From certainty to doubt
The evolution of the discourse marker *voire* in French*

Amalia Rodríguez Somolinos

This paper explains the evolution of the modal marker *voire* in French, following an argumentative and pragmatic approach. Until the 16th century, *voire* can mark a confirmation in a dialogue. It can also appear inside a sentential structure. In both cases, *voire* is strongly assertive. This assertive value disappears in the course of the 17th century, and intra-sentential *voire* 1 will give way to *voire* 2, characteristic of Modern French. *Voire* is found nowadays inside a sentential structure, and it has a semantic value close to the Modern French *même* or English *even*. But with *voire* 2, the degree of adhesion by the speaker to his utterance has diminished. The weakening of the primary assertive value has resulted in an entirely different marker.

1. Introduction

The evolution of *voire* from Old French to Modern French must be related to a general phenomenon in the evolution of languages. It is known that a number of modal markers that express, at first, certainty or the reinforcement of an assertion, undergo a devaluation and end up expressing doubt (cf. Traugott 1995; Traugott & Nordlingen 1997). In French, as Berrendoner (1987:291) points out, this is the case with *devoir*, *sans doute* and *certainement* among others:

Le morphème atteint commence par devenir polysémique, signifiant équivoquement la certitude aussi bien que la supposition. Puis cette acception seconde l’emporte, et finit par subsister seule.

‘At first, the morpheme in question becomes polysemic, signifying ambiguously certainty as well as supposition. Then, this second meaning prevails and this is the only one that survives.’

In Old French, *voire* is essentially an assertive and confirmative marker. In Modern French, *voire* is entirely different. The assertive and confirmative value of the marker has weakened and it can signal the uncertainty of the speaker as to the truth of his own utterance or that of his interlocutor. More frequently, *voire* is found nowadays inside a
sentential structure, and it has a semantic value close to the Modern French même or English even. There is nevertheless a difference: with voire the speaker does not commit himself to entirely to what he is saying:

(1) Qu'elles aient ou non les yeux verts, toutes les femmes lui semblaient suspectes, voire dangereuses. Il soupçonnait toutes les femmes d'accointances avec le diable et d'avoir la folie dans le sang prête à surgir à tout instant.

(S. Germain, Jours de colère, Gallimard, p. 83; 1989)

‘Whether they had green eyes or not, all women seemed suspicious to him, perhaps even dangerous. He suspected all women to have contacts with the devil and to have madness in their blood ready to appear at any moment.’

I intend to explain the evolution of the modal marker voire in French following an argumentative and pragmatic approach.¹

I will give a semantic description of the uses of voire and their evolution from Old French to Modern French. I will concentrate especially on voire in Middle French (14th to 16th centuries) and in Classical French (17th century). The main changes take place during these centuries.²

My corpus comes from two databases: first, the Base du Français Médiéval (BFM), developed by the Laboratoire d'Analyse de corpus linguistiques of the Ecole Normale Supérieure Lettres et Sciences Humaines in Lyon, under the supervision of Christiane Marchello-Nizia. The BFM is composed of 60 computerised medieval French texts from the 9th to the 15th centuries. The second database is Frantext, developed in Nancy (France) by the ATILF (Analyse et Traitement Informatique de la langue Française). Frantext is an important corpus of French texts available to subscribers through the Internet. It contains approximately 3,665 works from 1500 to the present time. My corpus includes 103 occurrences of voire in Old French, 117 in the Middle French of the 14th and 15th centuries, 292 in the 16th century, 268 in the 18th century and a large number for Modern French. The texts I have used include drama, as well as narrative and poetry.

There are practically no studies focused specifically on voire in French, excepting my paper, Rodríguez Somolinos (1995), which deals with Old and Modern French, but leaves aside entirely the use of voire in Middle French and Classical French. The different French dictionaries, including the TLF (Trésor de la Langue Française), simply repeat the same data and the same examples of voire that can be found in the dictionaries of the 16th and 17th centuries.

Voire has belonged, from the beginning, to the spoken language. It is a deictic marker that conveys the voice of a speaker. It generally appears in direct speech, or in a narrative text, where it shows the subjectivity of the narrator. Voire belongs to what Molinier (1990) calls modal adverbs. In its primary, assertive use the speaker uses it to express an opinion about the truth of an utterance. Voire always implies a previous discourse. It cannot open a direct speech or a monologue.

