

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# How do ‘rumours’ and reportative evidentiality match? A comparative study of the French conditional, Dutch *zou* + INF, and German *sollen* + INF

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## Abstract

In this paper, I will compare three reportative constructions: the French reportative conditional, Dutch *zou* + INF, and German *sollen* + INF. Although these markers share the reportative function as one of their established meanings, they clearly differ in how this reportative meaning actually functions. One of the most important differences pertains to the fact that the French conditional (and to a lesser extent Dutch *zou* + INF) often combines reportative meaning with epistemic denial, i.e. the speaker distances him- or herself from the content of what he or she reports. German reportative *sollen* also allows for such distancing interpretations but to a much smaller extent. Specifically for this paper, I will look at the behaviour of the three markers in the immediate context of the noun ‘rumours’ (French *rumours*, Dutch *geruchten*, and German *Gerüchte*), a context which – at least in theory – is strongly compatible with reportative marking, on the one hand, and with epistemic denial, on the other. On the basis of a self-compiled corpus of recent newspaper language, I will show that the French conditional occurs with a relatively high frequency in this specific context, especially in contrast to German *sollen*, and that the conditional often combines reportative semantics with epistemic denial, which again especially contrasts with German *sollen* + INF. Dutch *zou* + INF takes up an intermediate position in both respects.

## 1. Introduction

French, German, and Dutch feature verbal reportative markers, i.e. evidential markers that express that the speaker has obtained the information from another information source (another speaker, rumours, folk tales, or any written document). In French, the conditional, which is inflectionally marked, functions as a reportative (see example (1a)), Dutch has an auxiliary construction, which consists of *zou* – an originally past tense form of the modal/future auxiliary *zullen* ‘shall’ – combined with an infinitive (1b), whereas German uses a

present indicative form of the modal auxiliary verb *sollen* ‘shall, should’ (in the remainder of this paper: *soll*<sub>IND</sub>) with an infinitive in this function (1c).

### French

- (1) (a) tu sais pas la nouvelle? Vincent **vendrait**  
 2SG.NOM know.PRS2SG NEG ART.DEF.SG.F news Vincent sell.COND3SG  
 tout-e-s ses vigne-s  
 all-F-PL his.PL vine-PL  
 ‘Guess what! Vincent is allegedly selling all his vines.’  
 (conversation, 2016, example from Bres 2018)

### Dutch

- (b) De Bonvoisin **zou** neo-facistisch-e organisatie-s financieel  
 De Bonvoison REP.SG neo-fascist-PL organisation-PL financially  
 hebb-en gesteun-d.  
 have-INF support-PTCP.PST  
 ‘De Bonvoisin allegedly supported neo-fascist organisations financially.’  
 (*De Standaard*, 11 February 1996)

### German

- (c) Der [...] 65-Jährige [...] **soll** sein-e Bezüg-e bei  
 ART.DEF.NOM.SG.M 65-year.old REP3SG his-ACC.PL earning-PL at  
 dem Unternehmen jahrelang zu niedrig angegeben und  
 ART.DEF.DAT.SG.N company for.years too low report.PTCP.PST and  
 Firmengeld-er veruntreu-t hab-en.  
 company.fund-PL embezzle-PTCP.PST have-INF  
 ‘The now 65-year-old has allegedly underreported his earnings at the company  
 for years and embezzled company funds.’  
 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 2 January 2020, p. 15)

In the abundant literature on reportative evidentiality, this category is often linked to epistemic overtones of doubt and denial. The notion of ‘reportative exceptionality’ (coined by AnderBois 2014) refers to the fact that of all the evidential markers, it is only the reportative ones that may associate with epistemic denial.

In summary, we find that cross-linguistically it is (at least) nearly universal that an evidential-marked claim can be felicitously denied by the same speaker only if its evidence type is reportative. (AnderBois 2014: 240)

AnderBois (2014: 238) illustrates the concept of reportative exceptionality by a number of examples, the following (2) from Estonian being one of them:

## Estonian

- (2) Ta küll ole-vat aus mees aga ta ei ole üldse aus  
 he surely be-REP honest man but he NEG be at.all honest  
 ‘It’s certainly been said that he is an honest man, but he’s not honest at all.’

Interestingly, it has also been shown in the literature that reportative markers may differ with respect to their actual propensity towards distancing (i.e. doubt and denial) interpretations (Wiemer & Socka 2017, Wiemer 2018). For the three markers addressed in this paper, Mortelmans (2024) has suggested that they differ with respect to the frequency with which they actually evoke a distancing interpretation: the French reportative conditional is most often used in contexts in which the speaker doubts or even explicitly denies the content of what is reported, whereas German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF is hardly used in such contexts. Dutch reportative *zou* + INF takes up an intermediate position. The present study aims to explore this issue in greater depth: if there are indeed frequency differences with respect to distancing interpretations of these three reportative markers, then it can be hypothesised that the three markers show up a different distribution in the context of the noun ‘rumours’ as well. Rumours are typically unconfirmed and often untrustworthy pieces of second-hand information and can therefore be expected to be compatible with reportative marking, on the one hand, and epistemic distancing, on the other. The following ‘classic’ definitions of the noun ‘rumour’ demonstrate both aspects:

an unofficial interesting story or piece of news that might be true or invented, and quickly spreads from person to person (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rumour>)

unsubstantiated, often false stories that spread through a community person to person by word of mouth in a manner rather similar to the spread of communicable diseases. Rumor can affect the behavior of crowds for good or ill—unfortunately often for ill, e.g., by provoking riots. (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100433179>)

An additional question that this paper will address, is whether the notion of ‘rumours’ itself might be conceptualised differently in French, Dutch, and German, such that in one language, different aspects connected to rumours might be foregrounded more strongly than in another.

The article is structured as follows. In Section 2, I will present an overview of the semantics of the three markers in present-day French, Dutch, and German, which will reveal, among other things, the strong semantic affinity between the French conditional and the Dutch *zou* + INF construction. In Section 3, I will first go into the notion of reportative evidentiality and describe its link with modal notions like commitment and epistemic denial. I will then zoom in on the reportative use of the three markers, as it has been described in the relevant literature. In Section 4, I will address the corpus selection and its annotation; a number of relevant examples will be discussed as well. Section 5 then builds the core of the present article. The results of the corpus analysis will be presented, whereby three aspects will be in focus: the frequency of the use of the respective reportative markers in the

subclause after *Gerüchte*, *dass*, *geruchten dat*, and *rumeurs selon lesquelles* ‘rumours that’; the wider context in which the noun ‘rumours’<sup>1</sup> appears (e.g. the main verb it patterns with); and the possible association between the use of a specific reportative marker and an explicit distancing interpretation. Finally, in Section 6, I will summarise and try to account for the main findings.

## 2. The semantics of the French conditional, Dutch *zou* + INF, and German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF

The French conditional (see Dendale & Tasmowski (eds.) 2001; Dendale 2001, 2018; Bres, Azzopardi & Sarrazin 2012; Patard 2017; Bres 2018; Van De Weerd 2021) and the Dutch auxiliary construction *zou* + infinitive (see Harmes 2017; Mortelmans 2022) are remarkably alike from a semantic point of view, despite the fact that they have developed independently from one another and belong to different morphosyntactic categories. The conditional is inflectionally marked (by means of the suffix /*æ*/ for the singular and third-person plural paradigm, the first- and second-person plural endings are *-rions* and *-riez*)<sup>2</sup>, whereas *zou* + INF is a temporal/modal auxiliary construction. For both constructions, four main meanings can be discerned in present-day French and Dutch, respectively, which are highly similar.

First, both the conditional and *zou* + INF occur in hypothetical contexts, often in conditional sentences, in which they express that the described event is hypothetical or counterfactual (Dendale 2001; Harmes 2017: 152; Patard 2017; Bres 2018: 12).<sup>3</sup>

### French

- (3) (a) Paris ne **serait** pas un capharnaüm [...] si les  
 Paris NEG be.COND3SG NEG ART.INDF.SG.M chaos if ART.DEF.PL  
 voiture-s n’ y étaient pas si nombreux-e-s.  
 car-PL NEG there be.PST3PL NEG so numerous-F-PL  
 ‘Paris would not be a chaotic mess if there were not so many cars.’  
 (Evènement du jeudi 545, 1995, p. 65, from Haillet 1998: 67)

### Dutch

- (b) Als ik geld **zou** hebb-en, **zou** ik op reis gaan.  
 if 1SG.NOM money IRR.SG have-INF IRR.SG 1SG.NOM on journey go.INF  
 ‘If I had the money, I would travel.’  
 (example from the Dutch reference grammar ANS, <https://e-ans.ivdnt.org/topics/pid/ans2803030202lingtopic>)

Second, both constructions function as tense markers to express ulteriority in the past, often in contexts of indirect speech like (4a, b). In (4a), it is the prior speech event (*a dit* ‘has said’), which is the reference point from which the future action is projected. Note that what was

<sup>1</sup> For this study, the plural noun is preferred over the singular one (*gerucht*, *Gerücht*, *rumeur*), as corpus data indicate that the plural noun is more frequent in combination with *dat*, *dass*, and *selon*.

