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A propos* from verbal complement to discourse marker: a case of grammaticalization?

SOPHIE PREVOST

Abstract

This paper presents an analysis of the evolution of the French preverbal expression à propos ('by the way' in Modern French). First I discuss the possibility of analyzing it as a discourse marker. Basing the analysis on Fraser's approach (1990, 1999), I show that à propos falls within the definition of discourse markers, displaying their main characteristics. More specifically it serves to reinforce, or even create, discourse coherence. Secondly I give an account of the historical development of the expression and of the emergence of its pragmatic uses. I argue that it is closely related to the evolution of à ce propos (and to a lesser extent to that of à propos de), and hypothesize that à propos has progressively replaced à ce propos in certain contexts, while also developing in contexts of more abrupt discourse shift. I finally address the issue of the interpretation of à propos as a case of grammaticalization, and show that there are sufficiently convincing arguments to justify its being analyzed as such. I also discuss the relevance of introducing the notion of pragmatization, and argue for this being a mere subclass of grammaticalization, though pertaining more specifically to the pragmatic area.

1. Introduction

In Modern French, *à propos* ('by the way') in preverbal position indicates a discourse shift, either a smooth one or a more abrupt one. Such a function is fairly unexpected when one considers both the status and the semantic value of the expression when it stands in postverbal position: there it functions as a manner adverb, meaning "(in an) appropriate (way)".

In this paper I will first examine the possibility of analyzing Modern French *à propos* as a discourse marker, basing the analysis on the approach of Fraser (1990, 1999), and I will attempt to clarify its specific function. I will then account for the historical development of the expression and for the emergence

of its pragmatic uses, and show how it is closely related to the evolution of *à ce propos* (and to a lesser extent to that of *à propos de*). I will finally address the issue of the interpretation of *à propos* as a case of grammaticalization and discuss the relevance of introducing the notion of grammaticalization.

2. *A propos* as a discourse marker

In Modern French, *à propos* in preverbal position functions as an utterance marker indicating either a smooth discourse shift, a digression, as in (1):

- (1) *Nous irons dîner à l'Ange Bleu d'Abergavenny. A propos, ma chère, ce n'est plus que dans le Pays de Galles qu'on trouve la vraie petite auberge anglaise du bon vieux temps.*
 'We'll have dinner in the Blue Angel in Abergavenny. **By the way**, my dear, only in Wales can we find a true typical English inn as in earlier times'
 (V. Larbaud, *Beauté, mon beau souci* . . . 1923)

or a more abrupt shift, as in (2a) and (2b):

- (2) a. *Elsa est à la toilette. Elle se fait une beauté, me dit Dominique. A propos, elle attend toujours son article.*
 'Elsa is freshening up. She's putting her make-up on, Dominique told me. **By the way**, she's still waiting for your paper'
 (J. Kessel, *La Passante du Sans-Souci*, 1936)
- b. *Moi je ne raffole pas du style Darel. Tiens, à propos, Sean Penn et Robin Wright se séparent pour de bon.*
 'I'm not very fond of Darel's style. There, **by the way**, Sean Penn and Robin Wright separate for good'¹
 (attested example)

The label "utterance marker" is the English translation for *marqueur énonciatif*, which was suggested by Molinier (2003) in his study of the Modern French expressions *à ce propos* and *à propos*. Examining their respective functions in initial position, Molinier establishes a pragmatic distinction between them. *A ce propos* functions as what he terms a *marqueur énonciatif de transition* (utterance marker indicating a smooth discourse shift): it allows the speaker to link a new utterance to the preceding one to which it is bound only by an association of ideas. In signaling that a digression is to follow, *à ce propos* prevents a possible discourse rupture.

As to *à propos*, it functions as what Molinier calls a "marqueur énonciatif de rupture": it signals an abrupt and unannounced shift in discourse theme, and draws the attention of the addressee towards the emergence of a new theme.

Although I follow Molinier in the identification of both functions, I believe that the relation between expressions and functions is not such a strictly one-to-one mapping, especially when it comes to *à propos*. For *à ce propos*, the very presence of an explicit morphological link (demonstrative determiner) to the preceding context precludes abrupt shifts, or at least makes them very uncommon (they are difficult for the speaker to produce, and even more difficult for the addressee to process). On the contrary *à propos* may display a broad range of shifts, from smooth to very abrupt ones, as is evidenced by the above examples (1) to (2b), which may be analyzed as the two extreme points of a continuum.

Although the definition of *à propos* in terms of “utterance marker” seems to share some affinities with the notion of discourse marker, it is necessary to further investigate the status of the expression to assess whether it can be included in the henceforth large family of French discourse markers (e.g., Dostie 2004; Hansen 1997, 1998; Rossari 2006; Vincent 2005). Beyond the possibility of adding a new item to the class of French discourse markers, the interest of the investigation lies in emphasizing the specific pragmatic function of *à propos*, which is fairly unexpected when one considers both the adverbial status and the meaning of the expression when it occurs in postverbal position, meaning “(in an) appropriate (way)”. In the next part I will provide an explanation for this, in terms of the historical development of the expression.

Over the last thirty years discourse markers have attracted increasing interest, and various studies have attempted to specify the definition and function of discourse markers in different languages.

As discourse markers have been investigated within different frameworks, there is unsurprisingly some disagreement concerning their function and classification. I neither intend to enter the debate on the notion of discourse marker, nor to provide a thorough overview of it (see e.g., Hansen 1997, 1998; Schourup 1999; and the introduction to this volume). I will simply recall some of the difficulties, and specify the approach my work adopts.