We must distinguish two different uses of voire in Old French: there is first turn-initial voire in dialogue, which marks an agreement with the interlocutor or a confir-
The evolution of the discourse marker *voire* in French

Voire can also appear inside a sentential structure. In both cases *voire* is strongly assertive and I will call it ‘*voire* 1’. As I have said above, *voire* is in Modern French an entirely different marker, close to English *even*. At the same time it has weakened. It marks a lesser degree of adhesion of the speaker to what he is saying. I will call it ‘*voire* 2’. I will analyse first the evolution of confirmative *voire* 1 in dialogue; I will then describe assertive intra-sentential *voire* 1 and its evolution from Old French to Middle French. I will finally describe the semantic evolution of *voire* from Classical French to Modern French that will lead to the appearance of a new marker, *voire* 2.

2. The evolution of confirmative *voire* 1 in dialogue: From certainty to doubt

In Old French *voire* 1 signals a confirmation in a dialogue:

(2) Lors li demandoit: Artus, que voiz tu? – Dame, il me semble que je voie tout le monde. – *Voire*, fet ele, tu le voiz, n’il n’ai a granment chose dont tu n’aies esté sires jusques ci . . . (*La mort le roi Artu* 176, 69; 1230)

‘Then she asked him: Arthur, what do you see? My lady, it seems to me that I see the whole world. – You’re right, she says, you do see it, and there is nothing much that has not been under your rule until now…’

*Voire* reacts here to a previous utterance produced by the interlocutor and marks an agreement and a confirmation of what has been said. The speaker, by using *voire*, reformulates the utterance and agrees with it. It is in this sense that we speak of an assertive modality: *voire* confirms what has been asserted by the interlocutor and reinforces its truth value. In Old French, *voire* always has a strong assertive value. *Voire* 1, the confirmation marker characteristic of Old French in dialogue, exists in Middle French:

(3) Pathelin

Guillemette! ung peu d’eau rose!
haussez moy, serrez moy derriere.
Trut! a qui parlé je? l’esguiere!
a boire! frotez moy la plante!
Le drappier
Je l’os la.
Guillemette

*Voire.*

(*La farce de Maistre Pathelin*, v. 610; 1468–73)

‘Pathelin: Guillemette! Give some cordial! Raise me. Hold the bolster tight behind me. With whom am I speaking? The ewer! Give me some water! Rub my soles! The clothier: I hear him talking. Guillemette: Yes, you do (/That’s right).’
The marker has here an assertive, confirmative function in a dialogue and establishes a link with a previous assertion.

*Voire* coexists in the texts with *oui, ouy*, but there is a difference between them. With *voire*, the confirmation is the product of a personal experience of a speaker who commits himself personally to the veracity of the assertion. The speaker presents himself as the source of the assertion act, and he guarantees its truth. *Oui* equally can mark a confirmation, but in this case the speaker merely gives his agreement without any personal commitment.

In Middle French, confirmative turn-initial *voire* can be followed by the connective *mais* introducing a concession:

(4) “*S i s e r o i t b o n d e l e f a i r e b o i r e.*” “*V o i r e , d i t l e r o y , *mais nous ne pourrions ainsi faire comme il nous a fait. Pleust a Dieu que vous y eussiez esté.”

( *Jehan de Paris*; end of the 15th c.)

“‘It would be interesting to make him drink.” – Yes, I agree with you, said the king, but we won’t be able to treat him as he has treated us. I wish you had been there.’

Here the marker is part of the concessive strategy. It marks the agreement of the speaker with the proposition which is conceded. It is followed by *mais*, introducing a stronger argument that will prevail. In the 16th century, *voire mais* will develop into an adverbial phrase in which the assertive value of *voire* has weakened. It is used to object to what the interlocutor has just said. It is used especially frequently to introduce a question:

(5) *Mais (dist panurge) si vous cognoissiez, que mon meilleur feust tel que je suys demeurer, sans entreprendre cas de nouvelleté, j’aymerois mieulx ne me marier point.*

– Poinct doncques ne vous mariez, respondit Pantagruel.

– *Voire mais* (dist Panurge) vouldriez vous qu’aïnscie seulet je demeureasse toute ma vie sans compaignie conjugale? (Rabelais. *Le Tiers Livre*, p. 438; 1552)

‘But if you happened to know that it’s best for me to stay as I am, without undertaking new things, I would prefer not to get married. – Don’t get married then, answered Pantagruel. – Voire mais (said Panurge) would you like me to remain alone for my whole life without any conjugal company?’