<sup>2</sup> The conditional originated in the combination of the infinitive with the imperfect of *habere* ‘have’ in late Latin.

<sup>3</sup> Whereas in French, the conditional does not normally occur in a conditional’s protasis but only in its apodosis, there is no such restriction for Dutch *zou* in conditional sentences.

promised eventually did not take place ('and he forgot me'). In the Dutch example (4b), the conversation between the young woman and the beggar took place in the past (*fluisterde de jonge vrouw de bedelaar toe* 'the young women whispered to the beggar'), but what the young woman said pertains to a future moment with respect to the past reference point. Note again that the projected state of affairs does not take place – the context makes it clear that the child was not picked up by the mother.<sup>4</sup>

### French

- (4) a. Enfin, le M..P.. [...] a di-t qu' il  
 finally ART.DEF.SG.M M.P. have.PRS3SG say-PTCP.PST COMP 3SG.NOM.M  
**repasser-ait** me cherch-er le lendemain et  
 come.back-COND3SG 1SG.ACC look.for-INF ART.DEF.SG.M next.day and  
 il m' a oubli-é bien sûr.  
 3SG.NOM.M 1SG.ACC have.PRS3SG forget-PTCP.PST.M of.course  
 'Finally, the M.P. said he would come back for me the next day and he forgot me,  
 of course.'  
 (Jean Duvinéaud, *L'Or de La République*, 1957, p. 308, example from Azzopardi  
 2011)

### Dutch

- b. [...] fluister-de de [...] vrouw de bedelaar toe dat  
 whisper-PST.SG ART.DEF.SG.C woman ART.DEF.SG.C beggar to COMP  
 ze dringend een boodschap moest doen en het  
 3SG.NOM.F urgently ART.INDF errand must.PST.SG do.INF and ART.DEF.SG.N  
 kindje daarna **zou** kom-en ophal-en. Toen de  
 child afterwards PST.FUT.SG come-INF fetch-INF when ART.DEF.SG.C  
 jong-e moeder niet meer opdook, [...]  
 young-SG.C mother NEG anymore turn.up-PST.SG  
 'the woman whispered to the beggar that she urgently needed to run an errand and  
 would come and collect the baby afterwards. When the young mother did not appear  
 again, [...].'  
 (*De Standaard*, 2 November 1996))

<sup>4</sup> Both the conditional and *zou* + INF also feature so-called 'objective' future-in-the-past uses (see Bres 2010b, 2012), which differ from the uses exemplified in (4a, b) in that the projected process actually took place. Bres (2012) argues that such an 'objective' use arose through a process of grammaticalization from the earlier subjective one.

- (i) Pendant ce temps-là, Yoann est allé dans mon espace personnel et m'a emprunté [...] un globe terrestre avec lesquels je commençais à construire ce qui **serait** mon spectacle Cirque:  
 'Meanwhile, Yoann went into my personal space and borrowed a globe with which I was starting to build what would be my Cirque show.'  
 (*Le Monde*, 30 April 2021)
- (ii) Zijn grote successen kende hij tussen 1936 en 1945 [...]. Na de Tweede Wereldoorlog **zou** hij dit niveau nooit meer evenaren.  
 'His great successes were between 1936 and 1945. After World War II, he would never again equal this level.'  
 (*De Standaard*, 2 November 1996)

Third, both the conditional and *zou* + INF can be used to soften the illocutionary force of an utterance, as in (5a, b). For authors like Patard (2017), this use does not count as a separate meaning of the conditional but is merely a ‘meaning effect’ (‘effet de sens’) of the hypothetical one, which is tied to particular verbs – often modal ones – in present-day French. For Dutch, we observe that this mitigating use often combines with modal verbs (like *moeten* ‘must’ in (5b)) as well.

#### French

- (5) (a) Je            **voudrais**            rencontr-er le            président.  
           1SG.NOM want.COND1SG meet-INF    ART.DEF.SG.M president  
           ‘I would like to meet the president.’ (example from Patard 2017: 106)

#### Dutch

- (b) Dat **zou**            je            ‘ns    aan iemand    moet-en    vraag-en.  
           that should.SG 2SG.NOM once to    someone must-INF ask-INF  
           ‘You should ask someone about that.’ (example from Harmes 2017: 153)

Finally, both markers occur with evidential meaning, of which the reportative is the most prominent<sup>5</sup> one (reportative examples have been given above, see examples (1a, b)).

The first two meanings – hypotheticality and anteriority in the past – can be viewed as central or core meanings in both languages: they are already present in Old French occurrences of the conditional (see Patard & De Mulder 2012) and Old Dutch occurrences of *zou* (Harmes 2017: 156) and they still occur with considerable frequency in present-day French (see Mortelmans 2024). The reportative meaning, however, is a more recent one – Van de Weerd (2021: 234) finds the first occurrence of the conditional’s reportative use in 1507; in Harmes’s corpus material, the reportative reading of *zou* only pops up in Early New Dutch, although Harmes notes that Dutch historical dictionaries ‘attest evidential meanings for all the language stages’ (Harmes 2017: 158). The reportative reading of both markers is considerably less frequent in present-day French and Dutch than the hypothetical and anteriority-in-the-past uses of the constructions (see Mortelmans 2024: 703): in a newspaper language corpus, reportative uses account for 21.5% (French) and 18.5% (Dutch) of all uses of the respective constructions.

Turning to German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF, we find that the present indicative form of *sollen* ‘shall, should’ – the one denoting reportative evidentiality<sup>6</sup> – mainly functions as a modal verb expressing (some kind of) deontic modality (see e.g. Diewald 1999, Baumann 2017).

<sup>5</sup> In the literature on the conditional, a conjectural or inferential evidential meaning is also mentioned (see e.g. Van de Weerd 2021: 34–38, Bres 2022). It typically occurs in questions in which the speaker infers that a particular situation holds:

(iii) Il n’est pas venu: **serait-il** malade?

‘He didn’t come: could he be ill?’ (from Van de Weerd 2021: 32)

<sup>6</sup> Only the present indicative form of *sollen* can express reportative meaning (see e.g. Diewald 1999). The past subjunctive form *sollte* is mainly used in suggestions or recommendations and is therefore strongly associated with deontic modality.

A typical feature of deontic *sollen* is the fact that it evokes an external source of obligation, i.e. it is a third instance (generally neither speaker nor subject) that obliges the subject to act (cf. Baumann 2017: 136: ‘eine Notwendigkeit mit einer dritten Person als modaler Quelle’ [‘a necessity with a third person as modal source’, my translation]). A representative example is presented in (6), in which it is the main clause subject of *sagte* ‘said’ (*er* ‘he’), which functions as the modal source of the directive, as he demands to be stabbed.

#### German

- (6) Er stand auch schon öfter mit ein-em Messer  
 3SG.NOM.M stand.PST3SG also already often with ART.INDF-DAT.SG.N knife  
 vor mir und sag-te, ich soll zustech-en.  
 in.front.of 1SG.DAT and say-PST.SG 1SG.NOM shall.IND.PRS.SG stab-INF  
 ‘He has also stood in front of me several times with a knife and told me to stab.’  
 (<https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/misshandelte-frau-als-zeugin-vor-gericht-ich-kriege-keine-luft-mehr-a-499c77bd-b0e7-4e1b-ae90-1e927217ec95>)

In actual present-day use, and especially in journalistic prose, *soll*<sub>IND</sub> is mostly used not so much to refer to a strong obligation but rather to denote a third person’s intentions, goals, or plans (cf. Baumann 2017: 140), as in (7). As such, deontic *soll*<sub>IND</sub> has a clear future-time orientation.

#### German

- (7) Der [...] Ministerpräsident Habib Jemli nominier-te am  
 ART.DEF.NOM.SG.M prime.minister Habib Jemli nominate-PST.SG on.the  
 Donnerstag vier Ministerin-nen [...]. Der Schauspieler Fethi  
 Thursday four female.minister-PL ART.DEF.NOM.SG.M actor Fethi  
 Haddaoui soll das Kulturressort übernehm-en.  
 Haddaoui shall.IND.PRS.SG ART.DEF.ACC.SG.N ministry.of.culture take.over-INF  
 ‘Prime Minister Habib Jemli nominated four female ministers on Thursday. The actor Fethi Haddaoui is to take over the ministry of culture.’  
 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 January 2020, p. 7)

In contrast to the French conditional and Dutch *zou* + INF, one could argue that *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF has a rather low affinity to modal contexts of hypotheticality or counterfactuality. It typically predicates over actions and situations that are to or should be realised.