One of the difficulties lies in the terminology. Although *discourse marker* seems to be the most frequent term, it is in competition with a variety of other terms (among which: *discourse particle*, *discourse connective*, *pragmatic operator*, . . .),² which are used with partially overlapping meanings. Beyond — or besides — the terminological aspect of the issue, the main difficulty resides in the fact that the class of discourse markers is not a formal one: it cannot be analyzed in morphosyntactic terms (see e.g., Lamiroy and Swiggers 1991: 123; Hansen 1997, 1998). It is a functional-pragmatic category, for which no consensus has emerged regarding such fundamental issues as function and classification (see the discussion in the introduction to this volume).

The general definition I will adopt for discourse markers is one that I consider to be largely accepted: I define them as expressions whose prime function

is to mark relations between sequentially dependant units of discourse, and which specify the way in which what follows is connected to what has taken place before. I more specifically refer to Fraser's approach, in which discourse markers are a type of a more general category, *pragmatic markers*. These markers "do not contribute to the propositional content to the sentence but signal different types of messages" (Fraser 1999: 936).³ Among them, Fraser more specifically defines discourse markers as follows:⁴

- (3) They [discourse markers] impose a relationship between some aspects of the discourse segment they are a part of, call it S2, and some aspect of a prior discourse segment, call it S1. In other words they function like a two-place relation, one argument lying in the segment they introduce, the other lying in the prior discourse. (Fraser 1999: 938).

The critical issue to be raised when it comes to the analysis of *à propos* as a discourse marker is whether a shift in discourse may be held for a type of relationship. As I adopt a broad conception that includes not only the different types of relationships, but also the very presence or absence (or shift) of any of those relationships, I think it has to be analyzed as such (this is also the position of Fraser: see below). However, I do not consider a shift in discourse as a typical case of relationship. Before further investigating the specificity of *à propos*, I will examine whether the expression displays the typical formal characteristics generally attributed to discourse markers (see the introduction to this volume for a discussion of this point).

On the rhythmic level, we observe that *à propos* is often separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause,⁵ signaled by a punctuation mark as in (4) and (5):

- (4) *Eh bien! Non. Dans une maison solide, il faut un maître, il faut une volonté. Regarde ton frère Justin (à propos : j'oubliais de vous dire que j' ai reçu une dépêche; il a eu un dérangement à la dernière heure, et il ne viendra que tard, dans la nuit, par le dernier train.*

'look at your brother Justin (**by the way**: I forgot to tell you that I received a message; he got held up at the last minute, and he will only arrive late at night, with the last train.'

(M. Arland, *L'Ordre* 1929).

- (5) *. . . la prochaine fois, je leur ai dit, si l'on veut que je dîne à Rome, eh bien je ne partirai que le jour suivant. A propos, demain je ne déjeune pas.*

'next time, I told them, if you want me to have dinner in Roma, then I will leave the day after. **By the way**, tomorrow I won't have lunch.'

(M. Butor, *La Modification*, 1957)

even though we may also find it without a pause, as in (6):

- (6) *A propos* demain je ne déjeune pas au labo.
 ‘By the way tomorrow I won’t have lunch in the lab.’
 (attested example)

On the syntactic level, *à propos* typically appears at the beginning of a sentence, although it may be preceded by another discourse marker, such as *tiens* (literally ‘hold’, which means *there* in such a context). It is syntactically separated from the rest of the sentence.

- (7) *Tiens, à propos, j’ai croisé Paul ce matin : il veut récupérer son échelle.*
 ‘There, by the way, I met Paul this morning, he wants to get his ladder back.’
 (attested example)

From a semantic point of view, *à propos* does not have a conceptual meaning, but a procedural one: it specifies that the segment it introduces has to be interpreted relative to the prior sequence. For that reason, *à propos* may be deleted with no change in the propositional content of the segment it introduces, but as Fraser (1988: 22) points out, “It [the absence of a discourse marker] does however remove a powerful clue about what commitment the speaker makes regarding the relationship between the current utterance and the prior discourse”.

The issue to be raised in the case of *à propos* concerns the precise nature of the *clue* that is at stake. To attempt to answer this question, I will start from the distinction Fraser (1999) makes between different types of discourse markers. He suggests there are two main types: those which relate some aspect of the messages conveyed by the two segments S2 and S1 (typically they are contrastive, elaborative, inferential . . . markers), and those which relate topics (“topic relating discourse markers”), and involve an aspect of discourse management. In the last case, it is the topic to which S1 is contributing rather than its message itself which is related to the topic presented in S2.⁶

Among the second type Fraser mentions *incidentally* and *by the way*, which signal that S2 has to be interpreted as a digression from the topic of S1. They belong to the subclass of “topic change markers”. Example (8) is used by Fraser (1999: 949 Example (39a)):

- (8) *This dinner looks delicious. Incidentally where do you shop?*

This example is very close to Example (1) above, in which *à propos* functions as a marker indicating a smooth discourse shift.

In examples such as (1) and (8), the sequence is not difficult to process, since the very fact that it is a digression means that there is a common topic (“a place to eat” in (1), “quality goods” in (8)), and this common topic accounts for the juxtaposition of S1 and S2. There is both a thematic and discursive coherence, which is pointed at and made explicit by *à propos*.

In other cases, the relationship between S1 and S2 is far less obvious to perceive, and the addressee has to draw an inference in order to establish the connection between the two segments, as in (9):

- (9) *J'ai croisé Anne hier, elle est tout bronzée. A propos j'ai oublié d'acheter la crème solaire pour les enfants, je passerai à la pharmacie ce soir*
 'I met Anne yesterday, she's all sun-tanned; **by the way**, I forgot to buy sun lotion for the kids, I will call in at the chemist's tonight.'
 (attested example)

Finally, in some sequences (such as (2a) and (2b)) there seems to be no relationship at all between the prior discourse and the sentence. The only *clue* that signals that however this is not the case is the very presence of *à propos*: for the speaker at least, there *is* a relationship, and *à propos* indicates that the speaker estimates appropriate, relevant to utter S2.