The position of the interpolated clause is important here. In *Jehan de Paris*, in the 15th century, it comes between *voire* and *mais*, whereas in Rabelais *voire mais* is a semantic unit, and the interpolated clause must follow it.

The speaker can use *voire* in an ironic way to express his doubts as to the truth of the interlocutor’s assertion. This can be seen in (6), which is a farce from the 15th century. A wife pesters her husband by asking for money, and he refuses to give her what she is asking for:
The evolution of the discourse marker *voie* in French

(6) La femme
Colin, en effect et substance
Si me fault-il ung chapperon.
Colin
Al *voie*, c’est don de faucon
Ou d’espervier, s’il vous duy mieulx.

(*Farces I, Colin qui loue et dépité Dieu* p. 131; end of the 15th c.)
‘The wife: Colin, in brief, I need a new hairstyle/hood. Colin: Oh, yes, like a falcon or a sparrowhawk, if you like.’

The speaker agrees ironically. Here *voie* is not used by Colin to accept his wife’s request. On the contrary, it is to refuse the request. It is an ironic utterance, and its literal meaning is not assumed by the speaker. It is presented as absurd, and the speaker does not identify with it. *Voire* here marks a disagreement between the interlocutors.

In Middle French, *voie* can introduce a question marking scepticism. This was possible in Old French, but it becomes more frequent from the 14th century onwards:

(7) Pathelin
Mais, au fort, ay je tant bretté
et parlé qu’il m’en a presté
six aulnes.
Guillemette
*Voire*, a jamais rendre? (*La farce de Maistre Pathelin* v. 435; 1468–1473)
‘Pathelin: But, in the end, I talked so much, that he has lent me nine alders of cloth. Guillemette: *Voire*, you won’t have to give it back?’

The question is used here to mark the scepticism of Guillemette, who cannot believe what Pathelin is saying.

Sometimes the assertive and confirmative function of *voie* in dialogue has completely weakened:

(8) Là commencierent-ilz à tournoier ensemble moult longuement. En ce tourniement,
Lors recommença la bataille et tout a cheval.

(*Jean Froissart. Chroniques (Livre troisième*) 163, 2; 1390–1392)
‘They began then to fight each other in a tournament for a long time. During the tournament, messire Jacques de Lindesee asked him in his language: “Who are you, sir?” He answered: “My name is Mahieu Rademen.” “*Voires*”, he said, “in that case, I will conquer you or you will conquer me.”’

The function of *voie* here is what is called by Martin and Wilmet (1980: 28) “une cheville”, a discursive link with a semantic content which is difficult to specify. This
voire cannot be translated into Modern French by Oui, en effet (Yes, that’s right), but by bon (English Well). There is no strong assertion or any confirmation. There is, however, an agreement with the interlocutor. The speaker declares that he accepts the content of the previous utterance. Following Hansen’s (1995) analysis of bon in French, voire is used first to reach a consensus and also to facilitate the continuity of the discourse. By using voire, the speaker can introduce an utterance which is distant at a thematic level from the previous context.

In its primary assertive, confirmative use, voire 1 is close to the category of interjections and is elliptical for a proposition. In this ‘interjective’ use, voire 1 is found turn-initially and is retroactive, it points backwards in the discourse. The speaker uses it essentially to react to a previous utterance by an interlocutor. The marker presents what we can call an ‘absolute’ use: it constitutes an utterance in itself. When the assertive and confirmative function of voire 1 weakens, as we have seen in (5), (7) and (8), the marker becomes a discursive link which cannot constitute an utterance in itself.

We have now seen the uses of voire in dialogue. As can be seen in the Table 1 below, out of the 103 occurrences that we have for Old French, the marker has a confirmative function in dialogue in 35 cases, and expresses doubt or scepticism in 4 other occurrences. The remaining 64 occurrences correspond to intra-sentential voire. We give separately the numbers for Jean de Meun’s Le Roman de la Rose, because intra-sentential voire is here uncommonly frequent, which would distort the total numbers. We have made the same distinction for The Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles in Table 2.