The reportative meaning of *soll*<sub>IND</sub> is said to have developed in Middle High German (Diewald 1999, Zeman 2013) but qualifies as ‘stabil dokumentiert’ (Gloning 2001: 187) only from 1700 onwards. In present-day German, the reportative use is clearly less dominant than the non-reportative, deontic one; in a corpus of recent newspaper language from Germany, the reportative reading accounts for about 18.5% of all instances of *soll*<sub>IND</sub> (see Mortelmans 2024: 703) – which is remarkably similar to the relative proportion of reportative uses of the reportative conditional and *zou* + INF (see above). In the following subsection, we will zoom in on these reportative uses and try to provide a first comparison. Before we do this, however, a short introduction into reportative evidentiality and its link with particular epistemic overtones seems warranted.

### 3. Reportative evidentiality and the reportative uses of the French conditional, Dutch *zou* + INF, and German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF

#### 3.1. Reportative evidentiality, epistemic commitment, and epistemic distancing

I take reportative<sup>7</sup> evidentiality to signal that the speaker is reporting information that they did not witness firsthand but via hearsay. Reportative evidentials, just like other evidentials, primarily aim at providing epistemic justification for a piece of information (i.e. a proposition), in the sense of Boye 2012 (see also Wiemer 2018). Like epistemic modality, the notional category of evidentiality is related to the speaker's knowledge and belief state; hence, evidential markers can be defined as deictic, i.e. speaker-oriented markers. Importantly, despite referring to hearsay, reportative markers do not necessarily evoke a concrete previous speech act, nor do they obligatorily refer to a concrete or well-defined speaker.

Report[at]ives use the reference to the existence of a source only as a means to an end, namely the justification of a proposition, therefore they will often omit overt reference to this source. [...] They are different from other (indirect) evidentials in being the only ones that evoke an entirely separate consciousness as source of information. (Vanderbiesen 2015: 25)

In the literature, a finer distinction is often made within the broader category of reportatives or hearsay markers between 'reported' and 'quotative' markers (see Aikhenvald 2004: 177; Aikhenvald 2018: 12): The former refer to cases in which the speaker obtained their information from an unspecified source, whereas the term 'quotative' is reserved for hearsay with an explicit source. In this paper, I will use the broader term 'reportative', in view of the fact that the relevant markers differ with respect to their preference to express reported and/or quotative meanings.

Highly debated in the literature on evidentiality is the issue of speaker commitment (for a good overview, see e.g. Cornillie 2018). For reportative evidentials, it has often been remarked that they do not express any commitment of the reporting speaker to the truth of what they are reporting (Mélac 2014: 56–59, Cornillie 2018). In this regard, the French conditional has been analysed as a non-commitment marker (Abouda 2001, Coltier et al. 2009) and so has reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF in German (Faller 2012: 300). Of course, if a particular marker does not signal any speaker commitment to the proposition, it is also compatible with a reading in which the speaker distances him- or herself from the content he or she acquired through second-hand information. Since such denial readings are more or less typical of reportative evidentials (but do not or hardly occur with inferentials, for instance), they are coined under the term 'reportative exceptionality' (AnderBois 2014). Following Wiemer (2018) in his in-depth study on the relationship between epistemic modality and evidentiality, such epistemic extensions or overtones – i.e. the explicit signalling of doubt or non-belief – often arise with reportative evidentials, but they can also be suppressed, such that the reportative marker simply signals non-commitment ('the actual speaker can remain agnostic with regard to their own epistemic attitude', Wiemer 2018: 92). As they can be easily cancelled or suppressed, Wiemer considers epistemic overtones with reportative evidentials (i.e. distancing interpretations) in terms of Generalised Conversational

<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I will use the term 'reportative' as a synonym of the indirect evidential category 'hearsay' (see also Mélac & Leclercq 2024: 5).



Implicatures. At the same time, however, cases can be found in which the reportative marker does not easily lose its epistemic overtones (in the case of the Russian reportative marker *jakoby*, for instance, which keeps ‘its strong connotation of doubt’, Wiemer 2018: 103; see also De la Mora & Maldonado 2015 on Mexican Spanish *dizque*), i.e. reportative markers may differ with regard to the extent to which they actually evoke distancing interpretations (see in this respect, see also Wiemer & Socka 2017). This issue has been addressed by Mortelmans (2024) for the French reportative conditional, Dutch *zou* + INF, and German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF, whereby it was suggested that in journalistic discourse, the French reportative conditional is indeed more prone to expressing epistemic distancing than its Dutch and German counterparts. The present study aims to build on this earlier finding in that it addresses the use of the three markers in a reportative-dubitative context (rumours); note that Mortelmans (2024) studied these markers in general<sup>8</sup> and not in a specific context that potentially favours reportative readings. In the following Section 3.2, we will take a closer look at the literature on the reportative use of the French conditional, reportative *zou* + INF, and reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF, before embarking on the actual analysis of the three reportative markers in the context of rumours.

### 3.2 Reportative uses of the French conditional, Dutch *zou* + INF, and German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF

#### 3.2.1. The French conditional

A long-standing controversy in the literature on the reportative use of the French conditional (see Van de Weerd 2021: 46–51 for an overview) pertains to the fact whether it is first and foremost an evidential marker (a position defended by Dendale 2001, 2018); a modal-epistemic marker, signalling a lack of commitment with respect to the proposition (see e.g. Abouda 2001) or denoting the uncertainty of the information (see e.g. Merle 2004); or a combination of both, such that the conditional is said to signal both non-commitment – as a modal meaning – and second-hand information – as an evidential meaning (Kronning 2002, 2012). Scholars like Dendale and Kronning seem to agree on the basic evidential nature of the reportative conditional, whereby the marking of ‘second-hand information’ is a definitional part of its semantics. A similar position is found in the publications of Patard (2017) and Bres (2022), among others. Patard (2017), for instance, views the conditional in terms of a network of three different generic constructions: a hypothetical conditional construction, an anteriority-in-the-past conditional construction, and an evidential conditional construction, which is characterised as ‘un authentique marqueur évidentiel exprimant l’information empruntée’ (‘a genuine evidential marker expressing second-hand information’ [my translation], Patard 2017: 119). Similarly, in an interesting comparison of the evidential functions of the conditional and the modal verb *devoir* in French, Bres (2022) also assumes that the conditional is mainly an evidential marker.

<sup>8</sup> Given that reportative readings generally occur in about 20% of all uses of the markers in question, the absolute number of reportative instances studied in Mortelmans (2024) remained rather low (< 50 for each language). The focus on the ‘rumours’-context in this paper specifically aims at increasing the number of relevant (reportative) tokens.

A notable exception to this theoretical position – which can be regarded as more or less dominant in French scholarship – is provided by Celle (2020). Celle (2020) questions the evidential nature of the ‘reportative’ conditional and argues that the marking of second-hand information is not a necessary component of this use. Rather, Celle considers the conditional to be a marker of epistemic distancing in that it encodes ‘the non-factual status of an utterance’ in cases in which the speaker has only access to unreliable or unexpected information with respect to the proposition (Celle 2020: 84). Celle does not deny the fact that the conditional is often interpreted reportatively (especially in journalistic discourse) but tries to give a unified account of all its evidential uses (remember that the conditional also has inferential meaning, mainly in questions), which are regarded as ‘evidential extensions’ of a basic epistemic category that expresses epistemic possibility (Celle 2020: 86). For the use of the conditional in reportative contexts, Celle argues that it is used by the speaker ‘to disclaim responsibility’ (Celle 2020: 98). In earlier publications (Celle 2006, 2007, 2009), Celle also stressed the distancing function of the ‘reportative’ conditional: in her view, the conditional not only introduces a different point of view (i.e. the reported speaker) but also questions the trustworthiness of this alternative point of view and thus casts doubt on the proposition (Celle 2009: 284). Similar remarks regarding supposedly inherent distancing features of the French conditional are found in Merle (2004) and Haillet (1998), among others.

Le conditionnel journalistique est conditionnel de reprise : il s’emploie pour reprendre des propos tout en manifestant **une prise de distance** à l’égard de ces propos, le critère **non vérifiable / non vérifié étant toujours pertinent**. [‘The journalistic conditional is a conditional of recapitulation: it is used to recapitulate statements while expressing a **certain degree of distance** from these statements, with the criterion of **non-verifiability/non-verified always remaining relevant**’, my translation and emphasis] (Merle 2004: 248)

To summarise, there is a remarkably strong attention for distancing uses of the French reportative conditional in French scholarship on this topic. The long-standing controversy regarding its status as a mainly modal or a mainly evidential marker bears witness to this. In fact, the findings in Mortelmans (2024) also suggest that the French reportative conditional indeed occurs with a distancing interpretation more often than its Dutch and (especially) its German counterparts (although neutral readings are the most frequent ones with all three reportative markers). To account for this difference, Mortelmans stresses the multi-perspectivity<sup>9</sup> associated with the French conditional: it often combines with direct speech fragments, on the one hand, and frequently occurs in embedded complement contexts, on the other – both of which typically bring another speaker’s perspective into the linguistic scene.<sup>10</sup> Consider in this respect the following example (8), in which multiple perspectives are present – apart from the writer’s: the author (*l’auteur*), who claims that the commission of inquiry (*la commission d’enquête*; another perspective) refutes someone else’s thesis

<sup>9</sup> This is in line with the analysis presented by AnderBois, according to whom it is the ‘salience of another perspectival agent’ (AnderBois 2014: 242), which allows for denial interpretations. Such interpretations occur in “perspectively-rich” contexts’ (AnderBois 2014: 242) and it could be claimed that the French conditional – especially when compared to German *sollen* – has an outspoken preference for perspectively rich contexts.