In such sequences, the use of the expression prevents a discourse rupture. It also performs a striking rhetorical function since it presupposes and signals a discourse continuity, which only the speaker may be aware of, and in this way it forces the hearer/reader to admit the existence of such a continuity, in order to respect the coherence principle.

It has been noted (Fraser 1999) that discourse markers may not relate to the segment that immediately precedes, but to another one before it. This can be the case with *à propos*. Sometimes there may even be no linguistic context at all preceding the occurrence of *à propos*, it has to be contextually reconstructed. Such occurrences are very similar to some of *so*, which Traugott (1999) mentions as being at the beginning of the first sentence of a speech. In what can be considered as an extreme case, the hearer may even be unable to reconstruct the linguistic context to which *à propos* is related.

As a conclusion on the discursive status of *à propos*, I will add a final remark. According to Fraser, a discourse marker does not *display* a relationship (this is the position of Schiffrin 1987): a discourse marker "imposes on S2 a certain range of interpretations, given the interpretation(s) of S1 and the meaning of the DM" (Fraser 1999: 942). Relying on the assumption of Fraser, I would like to suggest a distinction according to the functions of *à propos*. When the marker indicates a smooth discourse shift, it points to the thematic relationship between the two segments, and may be considered as simply *reinforcing* the discourse continuity and coherence. However, when *à propos* signals an abrupt discourse shift, it points at the very fact that there *is* a relationship between the two segments, and for that reason, it must be interpreted as *forcing* discourse coherence.

From this point of view, we may say that even more than other discourse markers, *à propos* really operates on the pragmatic level.

As usual as it may seem for the contemporary French speaker, this type of use is fairly recent: *à propos* has had different meanings since the 14th century, and it has gone through a fairly unexpected evolution, the most important aspects of which I will describe in the next part of this paper.

3. Historical development of *à propos*

The corpus of my study was restricted to the 14th–17th centuries, since it appears to be a crucial period after which *à propos* displays most of the main characteristics it has in Modern French.⁷ The period is divided in three parts: Middle French (14th–15th centuries), 16th century and 17th century. As I suspected the expressions would not be very frequent, I chose to select all the texts of the databases I investigated. The databases are the following: the *Base du Dictionnaire de Moyen Français* for the first period (composed of 218 texts and 6.8 million words),⁸ and the *Frantext base* for the two following periods (respectively 148 texts and 5.6 million words, and 460 texts and 19.6 million words).⁹ They are both composed of narrative prose, plays, poetry and argumentative texts.

The account of the historical development of *à propos* would not be comprehensive if I did not give also an account of the evolution of two other expressions: *à propos de* and *à ce propos*. Although the relation between *à propos de* and *à propos* is far less decisive than the influence of *à ce propos* on *à propos* is,¹⁰ I will however give a short overview of it, before turning to a more detailed description of the evolution of the two other expressions.

3.1. *À propos de*

The expression *A propos de* (literally : *at — subject — of*) was not frequent either in Middle French or in the 16th century (we found only 70 occurrences in a corpus of several million words). In Middle French, in both postverbal and preverbal (even initial) position, *à propos de*, which means ‘about’, functioned as a prepositional phrase, and the global expression *à propos de X* had the grammatical status of a verbal complement (more specifically it defined an application domain for the predicate):

- (10) *Cy dit exemple de princes vertueux et de vie bien ordenencée, ramenant à propos du roy Charles comment en toutes choses estoit bien riglé.*
 ‘[he] gives here an example of virtuous princes and moral living, telling us **about king Charles** and how moral his life was.’
 (C. de Pizan, *Le livre des fais et bonnes meurs du sage roy Charles V*, 1401)

- (11) *Et se puet entendre en figure cest exemple, c'est assavoir que quant peuple voult monter plus hault qu'il ne doit, Dieu envoye entre eulx confusion qui les fait cheoir. Et pour ce, à propos de telz gens dit trop bien Orace que ilz sont aucuns qui se cuident avoir les yeulx plus fors que le spere du souleil, mais en eulx efforçant d'y regarder s'avuglent eulx mesmes.*

‘And his illustration may be understood as an exemplum, that is to say that when a people tries to raise itself higher than it should, God sends them confusion and makes them fall. This is why **Orace** says, with reason, **about such persons** that they think themselves capable of looking at the sun, but blind themselves in so doing.’

(C. de Pizan, *Le livre de la paix*, 1412)

From the 16th century on, such a function decreased when *à propos de X* was in preverbal position:¹¹ in this position the expression progressively became syntactically independent from the verb and took on the function of introducing an element serving as a frame or as a topic for the following sentence, just like in Modern French:¹²

- (12) *A propos de Paul, j'ai rencontré sa sœur hier au cinéma*

‘As for Paul, I met his sister in the train yesterday.’

(author's example)

- (13) *A propos de Paul, je l'ai rencontré hier dans le train*

‘As for Paul, I met him in the train yesterday.’

(author's example)

The resulting situation in Modern French is a one-to-one relation between position and function: in postverbal position *à propos de X* still functions as a verbal complement, whereas it serves to introduce a topic or a frame when it stands in preverbal or initial position. However it is to be emphasized that the semantic meaning — that is the notion of “aboutness” — remains unchanged whatever the position of the expression is.

3.2. *À ce propos*

I will now turn to *à ce propos* (literally ‘at this subject’). The expression was first attested in the 14th century, and it was far more frequent than the two other ones throughout the period of Middle French. At this time, either in postverbal or in preverbal position, *à ce propos* would most often function as a verbal complement (defining an application domain, like *à propos de X*), and it meant ‘about this (subject)’. In most cases, it was associated to a speech verb, as in (14):

- (14) *A laquele chose vault moult ajouster exemples manifestes, selonc le dit de Varron: "Tres clere maniere de enseigner est ajouster exemples". A ce propos dist Aristote ou premier livre de Methafisique: "La chose dont nous sommes acoustumés doit on au corage appliquer, che qui est au dehors est inconvenient".*

'We should add to this many obvious examples, following Varron: "in order to teach well, give examples". **On this subject Aristotle says** in the first book of Metaphysics . . .'