We can see that intra-sentential voire has approximately the same frequency until the 15th century. It is “interjective” voire that changes from Old to Middle French.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Voire in Old French (BFM corpus)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All texts except Jean de Meun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voire marking doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean de Meun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voire marking doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Le roman de la Rose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voire marking doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>62.13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Voire in 14th and 15th century French (BFM corpus)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All texts except CNN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voire marking doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Les Cent Nouvelles Nouvelles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voire marking doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>61.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The confirmative use becomes less frequent, while *voire* marking doubt increases its frequency from 3.88% to 16.23%.

Turn-initial confirmative *voire* in dialogue can still be found in the texts in the 17th century. However this use is not very common and it will disappear over the course of this century. As it can be seen in Tables 3 and 4 below, it amounts to 18.84% of the occurrences of *voire* in drama and novel in the 16th century and only 10.07% in the 17th century.

(9) Marot: Ce medecin, sortant et passant par Sainct-Severin, vit les prestres enterrant des morts par trois bandes, et, les saluant, il leur dit: "Dieu vous garde! Messieurs; vous faites bien vostre aoust". – "*Voire*, dirent-ils; ouy, monsieur, Dieu mercy! Et vous?"

(Bérolальде de Verville, *Le moyen de parvenir*, p. 369; 1610)

‘Marot: This physician, when going out and passing in front of Sainct-Severin, saw the priests burying some dead bodies three by three. He greeted them and said: “May God be with you! You’re making a fortune.” “Yes, we are”, they said, “thank god! What about you?”’

*Voire* 1 in dialogue marks doubt or the uncertainty of the speaker as to the truth of an assertion in 14.04% of occurrences in the 16th century and 12.69% in the 17th century.

(10) si ce poirier n’est peut-être charmé. *Voire* charmé! tu nous fais un beau conte!

(La Fontaine, *Contes*, II, 7, 171, quoted by Haase, p. 235; 17th c.)

‘Perhaps this pear tree is enchanted. – *Voire* enchanted! You’re such a fibber!’

The speaker repeats *charmé*, which has been said before by the interlocutor, using an exclamative utterance. The function of *voire* here is to mark the scepticism of the speaker with respect to the previous assertion. The exclamative utterance, introduced by *voire*, signals a disagreement and concerns the illocutionary act. *Voire* signals the speaker’s doubts as to the legitimacy of the interlocutor’s assertion. It could be paraphrased in this way: “You’re not right in saying so”.

Sometimes, *voire* marks not only doubt, but even a contradiction:

(11) Balaam: A propos de quoy (c’est-à-dire, de boire), en quel temps le vin est-il meilleur ou bon? Dites, messieurs.

– C’est, dit l’un, quand on a grand soif.

L’Autre. C’est en esté.

– *Voire*, dit frère Anselme, c’est en hyver au soir, quand on s’est bien rosti auprès du feu …

(Bérolальде de Verville, *Le moyen de parvenir*, p. 96; 1610)

‘Balaam: While on this subject (I mean, drinking), when is wine better? Tell me. It’s when you’re very thirsty, said one of them. The other one: It’s in summer. *Voire*, said brother Alselme, it’s in winter in the evening when you have warmed yourself near the fire…’
The speaker uses *voire* here to express doubt as to the assertion of his interlocutor, which he contradicts directly. The marker has lost all of the assertive and confirmative value it had at first.

### Table 3. *Voire* in 16th century French (Frantext corpus)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Confirmative</th>
<th>Voire marking doubt</th>
<th>Intra-sentential</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>18.84</td>
<td>14.04</td>
<td>67.12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4. *Voire* in 17th century French (Frantext corpus)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Confirmative</th>
<th>Voire marking doubt</th>
<th>Intra-sentential</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drama</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Novel</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>10.07</td>
<td>12.69</td>
<td>77.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the 17th century, *voire* can introduce what Borillo (1979:27) calls "une question-reprise", i.e. a question which is oriented towards an expected answer:

*Le locuteur se propose de faire confirmer ou de faire admettre son point de vue par la personne à qui il s’adresse. Sa stratégie est donc d’orienter celui-ci vers le choix de la valeur que lui-même croit vraie.*

'The speaker intends to have his point of view confirmed or admitted by the person he is addressing. His strategy is therefore to orient her towards the choice of the value that he himself believes to be true.'


(H. d’Urfé, *L’astrée*, t.4, p. 501; 1627)

'Florice recognised the writing at once, but she pretended to think it was from Clorian: What then? She told her, is this love story still going on? –What? answered Circéne, what love story are you talking about? – *Voire* doesn’t everybody know that Clorian loves you? – I think so, answered Circéne, and I’m sorry, I think everybody sees Clorian’s folly.'
The question marks a disagreement with the interlocutor, and, at the same time, it imposes, by using a negative question, an affirmative answer: “Everybody knows that Clorian loves you”. Here we are far from the strong assertive and confirmative value that the marker used to have in Old French.