<sup>10</sup> Other scholars have also stressed the polyphony associated with the conditional, see e.g. Haillet 1998, 2002; Bres 2010a.

(again another perspective) about a barbarian struggle. Note that there are also direct speech fragments – in quotation marks – in this example.

French

- (8) Toutefois, précis-e l' auteur, et ce à rebours 'd' un-e  
 however specify-PRS3SG ART.DEF.SG author and this contrary to ART.INDF-SG.F  
 construction médiatique défavorable', 'la commission d' enquête  
 construction of.the.media unfavourable ART.DEF.SG.F commission of inquiry  
 réfut-a la thèse d' un-e lutte barbouzard-e  
 refute-PST.PERF3SG ART.DEF.SG.F thesis of ART.INDF-SG.F struggle barbarian-SG.F  
 que les homme-s du SAC auraient men-é-e contre  
 REL ART.DEF.PL man-PL of.the SAC have.COND3PL lead-PTCP.PST-F against  
 l' OAS'.  
 ART.DEF.SG OAS  
 'However, the author specifies that, contrary to 'an unfavourable media construction',  
 'the commission of inquiry refuted the thesis of a barbarian struggle that the men of the  
 SAC allegedly led against the OAS'.  
 (*Le Monde*, 30 April 2021)

### 3.2.2. Reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> in German

Turning to reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> in German, it is generally argued to be a straightforward evidential marker, which 'by default does not carry any epistemic overtones' (Wiemer & Socka 2017: 51). Also, according to Diewald & Smirnova (2013), *soll*<sub>IND</sub> is a deictic evidential marker – fully oriented towards the reporting speaker (see also Mortelmans 2000); Diewald & Smirnova also point out that *soll*<sub>IND</sub> does not accord any prominence to a preceding speech event or a potential original speaker.

Mithilfe von *sollen* markiert der aktuelle Sprecher, dass der geäußerte Inhalt aus einer oder mehreren anderen Äußerungssituationen stammt. Es ist dabei unerheblich, wer genau die Äußerung tatsächlich getätigt hat. Wichtig ist, dass der aktuelle Sprecher die Original-Äußerung gehört, gelesen oder in irgendeiner anderen Weise wahrgenommen hat, d.h. dass er die Information über den beschriebenen Sachverhalt aus einer anderen Kommunikationssituation bezieht. [The current speaker marks by means of *sollen* that the uttered content originates from one or more other utterance situations. It is irrelevant who exactly actually made the utterance. What is important is that the current speaker has heard, read, or in some other way perceived the original utterance, i.e., that he or she obtains the information about the described facts from another communication situation] (Diewald & Smirnova 2013: 454, my translation)

As such, reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> can be contrasted with the German present subjunctive (*Konjunktiv I*), which as a marker of indirect speech integrates the perspective of the reported speaker and the original speech act to which it refers more strongly in the discourse than reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> does (see Mortelmans 2009; Diewald & Smirnova 2013; Vanderbiesen 2015, 2016). Consider in this respect the two following examples involving the use of the

present subjunctive (*gekommen sei*), on the one hand, and a reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub>-construction (*soll gekommen sein*), on the other. In the first example (9a), reference is made to the original information source which is explicitly addressed (*Sie* ‘you’, *werter Herr Minister* ‘dear Minister’) and the original context in which the speech act (in this case more likely: the act of writing) took place (*in Ihrer Pressemitteilung* ‘in your press statement’). The present subjunctive occurs in an embedded complement clause introduced by the verbum dicendi *gaben Sie [...] bekannt* ‘you announced’. By contrast, the use of reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> in (9b) does not refer to an original speaker source nor to an original speech act. The writer solely signals that they acquired the information via hearsay.

### German

- (9) (a) In Ihr-er                      Pressemitteilung gaben                      Sie,                      wert-er  
          in your-DAT.SG.F press.release                      announce.PST.PL 2HON.NOM dear-NOM.SG.M  
          Herr Minister, bekannt, dass in dies-e                      Akte nun endlich  
          Sir Minister announce COMP in this-ACC.SG.F file now finally  
          Bewegung **gekommen sei**.  
          movement come.PTCP.PST be.SBJV.PRS.3SG  
          ‘In your press release you announced, dear Minister, that there was finally  
          progress in this file.’  
          ([https://pdg.be/desktopdefault.aspx/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-5093/8772\\_read-70511](https://pdg.be/desktopdefault.aspx/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-5093/8772_read-70511))
- (b) In den                      zäh-en                      Poker                      um Mönchengladbach-s  
          in ART.DEF.DAT.PL drawn-out-DAT.PL poker.game over Mönchengladbach-GEN  
          Schlussmann Yann Sommer [...] **soll**                      neu-e                      Bewegung  
          goalkeeper Yann Sommer                      REP.IND.PRS.SG new-NOM.SG.F movement  
          gekommen sein.  
          come.PTCP.PST be.INF  
          ‘There seems to be new movement in the drawn-out poker game over  
          Mönchengladbach’s goalkeeper Yann Sommer.’  
          (<https://www.faz.net/aktuell/sport/fussball/bundesliga/bundesliga-fc-bayern-mit-remis-im-test-gegen-red-bull-salzburg-18601920.html>)

The above pair (9a, b) also illustrates another observation concerning the difference between the present subjunctive and reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub>: in contrast to the present subjunctive, reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> hardly occurs in subordinate contexts, and when it does, it typically evokes its reportative meaning, i.e. *soll*<sub>IND</sub> is normally not used to attribute a particular assertion to a concrete source (see Diewald & Smirnova 2013: 459).

### 3.2.3. Dutch reportative *zou*

Interestingly, Dutch reportative *zou* has been argued (Mortelmans 2009) to be functionally somewhere in between German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> and the German present subjunctive<sup>11</sup> used to mark

<sup>11</sup> Note that Dutch does not possess a productive subjunctive mood anymore. The present subjunctive can be found in fixed collocations like *Lang leve de jarige* ‘Long live the birthday boy/girl’ or *Het zij zo* ‘So be it’, whereas a past subjunctive form only exists for *zijn* ‘to be’: *Het ware te wensen* ‘It were to wish’ (see ANS | 2.3.2.4 De conjunctief (aanvoegende wijs)). In cases in which German uses a past subjunctive (the German term would be

indirect speech. On the one hand, Dutch *zou* can be used as an equivalent of German reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> in main clause contexts (see examples (10a, b) from the *europarl* parallel corpus), without evoking an original speech act nor referring to a specified speaker source. On the other hand, however, since Dutch *zou* + INF is more strongly oriented towards the reported speaker than German *soll*<sub>IND</sub>, it can also occur in contexts in which German typically uses the present subjunctive as a marker of indirect speech. Examples (10c, d) are based on the same press statement of Buckingham Palace: there is a clear information source (the statement) written by a more or less identifiable author (Buckingham Palace), which can be quoted (as happens in the German text). Dutch uses *zou* here, as it does not possess any dedicated means to render indirect speech.

#### Dutch

- (10) (a) Europa **zou** ook een enorme geldverslindende machine zijn.  
 Europe REP.SG also ART.INDF enormous money-wasting machine be.INF

#### German

- (b) Europa **soll** ferner ein Apparat sein, der  
 Europa REP.IND.PRS.SG also ART.INDF.NOM.M machine be.INF REL.NOM.SG.M  
 immens-e Geldmenge-n verschling-t.  
 huge-ACCC.PL amount.of.money-PL devour-IND.PRS3SG  
 ‘Europe is said to be a huge money-wasting machine.’  
 (Europarl Corpus)

#### Dutch

- (c) De Brits-e koningin Elizabeth [...] heeft positief  
 ART.DEF.SG.C British-SG.C queen Elizabeth have.PRS3SG positive  
 getest op Covid-19. Dat laat Buckingham Palace wet-en in  
 test.PCTP.PST on Covid-19 that let.PRS.SG Buckingham Palace know-INF in  
 een statement. De Queen **zou** last hebb-en van  
 ART.INDF.SG statement ART.DEF.SG.C Queen REP.SG trouble have-INF of  
 mild-e symptom-en die overeenkom-en met een verkoudheid.  
 mild-PL symptom-PL REL.PL be.consistent-INF with ART.INDF.SG cold  
 ‘Britain’s Queen Elizabeth (95) has tested positive for Covid-19. Buckingham  
 Palace reveals this in a statement. The Queen is said to [zou] be suffering from  
 mild symptoms consistent with a cold.’  
 (<https://www.hln.be/royalty/koningin-elizabeth-95-test-positief-op-covid-19-aed3a05a/>)

#### German

- (d) Die britisch-e Königin Elisabeth II. ist positiv  
 ART.DEF.NOM.SG.F British-NOM.F queen Elisabeth II be.IND.PRS3SG positive  
 auf das Coronavirus getestet worden. Die  
 on ART.DEF.ACC.SG.N Coronavirus test.PTCP.PST AUX.PASS ART.DEF.NOM.SG.F

Konjunktiv II) to express hypotheticality or counterfactuality, Dutch mainly uses *zou* + INF or a past tense with hypotheticalal (see example (3b) above).