(J. Daudin, *De la erudition*, 1360)

Such a construction was still attested in the 16th century, but we observe (at this period) some contexts in which the syntactic dependency of *à ce propos* may be questioned. For the Modern French speaker at least, sequences such as (15) may give rise to a double analysis, that is with, or without, a syntactic dependency of *à ce propos*:

- (15) *Mais au contraire il en y a d'autres qui le sont par leur propre malice, comme vous avés ouy en la LXVIIIe nouvelle et de pluseurs aultres, comme cy devant ait esté dit.*

Et à ce propos je vous en vueil reciter encor une pour tousjours multiplier le nombre laquelle parle d'une jeune femme qui

'But others on the contrary were deceived by their own treachery as you heard in the 68th novel and from others, as was said before. **On this subject / by the way** I want to tell you another story . . .'

(P. de Vigneulles, *Les Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*, 1515)

Without any doubt such contexts have favored an important evolution of *à ce propos*. In this position the expression may have become syntactically independent from the verb, and acquired the opportunity to develop a new function: from that time it became possible for it to introduce an incidental remark (meaning 'incidentally'), thus signaling a smooth discourse shift.

Contexts like (16) in which the verb no longer denotes a communicative act, prove that the reinterpretation has taken place:¹³

- (16) *On voit coustumierement qu'à ces foires et marchez sont plusieurs coupeurs de bourses, qui ne font autre chose qu'espier leur belle, et regarder les moyens d'en avoir. A ce propos, un jour de marché, à Lyons, estoit un bon simple homme baissé assez bas, lequel marchandoit des naveaux estant contre terre sur du foirre, comme on les estalle.*

'We often see in those fairs and markets many thieves who do nothing else than observe women and try to gain access to them. **By the way**, on a market day in Lyon, there was a good and simple man who had gone down quite low . . .'

Table 1. Evolution of *à ce propos* in preverbal and postverbal positions, and frequency of discourse marker (DM) uses

Middle French	16th century		17th century	
224 occurrences	96 occurrences		94 occurrences	
postverbal: 60 (0.24/10000 w.) Incl. ¹⁴ 3% of DM (5 occ.)	preverbal: 164 36	postverbal: 60 (0.1/10000 w.) incl. 23% of DM (14)	preverbal: 42 (0.02/10000 w.) incl. 40% of DM (17)	postverbal: 52

(P. d'Alcricpe, *La Nouvelle fabrique des excellents traicts de verité*, 1580–1596)

Whereas such a function remained very rare in Middle French, it became more frequent in the 16th century: at this time around 23% of all occurrences in preverbal position can be considered as introducing an incidental remark, and this frequency reached 40% during the following period, as it appears in Table 1.

Although the interpretation of some cases may remain difficult because of their ambiguity (hence the term *around 23%*), it is possible to base the analysis on some criteria: none of them is sufficient alone, but the convergence of several can be a convincing argument to favor one interpretation over the other.

One of them is the position of the subject. We may find a preverbal subject occurring with a incidental remark or with a verbal complement, but there is no case of postverbal subject occurring with an incidental remark: the postverbal subject only occurs with a verbal complement *à ce propos*, as in (14). Another criterion is the presence of a pause, generally a comma. However this criterion should only be used very sparingly, because we know that the punctuation of medieval texts is largely the work of modern editors. The semantic value of the verb is certainly a decisive criterion, but in the same way as for the position of the subject, it is a non-reciprocal one: whereas the absence of a verb denoting a communicative act is a convincing argument in favor of the discourse marker interpretation, the presence of such a verb does not necessarily precludes it, as Example (15) illustrates. However, in such a case an additional criterion may lie in the examination of the compatibility of *à ce propos* with the other complements. The lack of compatibility prevents *à ce propos* from being analyzed as a verbal complement. There surely remains some subjectivity in the final interpretation, but it has to be as restricted as possible, especially because we do not have, as a Modern French speaker, any linguistic competence of Medieval French: at best we may have acquired a relative *intuition*.

In parallel to the increasing occurrences of the discursive uses of preverbal *à ce propos*, we observe, unsurprisingly, a decrease of its verbal complement function. As I mentioned in note 11, this movement falls within the general

evolution of verbal complements, which increasingly occupied a postverbal position. However, what is to become a rule is fairly less strict when it comes to complements other than the nominal object: still in Modern French we may find verbal complement à *ce propos* before the verb, as in (17), though it is unusual:

- (17) *La grippe fait des ravages cet hiver. A ce propos on m'a dit à que le virus est très agressif.*
 'The flu is terrible this winter. **On this subject I was told** that the virus is very aggressive.'
 (author's example)

Similarly to à *propos de*, the function of à *ce propos* varies according to its position, but its semantic value remains unchanged. This is not the case of à *propos*, the historical development of which I will now consider.

3.3. À *propos*

In opposition to à *ce propos* and à *propos de*, à *propos* displays different semantic values according to its position and its function.

In Modern French, in postverbal position, the expression functions as a manner adverb and it means 'appropriate', 'relevant' (Examples (18) and (19)). This meaning derives from one of the earliest meaning of *propos*: 'subject', 'matter'.

