

Cher Livre Inter : exploring a large corpus of contemporary readers' testimonies through a qualitative research approach

The presentation is based on an ongoing PhD project about applicants to the people's jury of the Prix du Livre Inter, organized by French public radio chain France Inter since 1975. This prize is of considerable interest for the history of reading practices because of its longevity and the fact that the application letters have all been preserved. Candidates introduce themselves, discuss their reading memories and describe their motivations for applying to the jury.

Building on 3,000 application letters received during the years 2010 and 2011, our study promotes an innovative framework of research - from data collection to in-depth content exploration - for the analysis of this complex and so far unexplored corpus.

The paper will show how digitization, statistics, textual content analysis and natural language processing techniques were brought in to describe a group of French ordinary readers, as well as their reading memories and practices. More precisely, our approach provides valuable information about the readers' identity, the features of a specific community of readers who are also radio listeners, the memories and emotions caused by reading, as well as the typical or specific ways in which these readers express themselves.

The presentation will focus on two major preliminary results. Firstly, a statistical analysis that sheds light on the main features of this relatively heterogeneous group : gender, geographical, occupational and age distribution data show an educated and mostly female readership, on average around fifty years old and located all over metropolitan France, with a predominance of candidates living in Paris.

Secondly, a textual analysis leading to exploring the intimate relationship of ordinary people with reading. Such information has so far proven elusive, due to its inherently subjective nature as well as the scarcity of suitable sources. Combining distant and close reading helps identifying patterns and lexical features disseminated across this rich material. We observed that the readers' discourse revolves around the intersections between the reading activity and their life. This common thread is expressed through several recurring patterns. Notably, candidates evaluate the narrative style and content through the lens of their feelings and personal experiences and associate their reading practices with personal goals (escaping, learning and improving). In addition, they often draw their "self-portraits" as readers and report multisensorial interactions with the reading supports and the reading environment.