3. Intra-sentential assertive voire 1 in Old and Middle French

In Old French, voire 1 appears also inside a sentential structure. As can be seen in the Tables above, our corpus presents 64 occurrences of this use in Old French. The marker makes a connection between two constituents of an utterance by the same speaker. This use of voire is originally very closely connected with confirmative voire 1 in dialogue, and the marker has a strong assertive value. The speaker confirms by using voire the preceding discursive segment, and, at the same time, the marker facilitates the continuity of the discourse. In the following passage a man complains of having lost his friend at the same time as his money:

(13) De riens donc vers moi ne mesprist
quant ses amis meïsmes prist,
siens voire, mes riens n’ en savoie,
car tant achetez les avoie
de queur et de cors et d’ avoir,
qui les cuidoie touz avoir …

(Jean de Meun, Le roman de la rose, v.3973; 1270–1280)
‘[Fortune] did not take anything wrongly from me when she took her own friends, her own, yes indeed, but I was not aware of that, because I had bought them so with my heart, my body and my money, that I thought they were mine…’

In Middle French, from the 14th to the 16th century, intra-sentential assertive voire is also extremely frequent: 72 occurrences in the 14th and the 15th centuries (61.53%) and 196 (67.12%) in the 16th century.

(14) Le quint cercle qui environne
L’ymage abat ceptre et couronne
Et met tout a destruction;
Cy ha dure conclusion,
Voire, a ceulz qui ne la desprisent,
Aïnçois l’aimeant, sievent et prismen,

(G. de Machaut, Le livre du voir dit, v. 8233; 1364)
‘The lover: The fifth circle which surrounds the image brings down the scepter and the crown and destroys everything. This is a painful conclusion, indeed, for those who do not despise [the goddess], but love, follow and value her.’
Voire is here a discursive link inside a sentential structure. On the one hand, it is retroactive, it takes the preceding segment “Cy a dure conclusion” into its scope. The speaker interrupts his discourse; he points backwards and reinforces his own assertion. We could paraphrase it as follows: “Yes, indeed, I am right in what I have just said”. At the same time, this intra-sentential voire must be followed by the rest of the utterance. It is then proactive, and it facilitates the continuity of the discourse.

Intra-sentential voire has a strong assertive value until the 16th and even the 17th century. The speaker commits himself entirely to what he is saying. This assertive value will disappear in the course of the 17th century, and intra-sentential voire will give way to voire 2, characteristic of Modern French. How could this change take place? Voire seems to have sometimes, starting in Old French, a rectifying function:

(15) Mes il n’avoit antancion
N’au cors, n’a la procession,
Qu’il volsist qu’il fussent tuit ars,
Si li eüst costé cent mars.

Cent mars? Voire, plus de cent mile. (Yvain, v. 1279; 1177–1181)
‘But he was not interested in the procession. He would have preferred all of them to be burned, even if it had cost him a hundred marks. A hundred marks? Indeed, more than a hundred thousand.’

(16) Nostre empereres fu moult preuz et nobile.
Charles li rois ot une guerre emprinse
Envers Gombaut le Loherainc par ire.
Bien a douze ans, voire bien prez de quinze,
Pais ne acorde ne trive n’en fu prinse. (Ami et Amile, v. 286; 1200)
‘Our emperor was most valiant and noble. Charles the king had waged war against Gombaut from Lorraine out of anger. There has been no peace agreement for the last twelve years, indeed for nearly the last fifteen years.’

Voire matches here what Moeschler (1982) defines as a rectification marker. It is a structure p voire p’ in a monologue in which two propositions having the same argumentative orientation are contrasted. In (15) the speaker corrects himself with a question: he first expresses his doubts about his assertion, “Si li eüst costé cent mars”, by using the question, which marks a metalinguistic negation. P and p’ are placed in the same gradual scale, p’ being a stronger argument for the same conclusion. Voire makes an emphatic assertion of p’, which replaces p. The following paraphrase could be given for (15): “I should not have said a hundred marks, but indeed three thousand instead”. In (16) the negation of p is not explicitly stated, but the semantic function of voire is the same.

