

***A propos***  
**From verbal complement to utterance marker of discourse shift**

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In modern French, *à propos* in preverbal position can function as an utterance marker indicating either a smooth discourse shift:

- (1) « Paul a vu le dernier film de Coppola.  
 - A propos, j'irais bien au cinéma ce soir »

or a more abrupt one:

- (2) « J'en ai assez de ce bruit. A propos, quand mange-t-on ? »

In the second case, use of the expression prevents a discourse rupture due to an unannounced subject change. It also performs a striking rhetorical function: presupposing and signalling a discourse continuity which only the speaker may be aware of, and in this way obliging the hearer to also recreate this continuity, in order to respect the coherence principle. This kind of use is quite recent: *à propos* has had different meanings since the 14th century, and has undergone a quite unexpected evolution, since it has ended up taking on a sense opposite to its literal meaning. In Middle French, *à propos* often permutes with *à ce propos* and functions as a verbal complement (approximately "about this subject"). However, this sense disappears in the 16th century, while the uses illustrated in (1) and (2) begin to develop. The first stages of the development of *à propos* are thus closely linked to those of *à ce propos*. The last expression henceforth behaves as an utterance marker of smooth discourse shift, and *à propos* is still in a close relation to it.

The study will be based on a corpus of texts from the 14th to the 20th century. It aims to give an account of the evolution of *à propos*. More specifically, I will focus on the emergence of *à propos* as an utterance marker of discourse shift, and on its growing independence with regard to *à ce propos*. Special attention will be paid to the analysis of ambiguous contexts.

The evolution of *à propos* is a typical example of '(inter)subjectification' (Traugott & Dasher 2002) and it also seems to be a case of grammaticalization: several mechanisms of the process are indeed involved in the evolution of *à propos* (both morpho-syntactic and semantic). Yet the status of the resulting form (modern *à propos*) leads us to consider the evolution of *à propos* rather as a case of 'pragmaticalisation'. Dostie (2004) defines this process as a grammaticalization, where grammar is seen in very broad sense, a process which "leads to the emergence of units which play a role at the level of the macro-syntax of discourse" (Dostie 2004, *our translation*).

The study of *à propos* enables us to focus on the relationship between the processes of grammaticalization, pragmaticalisation and (inter-)subjectification. In this regard, it will be interesting to examine similar discourse markers, in French or in other languages, to see whether they have undergone a similar evolution or not (*by the way, à ce sujet ...*).

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