95 Jahr-e alt-e Queen spür-e ‘mild-e,  
 95 year-PL old-NOM.SG.F queen experience-SBJV.PRS3SG mild-ACC.PL  
 erkältungsähnlich-e Symptom-e’, [...].  
 similar.to.a.cold-ACC.PL symptom-PL  
 ‘Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II has tested positive for the coronavirus. The  
 95-year-old queen is experiencing [spüre] ‘mild symptoms similar to a cold [...].’  
 (<https://www.dw.com/de/k%C3%B6nigin-elisabeth-positiv-auf-corona-getestet/a-60847679>)

Let us take stock. The literature overview has revealed that in French, the reportative conditional is often associated with epistemic distance alongside its evidential meaning. By contrast, the German reportative marker can be characterised as a pure evidential marker that generally does not evoke epistemic overtones, i.e. distancing interpretations. In German, reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> can be contrasted to the present subjunctive. The latter marks indirect speech, which typically introduces another point of reference – the reported speaker – into the linguistic scene. The Dutch reportative marker *zou* is compatible with both general hearsay readings (like German *sollen*<sub>IND</sub>) and uses in which the ‘author’ of what is being reported is more specific and identifiable. In the (relatively scarce) literature on reportative *zou* (De Haan 2001, Mortelmans 2022), there is no consequent association of *zou* with distancing interpretations.

#### 4. Corpus analysis: methodology and some examples

For the study reported on in this paper, I collected 200 instances of the German noun + complementiser combination *Gerüchte, dass* ‘rumours that’, 200 instances of the similar Dutch combination *geruchten dat* ‘rumours that’, and 200 instances of the French construction *rumeurs selon lesquelles* ‘rumours according to which’<sup>12</sup> from different newspaper corpora. The German instances were collected (a) via the Cosmas II platform of the Institut für deutsche Sprache (see <https://cosmas2.ids-mannheim.de/cosmas2-web>), whereby the search was restricted to instances from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *n* = 100) and (b) via the DWDS website (<https://www.dwds.de/r>), whereby only instances from the daily newspaper *Tagesspiegel* were taken into account, *n* = 100). For the French data, online editions of the French newspaper *Le Monde* and the Belgian newspaper *Le Soir* were manually searched to collect 100 instances per newspaper. For the Dutch data, the Corpus Hedendaags Nederlands (Instituut voor de Nederlandse Taal (ivdnt.org) was used, again with a restriction to newspaper language, whereby 100 instances were randomly collected from the *NRC*, a daily newspaper from the Netherlands, and another 100 instances from various Flemish, i.e. Belgian Dutch, newspapers.

Each instance was annotated for a number of parameters: formal characteristics of the finite verb in the subclause (mainly tense, mood (when relevant), and whether it is a modal verb), the wider context of the (main) clause in which the noun *Gerüchte/geruchten/rumeurs* ‘rumours’ appears (whether it is accompanied by verbs that easily give rise to epistemic overtones like Dutch *geruchten weglachen* ‘to laugh off rumours’ or French *démentir les rumeurs* ‘deny rumours’), and whether a clear epistemic overtone (i.e. distance or denial with

<sup>12</sup> In contrast to German and Dutch, it is not common to have the noun *rumeur(s)* followed by the complementiser *que* in French. Instead, French prefers a construction with a relative subclause.

respect to the proposition in the subclause) can be assumed. Let us consider the following French instances to illustrate the data and the annotations made.

### French

- (11) Le Vatican a démenti les **rumeur-s**  
 ART.DEF.SG.M Vatican have.PRS3SG deny.PTCP.PST ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL  
**selon** **lesquelles** le pape **aurait** **été**  
 according.to REL.F.PL ART.DEF.SG.M pope have.COND3SG be.PTCP.PST  
**admis** en soin-s intensif-s ou **aurait** **subi**  
 admit.PTCP.PST in care-PL intensive-PL or have.COND3SG undergo.PTCP.PST  
 un-e trachéotomie.  
 ART.INDF-SG.F tracheotomy  
 ‘The Vatican has denied rumours that the Pope was admitted to intensive care or underwent a tracheotomy.’ (*Le Soir*, 3 February 2005)

In (11), the finite verbs in the subclause are forms of the past conditional (*aurait été admis*, *aurait subi*). The noun *rumours* is the direct object of the verb *a démenti* ‘has denied’ and can as such be said to give rise to an epistemic overtone of doubt with respect to the validity of the proposition (as the Vatican has denied it). The conditional is by no means the only possible form in the relative subclause, however. In (12), the finite verb *a rejoint* ‘has joined’ is a perfect tense (so-called *passé composé* in French), which generally does not have a modal flavour – in contrast to the conditional in (11).

### French

- (12) Mardi soir, le président français, François Hollande, a confirmé la présence à Paris du général Tlass.  
 Dans un-e déclaration transmis-e à l’ AFP et  
 in ART.INDF-SG.F statement send.PTCP.PST-F to ART.DEF.SG AFP and  
 signé-e ‘général Manaf Tlass, Paris, le 17 juillet 2012’,  
 sign.PTCP.PST-F General Manaf Tlass Paris ART.DEF.SG.M 17 July 2012  
 il confirm-e les **rumeur-s** **selon** **lesquelles**  
 3SG.NOM.M confirm-PRS3SG ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL according.to REL.PF.F  
 il **a** **rejoint** des membre-s de sa  
 3SG.NOM.M have.PRS3SG join.PTCP.PST ART.INDF.PL members-PL of his.SG.F  
 famille dans la capitale français-e.  
 family in ART.DEF.SG.F capital French-SG.F  
 ‘On Tuesday evening, French President François Hollande confirmed that General Tlass was in Paris. In a statement sent to AFP and signed ‘General Manaf Tlass, Paris, July 17, 2012’, he confirmed rumours that he had joined members of his family in the French capital.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2012/07/18/le-general-tlass-a-paris-appelle-a-la-transition-en-syrie\\_1734983\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2012/07/18/le-general-tlass-a-paris-appelle-a-la-transition-en-syrie_1734983_3218.html))

For (12), there are no reasons to assume that the speaker should somehow express epistemic distance with respect to the proposition in the subclause: the rumours that General Tlass has



joined his family in Paris are officially confirmed (cf. *il confirme les rumeurs* ‘he confirms the rumours’), in a written and undersigned statement by general Tlass himself; there is even – as the previous context makes clear – a confirmation by the French president Hollande.

In the German instance (13), we find present tense indicative forms (*liegt* ‘lies’, *will* ‘wants’) in the complement clause. The main clause context is one that does not give rise to doubt or denial: speculations and rumours are ‘fuelled’ (i.e. strengthened) by the fact that the Pope does not plan to visit Argentina, his country of birth.

#### German

- (13) Der Papst besuch-t Chile und Peru aber sein Geburtsland  
 ART.DEF.NOM.SG.M pope visit-PRS3SG Chile and Peru but his.ACC country.of.birth  
 läss-t er aus, wieder einmal. Das schür-t Spekulation-en  
 leave-PRS3SG 3SG.NOM.M out again one.time that fuel-PRS3SG speculation-PL  
 und Gerücht-e, dass er mit den dortig-en  
 and rumour-PL COMP 3SG.NOM.M with ART.DEF.DAT.PL local-DAT.PL  
 Bischöf-en über Kreuz lieg-t oder Präsident Macri aus  
 bishop-DAT.PL over cross lie-PRS3SG or president Macri out.of  
 politisch-en Gründ-en meid-en will.  
 political-DAT.PL reason-DAT.PL avoid-INF want.PRS3SG  
 ‘The Pope is visiting Chile and Peru, but once again he is skipping the country of  
 his birth. This fuels speculations and rumours that he is at odds with the bishops  
 there or wants to avoid President Macri for political reasons.’ (*Süddeutsche  
 Zeitung*, 16 January 2018, p. 7)

In the following Dutch instance (14), we find a simple present tense form in the complement clause (*is* ‘is’). The wider context seems to be a neutral one: *er zijn geruchten dat* ‘there are rumours that’. The following sentence seems to corroborate the rumours in that more concrete information about the number of infected persons is given, albeit again rather vaguely: *Her en der wordt gesproken over negen getroffen personen in en rond de club* ‘there is talk here and there’. Again, there is no reason to assume a distancing interpretation.