- (18) *Il a jugé à propos d'annuler la réunion*
 'He estimated it **appropriate** to cancel the meeting.'
 (attested example)
- (19) *Il est arrivé à propos pour réveiller la soirée*
 'He arrived **at the right moment** to wake up the party.'
 (attested example)

There are only a few occurrences of this adverbial use of à *propos* in **my** Middle French corpus (6 occurrences, amounting to 24% of all à *propos*). They occur far more frequently in the following period, since their frequency reaches 92% in the 16th century, and 96% in the 17th century (see Table 2 below):

- (20) *Cependant, dom Pedro faisoit l'empresé à vouloir sçavoir la cause de ce changement; mais le roy ne luy en dit autre chose, sinon qu' il avoit jugé à propos d'éloigner davantage ces prisonniers.*
 'Meanwhile dom Pedro pressed the king to tell him the cause of this change, but the king didn't tell him anything more than that he had thought **appropriate** to send these prisoners further away.'
 (M. de Scudéry, *Mathilde*, 1667)

Table 2. Evolution of *à propos* in preverbal and postverbal positions, and frequency of discourse marker (DM) uses

Middle French		16th century		17th century	
25 occurrences		327 occurrences		2364 occurrences	
postverbal: 6	preverbal: 19 (0.03/10000 w.) incl. 21% of DM (4 occ.)	postverbal: 302	preverbal: 25 (0.04/10000 w.) incl. 68% of DM (17)	postverbal: 2269	preverbal: 95 (0.05/10000 w.) incl. 86% of DM (82)

Only rarely did *à propos* appear in preverbal position with this adverbial function and the associated meaning of ‘appropriate’, as in (21):

- (21) . . . *Duquel remède l'on se servira, par l'avis et la main de l'expert mareschal, qui **à propos** lui donnera quelques boutons de feu, dont les cicatrices embelliront plustost, qu'elles n'enlaidiront les jambes du cheval* . . .

‘This remedy will be used, with the consent and by the hand of the expert sergeant, who will **appropriately** give him fire spots, which in healing will leave marks embellishing rather than disfiguring the horse’s legs.’

(O. de Serres, *Le Théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs*, 1603)

As word order became stricter, occurrences such as (21) tended to decrease in number, and they finally disappeared.

Whereas *à propos* in preverbal position displayed only very rarely such an adverbial function, it could take on other functions and meanings.

In Middle French, we find a few examples in which *à propos* had the same meaning as *à propos de*, as in (22):

- (22) . . . *car de tant seras tu plus prisee. **A propos ycelles gentilz femmes**, de tant que plus [elles] se humilient devers leurs mariz en honneur, obeissance et reverence, et la foy que mariage requiert, de tant croistra plus leur honneur*

‘. . . **About these noble women**, all the more they will remain humble towards their husband. . . , all the more they will be honored.’

(C. de Pizan, *Le livre des trois vertus*, 1405)

However, *à propos* in Middle French would more often take on the same verbal complement function as *à ce propos*, as in (23):

- (23) . . . *sans laquelle avoir et tenir fermement nul ne puet plaire à Dieu n'estre sauvé, si comme dit Saint Paul. Et pourtant, **à propos dit Saint***

Bernart que ceste vie mortele puet estre à un chascun figurée à la prison,

‘. . . without having and holding on to it, no one can be dear to God nor be saved by him, as says Saint Paul. Still, **on that subject Saint Bernard says** that this mortal life can seem to be a prison.’

(C. de Pizan, *Epistre de la prison de vie humaine*, 1416)

We find a few examples for this period in which, owing to the absence of any speech verb, *à propos* is interpreted as introducing a smooth digression. However, in most cases it is possible to postulate an implicit performative, without affecting the coherence of the sequence, as is illustrated in (24):

- (24) *Car entre blanc et noir qui sont couleurs contraires sont plusieurs couleurs moiennes. Et aussi, **a propos**, entre le lieu ou est le feu et le lieu ou est la terre est lieu moien qui ne peust estre vieu.*
(N. Oresme, *Le livre du ciel et du monde*, 1370)

Example (24) can be interpreted as follows:

- (24) a. ‘For between white and black, which are opposite colors, there are a few colors in between. Also, **by the way** between the place where the fire is and the place where the earth is, there is a place in between . . .’

but it may also be understood as in (24b):

- (24) b. ‘For between white and black, which are opposite colors, there are a few colors in between. Also, **I will say on this subject that** between the place where the fire is and the place where the earth is, there is a place in between . . .’

The criteria to interpret the value of *à propos* — verbal complement or discourse marker — are the same as those used for the interpretation of *à ce propos*: position of the subject, presence of a pause (punctuation mark), semantic value of the verb. As it is the case for *à ce propos*, those criteria have to be used in a cautious way; moreover none of them is sufficient alone. Yet the convergence of several criteria may favor one interpretation over the other.

In the 16th century the majority (68%) of occurrences of *à propos* in preverbal position were similar to (24), and a few of them even indicated a more abrupt discourse shift, precluding the possibility of inserting any communicative verb, as in (25):

- (25) *A quoy elle respondit: Quant est de moy, je ne vous hays point, car, comme Dieu le commande, je ayme tout le monde.*
– *Mais, **à propos**, (dist il), n’etez vous amoureuse de moy?*

‘She answered: As for me, I don’t hate you, since I love everybody, as God commands it

– But, **by the way**, he said, aren’t you in love with me?’

(F. Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, 1542)

Such sequences became even more frequent in the following century (86%), and from this period on they displayed the same characteristics as in Modern French.

More specifically, *à propos* may have indicated a relationship either with the previous discourse of the speaker himself, as in (26):

(26) *Le Bon Homme: Et bien, boivons, et me donnez un petit de ceste crouste de pasté; ce que j’en fais est pour **espargner le pain**. Mais **à propos**, qu’est-ce qui **espargne plus le pain** en une maison?*

‘The Good Man: Well, let us drink and give me a taste of this pâté crust. I will eat it in order to **spare bread**. **By the way**, how can you best **spare bread** in a house?’

