemes within these apparently poor responses [Boy, Brugidou, 2004 ; Brugidou, Mandran, Moine, Salomon, 2004 ; Brugidou, 1998, 2003].
- Because it lends different weights to responses in accordance with their length (the longest answers are better represented in the classification) and their typicity (answers that were atypical from a vocabulary standpoint were not classified), the technique used to analyse the open questions gives the answers a real “political metric” along the lines of Blumer’s or Bourdieu’s recommendations that we need a better rendering of the “factual inequality of opinions” [Blondiaux, 1997 ; 1998]. The advantage of this approach is that it does not prejudge the capacities and involvement of the public. The samples are not subject to any *a priori* weighting (through non-proportional quota determined in accordance with any supposed capacity); it really is the *responses* given that vary in accordance with the understanding of the subject in question and the involvement therein. The uneven capacity of the different publics is thus recreated through the statistical processing of the responses. With this device, the type of political representativeness that governed the construction of the sub-samples is better served by the weight of the words³⁸, advocated by lexical statistics rather than by a

political representativeness³⁹ which relates a single individual to a single vote and which regulates standard sampling for polls [Blondiaux, 1998].

Presentation of this device shows that the constitution of corpuses of expressed public opinion largely depends on a controversy on theories of democracy, rather than on any question of method or statistics: the type of political representativeness discussed here – which supports statistical calculation – is in fact based on deliberative conceptions of democracy [Manin,1985].

In this sense we aim to maintain, at all costs, a representation of the diversity of points of view. But this theoretical bias is less open to criticism – not from a normative point of view but by through its descriptive virtues – than any opinion representation protocol which organises points of view into a hierarchy, or reduces them to unity. Indeed, as Bernard Manin says, democratic legitimacy now resides less in the expression of democratic will, and more in the “process of developing collective will” [Manin, 2002].

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¹ A question-answer configuration extracted from a survey in relation to the problem in hand might thus be considered to constitute a corpus: for example, not only a stance (closed question and its answer) and its justification (open-ended question and its answer), but also the socio-demographic or attitude variables describing the speaker.

² For a summary, cf. *Hermès*, 2001.

³ In France, the theoretical works by Louis Quéré and Laurence Kaufmann take part of accepted ethnomethodology and analytical philosophy and offer a *discursive* and *situated* definition of public opinion [Quéré, 1990 ; Kaufmann, 2002] that is not very compatible with the poll device and with the “behavioural” and approved definition of public survey opinion. Research in English-speaking countries mainly falls within the standpoint of an approved public opinion restored through a survey device. Theoretical thought on opinion is here closely linked with reflection on devices and their effects.

⁴ For example, experimental polls used shared sampling techniques and CATI or CAPI systems to test different contextualisations and framing for questions [Grunberg, Mayer, and Sniderman, 2002]. “One might also mention the *stop and think* technique, which requires the interviewees to take the time to think before answering, that of the *argumentative survey* where the interviewer takes an opposite stance to the interviewee in order to test coherency, and the so-called *source manipulation* technique, which presents the opinion as being endorsed by such and such celebrity or political organisation” [Mayer, 2002, p21]. From a more normative standpoint, but still making use of methodological and hybrid innovations, deliberative surveys, cf. [Fishkin, and Luskin, 2000].

⁵ The question of the role of language, and more broadly of cultural sciences, hermeneutic sciences, is raised in a highly acute manner in these works. See the works of F. Rastier [Rastier, 1991].

⁶ Cf. Special issue of the *Journal de la société Française de statistique*, 2001.

⁷ Regarding these questions, we refer to the special issue of the *Journal de la société Française de statistique* (tome 142, n°4, 2001) devoted to open-ended questions, examining the question-answer sessions during the day of organised studies on the 8th June 2001 in Grenoble.

⁸ The corpuses of works in the provinces of linguistics, sociolinguistics and the field of information and communication – important to these questions but from perspectives that are different from the political sociology perspective adopted in this paper – are not covered by the limited framework of this article, nor therefore by this very rapid reminder.