#### Dutch

- (14) Sanchez, Ikoné en Bamba test-ten positief. Eentje van hen train-t  
 Sanchez Ikoné and Bamba test-PST.PL positive one of 3PL.OBL train-PRS3SG  
 ondertussen weer mee, maar er zijn gerucht-en dat het  
 meanwhile again with but EXPL be.PRS.PL rumour-PL COMP ART.DEF.SG.N  
 virus nog niet weg is bij Lille. Her en der wordt  
 virus yet NEG gone be.PRS3SG at Lille here and there AUX.PASS.PRS3SG  
 gesproken over negen (!) getroffen person-en in en rond de  
 speak.PTCP.PST about nine infected person-PL in and around ART.DEF.SG.C  
 club.  
 club  
 ‘Sanchez, Ikoné and Bamba tested positive. One of them is now training again, but  
 there are rumours that the virus is not yet gone at Lille. There is talk here and there  
 of nine (!) infected people in and around the club.’ (*Het Nieuwsblad*, 25 July 2020,  
 p. 22)



The main research questions this study tries to answer concern the distribution of reportative markers in the subclause introduced by *dass*, *dat*, and *lesquelles*; the proportion of clear denial readings with such reportative markers; and whether denial is explicitly marked. These issues will be addressed in Section 5.

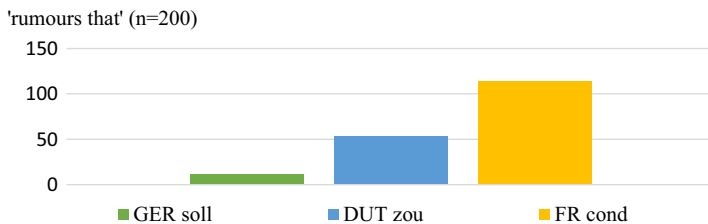
## 5. Main results

### 5.1. Which verb forms occur in subclauses after ‘rumours that’?

In the following subsections, we will see that a broad variety of verb forms occurs in the subclause introduced by *rumours that*: reportative markers, on the one hand, but also tense and mood markers, whereby each language seems to have its own systematic preferences and restrictions.

#### 5.1.1. Reportative markers after ‘rumours that’

A first striking observation is that the French conditional is used with a significantly higher frequency in the context of the noun *rumours* than both Dutch *zou* and (especially) German *soll*<sub>IND</sub>. Figure 1 presents an overview of the distribution. It shows that the conditional appears in a majority of cases ( $n = 114$ , 57%), whereas *zou* is the finite verb in about one quarter of the Dutch data ( $n = 54$ , 27%), while German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> occurs in only 12 instances (6%).



**Figure 1.** German *soll*, Dutch *zou*, and French conditional in subclauses after ‘rumours’.

Of course, as we have seen in Section 2, not all instances of these three markers can automatically be classified as reportative. In journalistic prose, only a minority normally functions with reportative meaning (see Mortelmans 2024). Which distribution do we find in this particular corpus? It turns out that in the French data, the conditional has reportative meaning in a clear majority ( $n = 89/114$ , 78%) of its occurrences in this particular linguistic environment, i.e. the conditional does not signal ulteriority in the past nor hypotheticality/counterfactuality. An example is provided in (15); a similar one is provided in (11) above.

#### French

- (15) Mais il avait en revanche démenti les **rumour-s**  
 but 3SG.NOM.M have.PST3SG however deny.PTCP.PST ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL  
**selon lesquelles** les deux partie-s se **seraient**  
 according.to REL.F.PL ART.DEF.PL two party-PL REFL be.COND3PL  
 accord-é-e-s auteur d’ un montant de 220 millions  
 agree-PTCP.PST-F-PL around of ART.DEF.SG.M price of 220 million

d' euro-s.

of euro-PL

‘However, he denied rumours that the two parties had agreed on a price of 220 million euros.’ ([https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2012/06/13/le-prix-de-vente-de-flammarion-n-excedera-pas-250-millions-d-euros\\_1717406\\_3234.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2012/06/13/le-prix-de-vente-de-flammarion-n-excedera-pas-250-millions-d-euros_1717406_3234.html))

Cases in which the French conditional does not (unambiguously) express reportative meaning occur but are clearly less frequent ( $n = 25/114$ , 22%) than in the routine use of the marker. In fact, two types can be discerned here. A number of instances ( $n = 10$ ) refer to states of affairs that can be regarded as lying in the future from a past perspective and can thus be interpreted as uses in which the conditional expresses its well-described meaning of future in the past, as in (16). Note that a reportative meaning can be argued to be present as well but it combines with a future-in-the-past reading.

#### French

- (16) Mais Zuckerberg avait démenti des **rumeur-s**  
 but Zuckerberg have.PST3SG deny.PTCP.PST ART.INDF.PL rumour-PL  
**selon lesquelles** il **lancerait** son propre smartphone  
 according.to REL.F.PL 3SG.NOM.M launch.COND3SG his.SG.M own smartphone  
 ‘But Zuckerberg had denied rumours that he would be launching his own  
 smartphone.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/technologies/article/2013/03/30/facebook-va-presenter-un-smartphone-android\\_3150759\\_651865.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/technologies/article/2013/03/30/facebook-va-presenter-un-smartphone-android_3150759_651865.html))

The remaining cases ( $n = 15$ ) feature the conditional of *pouvoir* ‘can’ (*pourrait*) in the relative subclause, which is best interpreted as expressing epistemic possibility, i.e. the rumours concern a state of affairs that might be realised in the future or at this moment. The conditional could be interpreted here as weakening the epistemic force of the base form *peut* (cf. the distinction between *may* vs. *might*). It is revealing, though, that almost every instance featuring the verb *pouvoir* in the subclause occurs in the conditional,<sup>13</sup> again pointing to the fact that the conditional can be regarded as a default form in this particular context.

#### French

- (17) Elle s’ est d’ailleurs estim-é-e ‘heureus-e de faire  
 3SG.NOM.F REFL be.PRS3SG in.fact value-PTCP.PST-F happy-F to do.INF  
 campagne’ sur la chaîne ABC, tout en dément-ant  
 campaign on ART.DEF.SG.F channel ABC everything while deny-PTCP.PRS  
 des **rumeur-s selon lesquelles** elle **pourrait** elle-même  
 ART.INDF.PL rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL 3SG.NOM.F can.COND3SG herself

<sup>13</sup> Only in one case do we find a present tense *peut*:

(iv) ‘Il y a même des **rumeurs selon lesquelles** on **peut** obtenir l’asile en trois mois’, assure ce militant, [...] ‘There are even rumours that you can be granted asylum in three months’, says this activist, [...]’. ([https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/05/06/entre-l-allemande-et-la-france-l-errance-des-afghans-deboutés-de-l-asile\\_5458632\\_3224.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/05/06/entre-l-allemande-et-la-france-l-errance-des-afghans-deboutés-de-l-asile_5458632_3224.html))

entr-er en politique en 2016 pour un poste au Sénat.  
 enter-INF in politics in 2016 for ART.INDF.SG.M seat in.the senate  
 ‘She said she was ‘happy to be campaigning’ on ABC, while denying rumours that she herself might enter politics in 2016 for a Senate seat.’

([https://www.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2012/05/30/au-fond-du-jardin-recettes-et-trucs-de-jardinier-michelle-obama-publie-un-livre-sur-le-potager-de-la-maison-blanche\\_5987219\\_4832693.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2012/05/30/au-fond-du-jardin-recettes-et-trucs-de-jardinier-michelle-obama-publie-un-livre-sur-le-potager-de-la-maison-blanche_5987219_4832693.html))

Summarizing for French, first, the conditional is the most natural form in this context (occurring in 57% of all instances), and second, a reportative interpretation is the most common one when the conditional is used (78% of all conditionals are unambiguous reportative conditionals). And note that even in those cases in which the conditional expresses ulteriority in the past, a reportative reading cannot be ruled out completely.

If we turn to Dutch and German, it becomes clear that neither language fully matches the situation in French. In Dutch, *zou(den)* appears in 54 instances, of which 20 occurrences evoke a purely reportative reading.<sup>14</sup> This means that reportative *zou* occurs in 10% (20/200) of all instances in the corpus, which is considerably less compared to the French reportative conditional, which occurs in 44.5% of all instances (89/200).

#### Dutch

- (18) Al sinds het begin van de uitbraak circuleren  
 already since ART.DEF.SG.N beginning of ART.DEF.SG.C outbreak circulate.PRS.PL  
**gerucht-en dat** het virus per ongeluk of opzettelijk **zou** zijn  
 rumour-PL COMP ART.DEF.SG.N virus by accident or intentionally REP.SG be-INF  
 ontsnap-t uit het lab.  
 escape-PTCP.PST from ART.DEF.SG.N lab  
 ‘Rumours have been circulating since the beginning of the outbreak that the virus may have escaped from the lab accidentally or deliberately.’ (NRC, 2 May 2020, p.6)

Turning to German *soll<sub>IND</sub>*, it appears that reportative *sollen* is marginal in this particular environment: of the 12 *soll<sub>IND</sub>*-instances in the corpus, only 5 (2.5%) occur with a reportative reading. Example (19) is one of them.

