

## The Bonjour Effect: The secret codes of French conversation revealed (a review)

Original work by Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau published by Duckworth Overlook 2017

Reviewed by Barry Tomalin

**Barry Tomalin** International House London [barrytomalin@aol.com](mailto:barrytomalin@aol.com)

**Published in Training, Language and Culture** Vol 1 Issue 4 (2017) pp. 107-110 doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.9](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.9)

**Recommended citation format:** Tomalin, B. (2017). The Bonjour Effect: The secret codes of French conversation revealed (a review). *Training, Language and Culture*, 1(4), 107-110. doi: [10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.9](https://doi.org/10.29366/2017tlc.1.4.9)



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There is a feeling among some interculturalists that etiquette and protocol has received too much attention as an indicator of cultural differences. It has obscured the more important influences of attitudes and values, communication styles and above all business and social behaviour. On the other hand, the building of social relations is also important as a business and diplomatic tool and creating the right impression through greetings, showing respect, dress code, gift giving and hospitality all matter.

*The Bonjour Effect* addresses these social relationship-building issues in relation to France but also examines the historical and social roots of language use and behaviour. It is written by two Canadian journalists who have already scored international success with *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't be Wrong* and *The Story of French*. Their present book, subtitled *the Secret Codes of French*

*Conversation* divides into two parts, form and content and explains complexities of French conversation and behaviour that often confuse foreigners and will be instructive for teachers of language and culture for all communities.

Presented as a guide to French conversation, the book extends to discussions of political, historical and social influences on the French use of their language and on French culture in general. It is particularly useful for new immigrants to France offering insights on how to help children integrate the French school system and for parents to decipher the French conversation code.

Phatic communication, sounds and stock phrases used with a particular stress or intonation are an important part of social speech. As Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau point out, '*Phatics are part of the communication protocol that establishes links, like the scratchy, squealing*

*sounds modems made back in the 90s when people had to dial up the Internet.'*

The greeting *Bonjour* in French meaning *Good morning* or *Good day* has at least three different meanings, each vital as a way of establishing positive contact. First it means, *I'm here*. (I greet therefore I am). The second meaning is *We are going to communicate* or *I am going to talk*. The third is, *I'm entering your territory*, such as going into a shop, getting on a bus etc. As Barlow and Nadeau put it, *'You can never say too many Bonjours. Our rule of thumb is to say Bonjour in all contexts and all circumstances. When it seems like overkill you are probably right on.'*

Another important area in all cultures is 'the privacy rule'. This determines what you talk about and what you don't mention. What constitutes acceptable public and private behaviour? The anthropologist Edward T. Hall introduced the notion of 'spatial dimensions' or 'bubbles' in the 1960s to explain how people interact. Hall identified the four spheres of intimate, personal, social and public. For example, French people tend not to talk about work and families to people they don't know well (the personal bubble).

Barlow and Nadeau illustrate the points they make with examples from their own lives in Paris and that of their children. They go into the reasons why some French may say *No'* at first when with a

little persuasion that can change to *Oui'* As they point out, *'it takes a certain amount of faith, and sometimes a lot of talking, but you can almost always find the yes hiding behind a French no if it's there.'*

A key part of the book deals with the French love of conversation. They discuss the origin and development of the *Academie Francaise*, France's guardian of the French language, and the rise of salons in the 18th century. This leads to an extended discussion of the role of teaching self-expression and logical thought and exposition through the study of philosophy in the Lycee (High School) system. They also show how the art of conversation permeates French social life. They explain how their daughters were educated in primary schools to learn and recite classic poems and how they learn exactitude in grammar and presentation skills. For the authors, learning the art of conversation is a prime aim of French education and they discuss its role and how it plays out in dinner parties and other social events.

Part of this fascination with conversation is what the authors as describe the *fixation on French*. According to Barlow and Nadeau the history and development of the French language and its use and the introduction of new phrases is part of the French conception of *culture generale* (a good education). However, one interesting feature of French usage is the tendency to abbreviate, partly

influenced by *txting*. A personal *coiffeur* is known as a *coiffeur perso*.

The linguistic habit of shortening words and ending with an *o* or *lo* is very common in everyday speech. For example, a *directeur* (director) may be popularly called *un dirlo*. Also, you may hear popular jargon or slang called *verlan*. This consists of reversing the syllables of commonly used words, such as, *femme* (woman) which becomes *meuf*, *fete* (party) becomes *teuf* and *discret* (discreet) becomes *scred*.

The value of this book is that it combines history, culture and language with personal experience to offer a reasoned and sometimes humorous insight into French culture, values and attitudes, communication styles and behaviour. It is interesting on attitudes to the UK (*les Anglo-saxons*) and the USA and also on the concept of French exceptionalism. It also examines the French penchant for criticising France and everything French and supports arguments for more positive appreciation of French life and culture.

It is also interesting for the authors' comparisons with life and attitudes in the UK, the USA and in their native Canada. France, like other countries, has been struck by terrorism attacks in Paris and Nice and also by the attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in January 2015. Chapter 18, *Proof of Identity*, explores the nature

of French identity and the relations of the multiple diverse minorities who call France home. France itself keeps no statistics on its minorities. You are either *citoyen* (citizen) or *etranger* (foreigner). In addition, France is *anti-communautaire* (denying the idea of separate ethnic or racial communities).

As a French citizen, you are part of the civic state, a policy that comes from the suppression of religious minorities in the wars of the 17th and 18th centuries in France. Also, important in France is the principle of *laicete* (laicity or secularism), a principle introduced after revolts by Catholic extremists in the 19th century. As sociologist and philosopher, Raphael Liogier explained to Julie Barlow, *laicete* represents not freedom of religion but freedom FROM religion and applies to Christians, Muslims, Buddhists and Hindus alike although freedom of worship is also a French principle.

The question is whether the principles of secularism and anti-community can continue in a world where many overseas citizens of France feel disadvantaged and confined to poorer suburban areas and become radicalised in protest. The authors however are confident that faced with stronger demands from Muslims for recognition and, confronted by the attacks of 2015 with a corresponding increase in 'Islamophobia' by some French, France will produce a new formula to deal with current issues. As the authors cheekily assert

in conclusion, *'You can always count on the French to talk their way out of anything.'* The book concludes with *Dos and Don'ts*, offering 12 guiding principles of French Conversation, behaviour to adopt and to avoid and Do and Taboo topics of conversation. All in all, it is an interesting, instructive and entertaining read, *The*

*Bonjour Effect* is really useful for researchers and teachers specialising in French language and culture and for people moving to France who need to understand the roots of its language and culture. The book's structure can also serve as a practical basis for analysing other countries' languages and cultures.