⁹ For a discussion of these questions and perspectives which maintain a statutory approach to discourse whilst at the same time trying to include ideas from pragmatic sociology, see [Le bart 1998 and 2003].

¹⁰ A dematerialisation process similar to that of currency (and musical notation) over the same period [Gordon, 2003] coming to a close at the beginning of the 20th century and making the development of the field of semiotics possible.

¹¹ For a detailed account of these discussions in the USA (based on works on ethnomethodology) and in France (based on works on *conventions of equivalence*), see [Desrosieres, 1996].

¹² Types of political language are thrown out of kilter by the constant semantic shifts caused by oppositions between justification, on the one hand, and criticism on the other – oppositions which reshape the "spirit of capitalism" and call for criticism to be re-empowered by rethinking the notion of "the city" [Boltanski and Chiappello, 1999]. In relation to the 2002 elections, see Eric Dupin's analyses of the deconstruction of the social representations of the working classes and their correlative absence in speeches made by Lionel Jospin and the socialist party. "Quand la classe ouvrière devient invisible", *Le Monde*, 5 June 2002.

¹³ We do not have room here to give details of the study and device of the "calculation centre" [Latour, 1989] constituted by a survey institute, and, in particular, the chain for processing the various equivalence operations [Desrosieres, 1996] (classification of professions, recoding of open-ended questions, etc.) required to aggregate the responses. On instrument testing and standardisation, see [Blondiaux, 1998 ; p. 325 to 366.]

¹⁴ Which affects the meaning of the answers and also has economic implications for the researcher (who cannot spend too much time on a given questionnaire), for the survey company, etc.

¹⁵ The unexpected success of Le Pen in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections proves the existence of a sort of calculation space common to interviewees and actors in the political arena: because opinion poll results regularly predicted that it would be Lionel Jospin and Jacques Chirac who would go through to the second round, a portion of the left-wing electoral base decided to fire a "warning shot" at Lionel Jospin by voting for a more radical candidate [Blais, 2004].

¹⁶ In 2001, over 6 million questionnaires were completed in France. More than 800 surveys are published every year (which means between 600 and 800,000 people interviewed); one would have to take a census of the consumers of these media to have an idea of the number of people familiar with these polls. On the reasons why interviewees refuse to answer questions, see [Brehm 1993].

¹⁷ In the case of self-administered questionnaires, giving answers means physically managing the flow of the questions, physically putting the answers into the boxes, etc.

¹⁸ "What is modern fact? Poovey means the tiny piece of information, the little box, the nugget, and the metaphors which spring to mind: something robust, compact, down to earth, neutral, small, the size of an octet, the very opposite of theory, of conjecture, or hypothesis, of generalisation. Facts are ugly ducklings, awkward, disorganised, raw facts". [Hacking, 2003, 295].

¹⁹ [Cicourel, 1974] quoted by [Maynard and Schaeffer, 2001, p 189 note 16]. These authors note that at "specific and unpredictable moments, they [the researchers] take their eyes off the screen, move their hands away from the keyboard and move in a relatively lively manner, formulating sentences which do not appear in the scripts and which are not preformed: this sudden movement suggests that they are trying to resolve problems which are taking them away from their work routine, in order to be able to get back to it as quickly as possible" [Maynard and Schaeffer, 2001, p194]

²⁰ As Loïc Blondiaux reminds us, Stoetzel's theoretical stance is complex, and is in any case far from identifying public opinion by calculating the sum of private opinions, cf. [Blondiaux, 1998 ; p 362 onwards].

²¹ "The role of opinion is not primarily to affirm a proposition or to make it known, but to express a person's attitude to said proposition" [Kaufmann, 2003, p268].

²² So it must not be confused with either "a rational act which pursues the general interest and public good, nor [with] a blind compliance with received opinion" [Kaufmann, 2003, p277].