#### German

- (19) Die **Gerücht-e, dass** er einig-e sein-er Kind-er  
 ART.DEF.NOM.PL rumour-PL COMP 3SG.NOM.M some-ACC.PL his-GEN.PL child-PL  
 missbrauch-t **hab-en soll**, gab es schon lange,  
 abuse-PTCP.PST have-INF REP.SG exist.PST3SG EXPL already long.time  
 vor allem in den Jahr-en vor sein-er

<sup>14</sup> The remaining cases in Dutch are instances of the generally more frequent *future-in-the-past* uses.

(v) Eerder gingen **geruchten dat** de zakenbank in omvang **zou** halveren.

‘Earlier, there were rumours that the merchant bank would halve in size.’ (nrc.next, 9 August 2018, p. 4)

before everything in ART.DEF.DAT.PL year-PL before his-DAT.SG.F  
Verurteilung.  
conviction  
‘The rumours that he had reportedly abused some of his children had been around for a long time, especially in the years before his conviction.’ (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 30 March 2019, p. 60)

We could describe this situation in terms of a cline, with French having the strongest preference for a reportative marker in this context, Dutch being in between and German clearly not showing a preference for reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> at all. Given these observations, the question arises which (other) verb forms are used – and to some extent preferred – in this particular environment.

5.1.2. Indicative tense forms after ‘rumours that’

The following Table 1 presents a general overview of the verb forms found in the subclauses introduced by *rumeurs/geruchten/Gerüchte*. It shows that indicative tense forms can be regarded as the default choice in Dutch ( $n = 146$ ). They are also the most frequent category in German ( $n = 100$ ), although present subjunctive forms ( $n = 56$ ) provide an important option as well.

Table 1. Finite verb forms in subclauses after ‘rumours that’.

‘rumours that’	(indicative) tense marker (present, past, future, (plu) perfect)	conditional <i>zou soll</i> <sub>IND</sub>	present subjunctive	past subjunctive
French <i>rumeurs selon lesquelles (n = 200)</i>	86	114 (of which $n = 15$ <i>pourrait</i> ‘could’)		
Dutch <i>geruchten dat (n = 200)</i>	146	54		
German <i>Gerüchte, dass (n = 200)</i>	100	12	56	32 (of which $n = 21$ <i>könnte</i> ‘could’)

If we zoom in on the (indicative) tense forms (see Table 2), we find a remarkable similarity with respect to the relative frequency of (most of) the tense categories: past tense markers occur more frequently than (plu)perfect markers, which are more frequent than future markers. The most frequent tense category in Dutch and German, however, is present tense, which accounts for only 15.2% of the French tense markers. We can account for this imbalance if we assume that the conditional is the default tense category in this environment and is used in cases in which Dutch and German have a present tense.

Table 2. Distribution of (indicative) tense forms in subclauses after ‘rumours’.

INDICATIVE TENSE	present	past/imparfait	(plu)perfect	future
French ( <i>n</i> = 86)	13 (15.2%)	50 (58.1%)	21 (24.4%)	2 (2.3%) (synthetic)
Dutch ( <i>n</i> = 146)	73 (50%)	49 (33.6%)	17 (11.6%)	7 (4.8%) ( <i>zullen/ gaan</i> )
German ( <i>n</i> = 100)	56 (56 %)	20 (20%)	13 (13%)	9 (9%) ( <i>werden</i> )

The high frequency of indicative tense forms in German and especially Dutch suggests that speakers and writers of both languages do not mark the special epistemic status of what is presented as a rumour: the indicative can be taken to express neutral epistemic stance towards the content of the rumour.

5.1.3. Present and past subjunctive forms in German

The relatively frequent use of the present subjunctive in German (see Table 1, *n* = 56/200) – as a marker of indirect speech – is interesting. It shows that rumours can also be conceptualised as referring to speech events, despite the fact that often neither clear sources nor a concrete act of speaking can be identified. So, in (20), the subclause contains a present subjunctive form (*stehe*), that can be taken to ‘simulate’ the presence of a previous speech-event.

German

- (20) Collomb-s Rücktritt befeuer-t die Gerücht-e, dass  
Collomb-GEN resignation fuel-IND.PRS3SG ART.DEF.NOM.PL rumour-PL COMP  
Macron zunehmend isoliert an der Spitze des  
Macron increasingly isolated at ART.DEF.DAT.SG.F top ART.DEF.GEN.SG.M  
Staat-es **steh-e**.  
state-GEN.SG.M stand-SBJV.PRS3SG  
‘Collomb’s resignation is fuelling rumours that Macron is increasingly isolated at the  
head of state.’ (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 4 October 2018, p. 7)

Corroborating this analysis is the fact that we can even detect direct speech fragments marked with quotation marks (‘einen jungen Theatermacher aus dem Osten’ in (21)) in present subjunctive subclauses, again hinting at the presence of a preceding concrete speech event, pieces of which are being quoted.

German

- (21) **Gerücht-e, dass** Flierl Hesse durch ein-en ‘jung-en  
rumour-PL COMP Flierl Hesse by ART.INDF-ACC.SG.M young-ACC.SG.M  
Theatermacher aus dem Osten’ ersetz-en **woll-e**,

theatre.maker out.of ART.DEF.DAT.SG.M east replace-INF want-SBJV.PRS3SG  
 wies die Kulturverwaltung zurück.  
 refute.IND.PST3SG ART.DEF.NOM.SG.F cultural.department back  
 ‘Rumours that Flierl wanted to replace Hesse with a ‘young theatre maker from the East’ were denied by the department of culture.’ (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 13 May 2004)

The use of the past subjunctive in German (either as a synthetic form or expressed periphrastically by means of *würde* + infinitive or *hätte/wäre* + past participle,  $n = 32$ ) can be accounted for on two grounds. The past subjunctive is either used as a so-called *Ersatzform* for the present subjunctive, in cases in which a present subjunctive formally coincides with an indicative (see example (22),  $n = 11$ ), or we are dealing with epistemic uses of past subjunctive *könnte* ‘could’, which frequently occur in this context ( $n = 21$ ). With respect to the former use, let us consider example (22): *geschrieben/geholfen hätten* is a past subjunctive form (in fact, it is a pluperfect, a so-called *Konjunktiv Plusquamperfekt*), which – following standard grammar rules – ‘replaces’ the expected present subjunctive *geholfen haben*, as the latter is formally identical with an indicative (indicative perfect *geholfen haben*) and as such cannot unambiguously signal indirect speech. Again, uses of this type indicate that rumours in German are easily conceptualised as referring to concrete speech acts.

#### German

- (22) Er war immer ein schlecht-er Schüler,  
 3SG.NOM.M sein.IND.PST3SG always ART.INDF.NOM.SG.M bad-NOM.SG.M pupil  
 und die Gerücht-e, dass sein-e Lehrer für ihn  
 and ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL COMP his-NOM.PL teacher.PL for 3SG.ACC.M  
 einig-e Arbeit-en geschrieben und auch bei den  
 some-ACC.PL paper-PL write.PCTP.PST and also with ART.DEF.DAT.PL  
 Abschlussexamina geholfen hätten, woll-ten nie  
 final.exam.PL help.PTCR.PST have.SBJV.PAST3PL want-IND.PST.PL never  
 verstumm-en.  
 fall.silent-INF  
 ‘He was always a bad student and the rumours that his teachers wrote some papers for him and also helped with the final exams would never die down.’ (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 5 May 2018, p. 12)

Interestingly, the relatively frequent use of past subjunctive *könnte* ( $n = 21$ ) – with epistemic meaning – matches the use of French *pourrait* ( $n = 15$ ), which was discussed above. Both verbs typically refer to either possible states of affairs that might materialise in the future (see examples (23a) and (17)) or to a situation that might be the case right now (23b). Rumours can thus be argued to be modally ‘harmonic’ with possibilities.