This rectifying function of voire will become more and more frequent. Until the 16th century, though, intra-sentential voire will keep its strong assertive function:

(17) Et mesmes les oiseaulx sauvages qui sont nourriz par personnes qui leur sont estranges au commencement, puis que icelx oiseaulx ont prins nourri-
The evolution of the discourse marker *voire* in French

The rectification is based here on the emphatic assertion of p’ in a structure p *voire* p’. This is the reason why we translate it here by “indeed”. In the course of the 17th century this rectifying emphatic *voire* which dates back to Old French disappears. The marker acquires a new semantic function, close to Modern French *même* (English even). This phenomenon, which is difficult to trace, will result ultimately in *voire* 2, characteristic of Modern French.

4. *Voire* 2: From Classical to Modern French

As we have seen, the origins of *voire* 2, characteristic of Modern French, are to be found in the 17th century. The structure p *voire* p’, where p and p’ are arguments for the same conclusion, undergoes a semantic evolution in the 17th century. At first *voire* carries out a rectification based on the emphatic assertion of p’, which replaces p: it would give in English “p, indeed p’”. Later the marker will acquire a semantic function expressing insistence close to the Modern French *même* (English even). Following the analysis of *même* in Modern French given by Anscombe (1973), in a p *voire* p’ structure, the marker introduces two arguments aimed at the same conclusion. P’ is presented as a stronger argument than p for this same conclusion. In this case *voire* corresponds to English “p even p’”.

(18) Vous espouserez donc Celiodante? dit Rosileon avec un grand soupir.
– J’espouserois, dit-elle, non seulement Celiodante, mais un barbare, *voire* le moindre des hommes, si mon pere me le commandoit.

(H. d’Urfé, *L’astrée*, t.4, p. 614–615; 1627)

‘Will you marry Celiodante, then? said Rosileon with a sigh. – I would marry, she said, not only Celiodante, but a barbarian, indeed /even the least of men, if my father ordered me to.’

The degree of adhesion of the speaker to his assertion can be still very strong in a structure p *voire* p’ in the 17th century, as is the case with *même*, but not with *voire*, in Modern French. This is easily seen when the deictic and metalinguistic value of the marker is explicitly stated:
(19) Que si au contraire le mien surpasse toutes les choses plus hautes, c'est que ceste belle Diane luy en a fait un qu'il aime, qu'il honore, voire puis-je dire, qu'il adore. (H. d'Urfé, L'astréée, t.2, p. 102; 1610)

'If on the contrary my love is great above all things, it's because this beautiful Diane has given him a brother that he loves, that he honours, I can even say that he adores.'

In (19) the speaker assumes the entire responsibility for his assertion. The marker corresponds more to the Modern French même than voire. It must be translated by "je peux même dire" (I can even say). The speaker adds an additional argument, which is presented as stronger than the preceding one for the same conclusion. This argumentative movement is specified by "voire puis-je dire" (I can even say / Furthermore). It is also explicitly stated in (20) by "Je diray bien davantage":

(20) Et quoy qu'il me déplust beaucoup. Et plus encore à Circéne, si nous y contreignions-nous pour avoir subject de vivre privément, elle et moy, car la mere qui croyoit que je n' y feusse que pour Clorian, m'en donnoit toutes les commoditez que je voulois. Voire je diray bien d'avantage: je luy portois les lettres que Clorian luy escrivoit, et le plus souvent je faisois la response . . .

(H. d'Urfé, L'astréée, t.2, p. 131; 1610)

'And though I didn't like it, and Circéne even less, we nevertheless forced ourselves to do so to be able to carry on with our life, both of us, because her mother, who thought I was acting on behalf of Clorian, made things as easy for me as I wanted. Furthermore (literally: I will even say more): I brought her the letters Clorian wrote her, and very often I wrote the answer…'

Otherwise, the combination voire même is extremely frequent from the first half of the 17th century onwards, which is explained by the semantic closeness between both markers. In Modern French there is a difference, however, between voire 2 and même. By using même, the speaker assumes his assertion entirely, whereas with voire he establishes a distance. Sometimes, voire's function in classical French seems very close to the function it has in Modern French:

(21) Il luy respondit que son grand respect l'en avoir empesché. Scachez, amant, reprit Clarimond, que la fortune favorise les hardis, voire les temeraires. Mesprisez la resistance de vostre maistresse: les filles ne s'enfuyent de nous que pour estre suivies et pour estre atteintes.