(Béroalde de Verville, *Le Moyen de parvenir*, 1610)

or with the previous discourse of the addressee, as in (27):

(27) *Massinisse:*

Je ne veux pour tesmoin des choses que vous dites,

Que mon propre bon-heur.

Sophonisbe:

*Mais vos **propres merites**.*

Massinisse:

***A propos** où nasquit, en quel temps et pourquoi,*

***La bonne volonté** que vous avez pour moy?*

De grace accordez-moy le plaisir de l’entendre,

Vous plaist-il?

‘*Massinisse:* There is no better proof of what you say than my own happiness

Sophonisbe:

Except your own **merits**

Massinisse:

By the way, where, when and why

Did **this good will** that you have for me come from?’

(J. Mairet, *La Sophonisbe*, 1635)

I did not find in the 17th century texts I have investigated any example such as (2a) and (2b) above, in which there appears no explicit thematic relationship between the two segments. However, it is often the case that the addressee has to draw an inference in order to establish the connection between the two seg-

ments. Depending on the cases, the inference may be easy to draw, as in (27), or more difficult, as in (28), in which we moreover observe an ironic effect:

- (28) *Encore si j'avais à vous apprendre des nouvelles de Danemark, comme je faisais il y a quatre ou cinq ans, ce serait quelque chose, mais je suis dénuée de tout. A propos, la princesse De La Trémouille épouse un comte D'Ochtensilbourg, qui est très riche et le plus honnête homme du monde.*

'If at least I had news from Denmark as I did 4 or 5 years ago, it would be something, but **I have nothing. By the way**, the princess De La Trémouille is about to marry a Count D'Ochtensilbourg, who is **very rich** and most honest.'

(Mme. de Sévigné, *Correspondance*, 1680)

Examples (26) and (28) can be considered as the two ends of a continuum, from the presence of an explicit thematic relationship to the necessity of drawing an inference, with varying degrees existing along the continuum.

Tables 1 and 2 above have shown the increasing frequency of the discourse marker function of both *à ce propos* and *à propos*. They have also brought out the respective evolution of both expressions in preverbal position from a quantitative point of view. The data are summarized in the form of graphs in Figures 1 and 2 below, designed to highlight two main trends. First, as it may be observed in figure 1, there is a strong decrease of *à ce propos*, especially between the 16th and the 17th centuries, while there is on the contrary a relative stability of *à propos* from Middle French to the 17th century.

Figure 2 illustrates the increasing tendency for both expressions to take on discourse marker uses, a tendency particularly marked in the case of *à propos*.

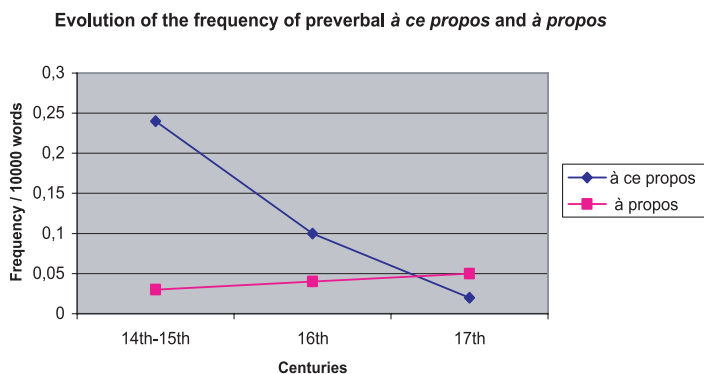


Figure 1. *Evolution of the frequency of preverbal *à ce propos* and *à propos**

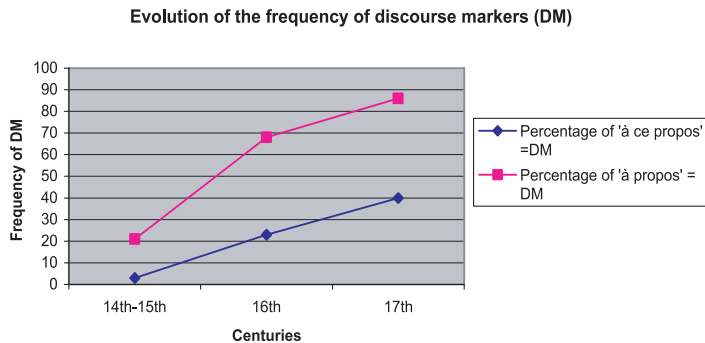


Figure 2. *Evolution of the frequency of discourse markers*

Taking the preceding observations as a starting point, I will now suggest an explanation for the emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker.

First I will discard the hypothesis that *à propos* as a manner adverb may have been dislocated from its internal clause position within the predicate, where it had a narrow syntactic scope, to a preverbal position where it operates as a wide scope sentential adverb with a pragmatic function. The data clearly show that there are only a few occurrences of adverbial *à propos* before the 16th century, while, from Middle French on, there are some occurrences of *à propos* which are similar to those of *à ce propos* from a functional point of view.

Judging from this, I suggest that the emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker should be analyzed as a case of analogy with *à ce propos* (the result being possibly also interpreted as a sort of *morphological reduction* of *à ce propos*). Although the increase of the first expression and the decrease of the second still deserve further investigation, we may already hypothesize that *à propos* has progressively replaced *à ce propos* in certain contexts.

It has also developed in contexts of abrupt discourse shift: the absence of an explicit morphological link with the preceding context may have favored the emergence of such a function. On the contrary, when the deictic is present, it *normally* has to point to an element present in the linguistic context.

Although the evolution of *à propos* is very closely linked to that of *à ce propos*, one cannot totally exclude that it was also influenced by the semantic value of adverbial *à propos*: as an abrupt discourse shifter, *à propos* points to the fact that, despite appearances, it is in fact *appropriate* to utter the following sentence.

In the last part of this paper I will go back to some theoretical issues concerning the relationship between the emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker and the notions of subjectification, grammaticalization and pragmaticalization.