²³ For an illustration of these ideas on public opinion in polls, cf. [Noëlle Neumann, 1984].

²⁴ Rules which constitute the reality mode proper to these strange entities that are institutional facts which are "relational" and not substantial. For a clear presentation of the complex thoughts of Vincent Descombes and his conception of "anthropological holism" cf. [Kaufmann and Quéré, 2001]

²⁵ One might define the trial as a device (regulatory, material, etc.) which aims to "calibrate" status as "large" or "small" in accordance with a specific conception of justice ("city"). As moral agents, we willingly submit to this type of measure which allows us to self-produce ourselves as "subjects". This perspective is similar to that of ethnomethodology: "everything takes place as if those who undertake a course of action were placing in overhanging exteriority, as a normative framework (self-subsistent) to which to refer, the very order that they are making sensitive and evident through their conduct, as if they were giving it the power to restrict their practices and were increasing its standing as such, as if they were giving it the status of a moral reference framework, through which to develop reciprocal expectations for behaviour and to understand (in moral terms) the conduct of all concerned. [Kaufmann and Quéré, 2001, p 382].

This vital point contradicts the sociology of science's principle of symmetry and differentiates humans from non-humans. In some ways, standard surveys treat humans as scallops and it is perfectly possible – and interesting – to describe the quantativist researcher's role in social science as being that of a natural science researcher, as shown by [Maynard and Schaeffer, 2001].

²⁶ Our emphasis.

²⁷ “The symmetry of the protagonists is fundamental here; coding cannot be separated from milieu or from shared culture” [Chateauraud, 2004 p 12].

²⁸ “The arguments are removed from the milieux using devices which can be autonomously deployed”, [Chateauraud, 2004 p 12].

²⁹ These arguments revolve around visions of the world, and given the constant conflict, the difference between argumentation and rhetoric no longer appears pertinent.

³⁰ “A public arena is a tangle of theatrical devices, where players with distinct skills give performances aimed at distinct sectors of the audience (...). It can be broken down into a myriad of overlapping stages that give onto wings of varying geometry, where the degrees of publicity are determined by the framing, footing and keying of the players, and where the auditoria change with the performances”. [Cefai, 2005, p30].

³¹ Which more or less supposes the creation of a Habermasian public space [Habermas, 1993].

³² Here is a brief summary of the controversy: in the 1990s, several technical studies were carried out on the VHT line project in the Quercy Blanc region. In 1996 and 1997, a new project was submitted for consultation. At the end of 2002, following persistent opposition, a local public debate was organised, involving several meetings in various areas of the Lot region and in certain municipalities of the Tarn and Garonne region, so that everybody could hear and discuss different solutions. When the debate was over, RTE (the public organisation in charge of the electricity transport network) announced that it was withdrawing its project to build the VHT line.

³³ This is the type of representativeness found in qualitative survey devices.

³⁴ Sample of 1,500 persons aged 18 and over, interviewed over the telephone at the end of 2003 (i.e. several months after local debates had been organised) by the BVA Institute.

³⁵ The generalisation of this recording technique means that a protocol must be agreed with the interviewees.

³⁶ We nevertheless know that in such corpuses argumentation, syntactic and enunciation marks (deictic and anaphoric elements, mechanisms of temporality etc.) tend to disappear in favour of “key words” [Marc, 2001 ; Lallich-Boidin, 2001 ; Caillot and Moine, 2001].

³⁷ This question of typicality can also be examined from the point of view of attitude sociology [Caillot and Denni, 2004]. An atypical response (i.e. the classification algorithm is unable to allocate the response to a group and thus identify the linguistic and cognitive pattern underlying the response) takes us back to the “non-attitude” concept as defined by Converse [Converse, 1964].

³⁸ The question of the standardisation and lemmatisation of this point of view is vital, as Dominique Labbé shows [Labbé, 2001].

³⁹ Excellent from the point of view of the theory of standard representation which founds democracy on the expression of the general will (necessarily unified), but dubious in terms of public opinion as it is understood here.