(Ch. Sorel, Le berger extravagant, p. 167; 1627)

'You should know, lover, resumed Clarimond, that Fortune smiles on the daring ones, sometimes even on the rash ones.'
The evolution of the discourse marker *voire* in French

(22) partout de maisons à plusieurs estages, serrées et habitées de gentilhommes et marchands, mais surtout d’artisans de toute manufacture autant que ville de l’Europe, *voie peut estre* du monde…

(Anonymous, *Voyage d’Italie*, p. 47; 1606)
‘… by houses with several floors, occupied by gentlemen and tradesmen, but mainly by craftsmen of all kinds as many as in any town in Europe, perhaps, even in the whole world…’

It is difficult to know when the change takes place from the strongly assertive function of *voie*, which is common until the 17th century, to an insistence value, with the weak degree of adhesion by the speaker that it has in Modern French. This change may have begun in the course of the 17th century, but it is difficult to date it more accurately, as the degree of adhesion of the speaker is not usually marked linguistically.

What must be clear, is that at some point the degree of certainty of the speaker weakens and the structure *p voire p*’ meaning “*p even p*” becomes equivalent to “*p perhaps/ sometimes even p*”.

In the 17th century, the sociolinguistic level of *voie* changes, and it is used mainly in colloquial language. The *Dictionnaire universel* by Furetière, of 1690, says about *voie* “Terme populaire et ironique” (colloquial and ironic term). The *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française*, of 1694, says in the entry for *voie*: “adv. Oui, vraiment. Il est vieux en ce sens, & ne se dit plus que par ironie, & pour se moquer d’une chose qu’un autre dit. Il est bas” (adv. ‘Yes, really. It is dated with this meaning, and is only said ironically or to laugh at somebody else’s words. It is vulgar’). This same dictionary records in the 1762 edition: “adv. Vraiment. Il est vieux & on ne s’en sert plus que par plaisanterie ou par ironie, pour nier ce qu’un autre vient d’affirmer, pour s’en moquer” (adv. ‘Really. It is dated and is only used for fun or ironically, to deny what somebody else has just said, to make fun’).

Starting in the 17th century the marker is considered to be colloquial, ironic, and even burlesque. For this reason it falls into disuse, and it is practically nonexistent in the 18th century texts. I give below the absolute frequency of *voie* in the texts from the 16th century until today, according to the database Frantext. In the entire database, 3,665 works, there are a total of 4,129 occurrences of *voie* distributed in the following way:

16th century: 132 works, 941 oc.
17th century: 569 works, 1,164 oc.
18th century: 545 works, 9 oc.
19th century: 928 works, 177 oc.
20th century: 1,491 works, 1,838 oc.

We can see here that *voie* is surprisingly scarce in 18th-century texts – only 9 occurrences for the whole century – which shows that the marker has fallen into disuse. From the 19th century onwards, *voie* reappears in the texts, and then increases in frequency in the 20th century. But it is not the same *voie* as before.
Amalia Rodríguez Somolinos

In Modern French, voire 1, with an assertive function in dialogue, characteristic of Old French, has disappeared entirely. Nowadays it only expresses doubt, belongs to written language, and is quite unusual. Grevisse and Goosse (1986) give the following definition for the equivalent of voire 1 in Modern French: “Voire sert dans la langue littéraire de réponse ironique et dubitative, “peut-être”, “soit”, “j’en doute”, ou même “non”!” (In literary language, voire can be an ironic or doubtful answer, “perhaps”, “I doubt it”, “yes, but”, or even “no”):

(M. Genevoix, Raboliot, p. 130–135; 1925, quoted by Grevisse §1054)

‘In the mean time, the reptile remains blind, and displeased, as you can imagine. And it whistles in front of the nightingale: “I will kill your young birds in the egg! – I doubt it (/Don’t be so sure). I will make my nest so high, so low, that you will not find it.’

It is important to reiterate that in Modern French voire belongs to written literary language and is no longer used in colloquial spoken language.