4. The development of *à propos* as a discourse marker: a case of grammaticalization?

It has been observed (Traugott 1995b; Traugott and Dasher 2002; Brinton and Traugott 2005 among others) that the diachronic development of discourse markers often involves a process of subjectification and/or intersubjectification, that is a shift from meaning pertaining to the characterization of the objective world to meanings involving the expression of personal attitudes of the speaker (subjectification) to meaning concerned with the interaction between speaker and hearer (intersubjectification) (see Traugott 1999 for the subjectification/intersubjectification distinction).

It is clear from the characterization of discursive uses of *à propos* along with its historical development that its emergence as a discourse marker falls within such a semantic evolution, and more specifically within the process of intersubjectification: whether it *points* either to the thematic relationship between the two segments or to an abrupt discourse shift, in both cases it functions as an explicit signal the speaker directs to the addressee.

However, the fact that the emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker involves a process of intersubjectification does not imply that it corresponds to a case of grammaticalization. It has actually been recognized (Traugott 1995a, 1995b; Marchello-Nizia 2006 among others) that although there is a high degree of correlation between the semantic process of (inter)subjectification and that of grammaticalization, they do not coincide. I consider (inter)subjectification as one of the parameters within the grammaticalization process. Just like the other parameters, it may occur during grammaticalization (though being unnecessary), but it can also occur independently of grammaticalization.

The question whether the emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker is a case of grammaticalization is actually a two-fold question. It first raises the controversial issue of whether discourse markers should be discussed in the framework of grammaticalization or in the more recent pragmaticalization framework. It implies secondly examining whether criteria or parameters characterizing grammaticalization and/or pragmaticalization are involved in the process under scrutiny. The two questions are actually closely linked, some elements of the second answer being critical, according to some authors, to answer the first one. However for methodological reasons I will discuss them successively.

It has been suggested (esp. Erman and Kotsinas 1993; Aijmer 1997; also Dostie 2004; Günthner and Mutz 2004) that grammaticalization describes the emergence of sentence-internal grammatical markers while the notion of pragmaticalization would be more appropriate to describe the emergence of text-structuring discourse markers, as they involve a movement from a conceptual meaning to a procedural one, from the lexical area towards the pragmatic area, and from the sentence level to the macro-textual level.

The position one may adopt basically depends on one's conception of grammar, whether it is more or less broad enough to encompass the domain of pragmatics. However, although there may be some theoretical interest in preserving the domains of grammar and pragmatic functions as clearly distinct, it has been pointed out (Traugott 1995b: Section 2) that it is not always possible to keep them apart. For instance, although time, aspect and mood expressions are often treated as syntactic or semantic (that is *grammatical*) categories, they also have pragmatic functions. Brinton and Traugott (2005: 139) advocate a similar position, and they furthermore indicate discourse-related categories such as Topic and Focus which, inversely, display a grammatical dimension. This is also the position of Diewald (2006), who considers pragmatic functions as genuine grammatical functions, since they are essential for the organization and structuring of spoken dialogic discourse.

Consequently, in line with these authors,¹⁵ I adopt a broad conception of grammar, inclusive of the domain of pragmatics, and thus consider pragmaticalization as a mere subclass of grammaticalization which shows the crucial features of it,¹⁶ though pertaining more specifically to the pragmatic area. Since I am not convinced of the utility of increasing labels, I will favor the term of grammaticalization, even in the case of discourse markers.

The emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker falls within the general definition of grammaticalization, the expression moving from a lexical status towards a grammatical (pragmatic) one. However it is also necessary to assess whether this evolution implies some mechanisms (Hopper and Traugott 2003[1993] among others), some principles (Hopper 1991), some parameters (Lehmann 1995[1982]), which are supposed to characterize a process of grammaticalization, should it be in an incipient, ongoing or final stage.

I will not consider all of them, but only those I consider to be crucial. I will not discuss the unidirectionality hypothesis, since I assume that unidirectionality belongs to the very definition of grammaticalization, and for that reason it does not need to be questioned. As Campbell points out¹⁷: "A fact not usually recognized explicitly by grammaticalization enthusiasts is that unidirectionality is essentially built into the definition of grammaticalization" (2001: 124), a point of view that is shared by other linguists (see e.g., Newmeyer (2001), Janda (2001),¹⁸ Norde (2001), and also Prévost (2003, 2006).¹⁹ Either a linguistic element becomes more grammatical and it may be analyzed as going through a process of grammaticalization, or it does not, and in that case its evolution is not a counterexample to any unidirectionality hypothesis, but simply another kind of linguistic change: "A change which results in a shift from left to right on the cline of grammaticality is an instance of grammaticalization; a change which results in a shift from right to left, or no shift at all, is not." (Norde 2001: 232)²⁰. Sometimes there seems to be some confusion between grammaticalization, which is unidirectional by definition (though it may be

reversible), and linguistic change in general, which is not directional and may take various directions, even though changes towards increased grammatical status appear to be far more frequent than the others.

In examining the mechanisms involved (or not) in the evolution of *à propos*, one must keep in mind the fact that the emergence of *à propos* as a discourse marker is closely linked to that of *à ce propos*. For that reason, some of the mechanisms which are mentioned may pertain to both expressions.