In any case, in the 17th century, as we have seen, voire 1 gradually disappears and voire 2 appears in the texts. It is voire 2 that will prevail in the end in Modern French:

(24) En outre, parmi les militaires et les fonctionnaires qui restaient en activité, Vichy avait rapatrié, voire arrêté, nombre de “gaullistes”.
(Ch. De Gaulle, Mémoires de guerre: l’appel, Plon, p. 149; 1954)

‘Furthermore, among the military and the civil servants that remained active, Vichy had repatriated, sometimes even arrested, a great number of “gaullistes”’

(E. Orsenna, Grand amour, Seuil, p. 277; 1993)

‘Africa in the health spa . . . The inhabitants of Vittel couldn’t believe it. Usually September is such a quiet month, you could even say (/sometimes even) really dull. And now, all those whistles, motorcycle policemen, walkie-talkies, all those Renault 25 cars at full speed . . .’

According to the classification of particles given by Hansen (1998:37–63), we will consider voire 2 to be a focus particle. It is found inside a turn and is linked to a specific constituent of the sentence, which it takes into its scope. This ‘focus’ necessarily follows voire, which is proactive. Voire 2 establishes a contrast between two constituents of a sentence which function as arguments for the same conclusion. The speaker presents the second argument as stronger than the first one for the same conclusion, but at the same time he does not assume full responsibility for his assertion.
5. Conclusion

We have seen that in the 17th century, voire changes its sociolinguistic level and becomes part of the colloquial language. This possibly explains the almost complete disappearance of the marker in 18th century texts. In the 19th and 20th centuries, voire becomes more and more frequent, but it is not the same marker as before. Assertive voire 1 in dialogue and voire 1 interpolated inside a sentential structure have disappeared. It is almost always voire 2 or voire 2 même derived from intra-sentential voire 1. It marks insistence and is close to the Modern French même, with a weaker degree of adhesion of the speaker. The sociolinguistic register is not the same either. Voire now belongs to the written language. It is especially frequent in literary texts and in the journalistic discourse, but is no longer found in the spoken language, as was the case before.

We have seen that voire has undergone a significant change in French. In Old French, confirmative Voire 1 in dialogue belongs to the category of interjections. It is found turn-initially and is retroactive: it reacts to an utterance by an interlocutor. The marker constitutes an utterance in itself and belongs to the same category as oui, non. Voire 2 is characteristic of Modern French, and derives from intra-sentential assertive voire 1 in Old and Middle French. Voire 2 can be best classified as a focus particle. It is found inside a sentential structure and is proactive. In a sentence it is linked to a constituent which is its 'focus'. In both cases, there has been a weakening of the assertive value. In one case, confirmation has been replaced by doubt, and in the other, the degree of adhesion by the speaker to his utterance has diminished. As Berrendoner (1987:296) points out: “Plus une assertion se dit forte, plus elle est suspecte de faiblesse” (‘The stronger an assertion presents itself, the more it is suspected of weakness’). The reinforcement of an assertion leads very frequently to a semantic or deictic weakening process. In the case of voire, the weakening of its primary assertive value has resulted in an entirely different marker.

Notes

* Research for this article was supported by a grant from the Ministry of Science and Education in Spain (Research Project HUM2004-00321/FILO).

1. The term argumentative refers here to the “Théorie de l’argumentation dans la langue”, developed in France by Oswald Ducrot together with several collaborators during the last thirty years. It is a non referential pragmatic theory which opposes the traditional conception of meaning according to which language is a description of the real world. For Oswald Ducrot, ordinary language is essentially argumentative – an utterance is meant to direct the interlocutor towards a certain conclusion. Language is primarily a polemic instrument which is used in the interaction between individuals. Ducrot studies the chaining of utterances within the discourse and the argumentative conclusions which they aim at. Ducrot’s theory has focused on the semantic description of connectives such as mais, même, expressions like peu and un peu, and more recently pourtant.
2. The linguistic history of French is well documented (cf. Marchello-Nizia 2003). The language has undergone great changes since the 9th century, the date of the first vernacular texts. The earliest texts, from the Oaths of Strasbourg in 842 to Joinville’s The Life of Saint Louis at the end of the 13th century, are classified as Old French. A break at the end of the 13th and beginning of the 14th centuries gives rise to Middle French (14th–16th c.). Within Middle French the transitional language of the 14th and 15th centuries, presenting already a number of traits characteristic of Modern French, is distinguished from Renaissance French, written amidst the lexical renovation of the 16th century, and the rise of dictionaries and grammars. 17th century French is usually termed Classical French, and, from the 18th century onwards, we can speak of Modern French.

Sources


References

The evolution of the discourse marker voire in French

Trésor de la Langue Française Informatisé (= TLFI). Available online at http://atilf.atilf.fr/tlf.htm