First we may consider the evolution from the verbal complement function to the discourse marker one as a reanalysis, or at least as a *reinterpretation*, followed by a contextual extension (the possibility for the expressions to appear when there is no speech verb any longer). As regards the mechanism of decategorialization, it is difficult to say that *à ce propos* or *à propos* are affected by it: the discourse marker is no less able to refer than the verbal complement is, such a possibility being actually fairly limited in both cases. There is no increase in bonding within the phrase either, the verbal complement being already internally bonded. As to the phonological reduction, it is not relevant: even though we could hypothesize that discursive *à propos* results from a “reduction” of *à ce propos* (which is a far less convincing hypothesis than that of a simple analogy), it would not amount to a phonological reduction or erosion, as it is usually understood in the framework of grammaticalization. Turning now to the semantic and pragmatic changes typically occurring during a process of grammaticalization, it has already been argued in favor of subjectification and intersubjectification, the latter pertaining more especially to *à propos*. I would not argue for a semantic bleaching or a generalization of meaning, but there is an undoubted increase in pragmatic function, which is correlated to the very emergence of discursive uses, and this appears especially striking in the case of *à propos*.

The last mechanism to be examined concerns syntactic integration and scope, and we observe for *à propos* (and *à ce propos*) the same behavior as for other discourse markers: in emerging as a discourse marker *à propos* has become disjoined and has come to carry scope over stretches of discourse beyond the sentence. Thus it does not exhibit the scope reduction supposed to be characteristic of a grammaticalization process (and so it runs counter to the “condensation” parameter identified by Lehmann 1995[1982] as characteristic of grammaticalization). However the notion of scope reduction has been challenged in grammaticalization generally, and in the case of discourse markers more specifically (see Tabor and Traugott 1998; Hopper and Traugott 2003: Ch. 7 “Grammaticalization across clauses”; Brinton and Traugott 2005: 136–140). As Traugott (1995b) notes: “Nevertheless, many instances of syntactic increase in scope have been identified in the extensive literature on the development of clause connectives”. She mentions in particular the development of prepositions into complementizers, or verbs into complementizers. As

a conclusion, she argues that “the large number of changes of this type suggests that syntactic scope increases must be allowed for in a theory of grammaticalization”, a position that is strengthened in Tabor and Traugott (1998), where the authors suggest the use of other criteria to identify the cases of grammaticalization: semantic and syntactic reclassification, gradual step-by-step change (1998: 265). In line with this position, I believe decreases in scope and syntactic freedom are not central criteria.

Consequently, even though *à propos* in initial position has developed a pragmatic function and also syntactic increase in scope, I consider there are sufficiently convincing arguments to justify its being analyzed as a case of grammaticalization.

5. Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have first defended the analysis of Modern French *à propos* as a discourse marker, arguing that a shift in discourse may be held for a type of relationship. I have also emphasized the very specific function of the expression, which may, depending on the contexts, not only reinforce, but even *force*, discourse coherence. Secondly I have attempted to shed light on the apparently surprising evolution of *à propos*, by providing an account of the historical developments of both *à propos* and *à ce propos*, which highlighted the influence of the second expression upon the first. However it remains necessary to pursue investigations — by enlarging the corpus — especially as concerns the clarification of chronology, which will allow us to provide a more fine-grained description. I finally raised the issue of grammaticalization, which can be hardly avoided when it comes to the emergence of discourse markers. After recalling that the presence of a process of (inter)subjectification does not imply *per se* that we have a case of grammaticalization, I discussed the respective relevance of the notions of grammaticalization and pragmaticalization when it comes to the emergence of discourse markers. I argued in favor of the first one, and then tried to show that beyond the fact that the emergence of *à propos* involves at the end point the domain of grammar, it also involves some of the mechanisms characteristic of a process of grammaticalization, even though there is no reduction in syntactic scope. Certainly the evolution of *à propos* in terms of grammaticalization needs to be further investigated as well, especially as regards its mechanisms, parameters and principles. (This will be the subject of a following study).

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Notes

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1. Gerard Darel is a French stylist, and Robin Wright is his new muse.
 2. For a list of those terms, see Brinton (1996: 29) and Fraser (1999: 932).
 3. See also Fraser (1996, 2006).
 4. Fraser actually distinguishes two main types of discourse markers: see below.
 5. In oral speech, *à propos* is often separated from the rest of the sentence by an intonational break.
 6. It should be noted that S1 does not have to come right before S2.
 7. However it would be interesting to investigate the next period in order to reveal some micro-evolutions.
 8. Base du DMF, UMR7118 ATILF / Nancy-2, <<http://atilf.atilf.fr/dmf.htm>>
 9. Frantext, UMR7118 ATILF / Nancy2, <<http://www.frantext.fr>>
 10. Moreover, though *à propos de* has also developed a pragmatic function, it has not evolved towards a discourse marker function, like *à ce propos* and *à propos*: it introduces a frame or a topic. For a detailed study of *à propos de*, see Prévost (2007, 2008).
 11. This decrease is to be connected to the general decrease of preverbal complements in French.
 12. I refer to the notion of *frame* as it is defined by Fillmore: “By the term ‘frame’, I have in mind any system of concepts related in such a way that to understand any of them you have to understand the whole structure in which it fits; when one of the things in such a structure is introduced into a text, or into a conversation, all of the others are automatically made available” (1982: 111).
 13. In Heine’s four stages model of evolution (2002), Example (15) would correspond to a “bridging context”, while Example (16) would correspond to a “switch context”, which is no longer compatible with the original meaning.
 14. ‘Incl.’ = ‘including’.
 15. See the introduction to this volume for a more detailed presentation of the different positions regarding the relation between grammaticalization and pragmaticalization.
 16. See below for a discussion of scope reduction.
 17. Even though it is in order to criticize grammaticalization.
 18. “[. . .] if *grammaticalization* is defined as involving a decrease in lexical meaning and/or an increase in grammatical meaning, then the process in question is inherently unidirectional. [. . .] the unidirectionality of grammaticalization is a tautology” (Janda 2001: 294).
 19. Prévost (2003) is in line with these linguists on the question of unidirectionality but disagrees with them on many other points.
 20. See also Lessau (1994: 886): “If, however, ‘unidirectionality’ is a *defining property* of grammaticalization, it follows that any case of linguistic change that runs in another direction is simply not a case of grammaticalization by definition.”

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