#### German

- (23) (a) Anfang der Woche gab es Gerücht-e, dass  
 beginning of.the week exist.IND.PST3SG EXPL rumour-PL COMP  
 die beid-en groß-en Rivale-n Delivery Hero  
 ART.DEF.NOM.PL both-PL big-PL rival-PL Delivery Hero

and Takeaway fusionier-en **könnten**.

und Takeaway merge-INF can.SBJV.PST3PL

‘Earlier this week there were rumours that the two big rivals Delivery Hero and Takeaway could merge.’ (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 26 January 2018, p. 20)

- (b) Plän-e, das Wrack aus 123 Meter-n Tiefe zu heb-en,  
 plan-PL ART.DEF.ACC.SG.N wreck from 123 metre-DAT.PL depth to lift-INF  
 geb-e es nicht trotz viel-er **Gerücht-e, dass** sich  
 exist-SBJV.PRS3SG EXPL NEG despite many-GEN.PL rumour-PL COMP REFL  
 an Bord Wertgegenständ-e befind-en **könnten**.

on board valuable-PL find-INF can.SBJV.PST3PL

‘There are no plans to lift the wreck from a depth of 123 metres, despite many rumours that there could be valuables on board.’ (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 April 2018, p. 12)

Interestingly, Dutch does not often feature forms of *kunnen* ‘can’ in this environment ( $n = 4$ ), and when they occur, they prefer a present tense (*kan*), which – as we have seen – is the default tense in Dutch in this specific context. We can only speculate on why *kunnen* is clearly less frequent than *pourrait* and *könnte*. Both *pourrait* and *könnte* also function outside this context with a relatively well-established epistemic meaning, whereas the epistemic potential of *kunnen* in general is considerably lower (Nuyts 2001: 188). Moreover, non-reportative *zou*-instances – expressing future-in-the-past – also code meanings that are very close to epistemic possibility and might thus preclude the use of *kunnen* in Dutch. So, in the following Dutch example, *kan* could be replaced by *zou* without altering the meaning of the sentence.

#### Dutch

- (24) We horen **gerucht-en dat dat kan** oplop-en naar 200  
 1PL.NOM hear.PRS.PL rumour-PL COMP DEM can.PRS.SG rise-INF to 200  
 miljoen varken-s voordat de uitbraak stabiliseer-t.  
 million pig-PL before ART.DEF.SG.C outbreak stabilise-PRS3SG  
 ‘We hear rumours that that could rise to 200 million pigs before the outbreak stabilises.’ (*NRC*, 8 June 2019, p. 5)

To summarise: after *rumours*, French uses the conditional in 57% of all cases ( $n = 114$ ), of which a clear majority (78%,  $n = 89$ ) has ‘purely’ reportative meaning. Dutch has reportative *zou* in about 10% of all the cases in the sample, whereas reportative *soll<sub>IND</sub>* in German is marginal. In Dutch, simple present ( $n = 73$ ) and – to a somewhat lesser extent – simple past tense forms ( $n = 49$ ) are most often found in the complement subclauses after *geruchten*, suggesting that there is no special marking for the epistemic status of what is being rumoured. In German, we find either indicative tenses (again with simple present ( $n = 56$ ) and simple past ( $n = 20$ ) being the most frequent options) or forms of the present subjunctive ( $n = 56$ ) or past subjunctive ( $n = 32$ ). The use of present subjunctive (and some of the uses of the past subjunctive) point to the fact that rumours in German are often conceptualised as referring to actual speech events, even allowing for direct quotation.

5.2. Distancing interpretations in French, Dutch, and German

The second part of the analysis addresses the epistemic stance towards the proposition in the subclause: Is there a positive or neutral attitude towards the content of the rumour, or is its content doubted or denied? The main basis for classification is provided by the wider context in which the noun *Gerüchte/geruchten/rumeurs* appears: When rumours are the object of verbs like Dutch *bevestigen*, German *bestätigen*, or French *confirmer* ‘confirm’, a positive stance is expressed, whereas combinations with German *dementieren/zurückweisen* ‘deny’, French *démentir* ‘deny’, or Dutch *niet kloppen* ‘be false’ are classified as denoting a negative attitude. Neutral stance is expressed in constructions like German *es gibt Gerüchte* ‘there are rumours’, French *on a entendu des rumeurs* ‘one has heard rumours’, or Dutch *er gaan geruchten* ‘rumours circulate’. Note that the attitude expressed is not necessarily the writer’s attitude but may well be a third person’s attitude in cases like ‘she denied the rumours that she had been contacted’ (see example (25)).

The analysis reveals a remarkable difference between the three languages with regard to the frequency of negative stance: whereas in French, cases of doubt and denial abound (*n* = 91, 45.5%), these are much less frequent in Dutch (*n* = 32, 16%) and in German (*n* = 22, 11%). In the French data, explicitly negative verbs and constructions with distancing meaning are highly frequent. The most frequent main verb with which *rumeurs* combines as a direct object is the verb *démentir* ‘to deny’ (*n* = 46). Apart from *démentir*, *rumeurs* is the object of semantically similar verbs like *balayer* ‘to sweep aside’ (*n* = 4), *rejeter* ‘to reject’ (*n* = 4), *réfuter* ‘to refute’ (*n* = 4), *nier* ‘to deny’ (*n* = 3), *infirmer* ‘to invalidate’ (*n* = 2), or *dénoncer* ‘to denounce’ (*n* = 2). Highly prevalent in the corpus are hence instances like the following:

French

(25)	[...] la	top	model	Gisèle	Bundchen	a
	ART.DEF.SG.F	super	model	Gisèle	Bundchen	have.PRS3SG
	<b>démenti</b>	<b>les</b>	<b>rumeur-s</b>	<b>selon</b>	<b>lesquelles</b>	elle
	deny.PTCP.PST	ART.DEF.PL	rumour-PL	according.to	REL.F.PL	3SG.NOM.F
	<b>aurait</b>	été	contact-é-e	pour	jou-er	dans
	have.COND3SG	be.PTCP.PST	contact-PTCP.PST-F.SG	for	play-INF	in
	le	prochain	film	de	la	série
	ART.DEF.SG.M	next.SG.M	film	of	ART.DEF.SG.F	series
	des	James	Bond.			
	of.the	James	Bond			
	‘Supermodel Gisèle Bundchen has denied rumours that she had been approached to star in the next film in the James Bond series.’					
	(Le Soir, 17 January 2005)					

As table 3 shows, these verbs are more or less evenly distributed in the French (*Le Monde*) and Belgian French (*Le Soir*) sample, which lends support to the thesis that the frequent combination of *rumeurs* with verbs of negative epistemic stance is not a random observation.

Moreover, we find *rumeurs* as the subject of predicative constructions that clearly express the speaker’s (or protagonist’s) negative epistemic stance regarding the validity of the rumours: [*les rumeurs selon lesquelles y*] *sont infondées* ‘are unfounded’ (*n* = 3) / *fausses*



Table 3. Verbs of ‘negative’ epistemic attitude in the French sample.

	FR ( <i>Le Monde</i> )	B ( <i>Le Soir</i> )
démentir ‘deny’ (n = 46)	n = 25	n = 21
balayer ‘sweep aside’ (n = 4)	n = 1	n = 3
rejeter ‘reject’ (n = 4)	n = 3	n = 1
réfuter ‘refute’ (n = 4)	n = 2	n = 2
nier ‘deny’ (n = 3)	n = 2	n = 1
infirmer ‘invalidate’ (n = 2)	n = 0	n = 2
dénoncer ‘denounce’ (n = 2)	n = 1	n = 1
<b>Total: n = 65</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>31</b>

‘false’ (n = 1) / *incorrectes* ‘incorrect’ (n = 1) / *ridicules* ‘ridiculous’ (n = 1) / *insensées* ‘nonsense’ (n = 1) / *exagérées* ‘exaggerated’ (n = 1).

French

- (26) (a) ‘Quant aux **rumeur-s** selon **lesquelles** nous aurions  
regarding for.the rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL 1PL have.COND1PL  
l’ intention de supprim-er la Cellule de médiation  
ART.DEF.SG intention of abolish-INF ART.DEF.SG.F unit of mediation  
de dette-s, elles **sont** **totale-ment** **infondé-e-s**,  
of debt-PL 3PL.NOM.F be.PRS3PL totally unfounded-F-PL  
conclut Guy Wilmart.  
conclude.PST.PERF3SG Guy Wilmart  
‘As for the rumours that we intend to abolish the Debt Mediation Unit, they are  
totally unfounded,’ Guy Wilmart concludes.’  
([https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/09/syrie-damas-salue-l-entente-russie-etats-unis\\_3174663\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/09/syrie-damas-salue-l-entente-russie-etats-unis_3174663_3218.html))
- (b) Les **rumeur-s** selon **lesquelles** la Syrie a  
ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL ART.DEF.SG.F Syria have.PRS3SG  
empêch-é la mission de ven-ir **sont** **absolument**  
prevent-PTCP.PST ART.DEF.SG.F mission of come-INF be.PRS3PL absolutely  
**incorrect-e-s**, **foll-e-s** **et** **inacceptable-s**.  
incorrect-F-PL crazy-F-PL and unacceptable-PL  
‘The rumours that Syria prevented the delegation from coming are absolutely  
incorrect, crazy and unacceptable.’  
([https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/09/syrie-damas-salue-l-entente-russie-etats-unis\\_3174663\\_3218.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2013/05/09/syrie-damas-salue-l-entente-russie-etats-unis_3174663_3218.html))

Other constructions may also evoke a distancing interpretation: in the following example (27), the actor Jean-Claude Van Damme asks his fans not to believe particular rumours about his health; as such, serious doubt is cast on the content of the rumours.

## French

- (27) L'            acteur Jean-Claude Van Damme **demand-e à ses fan-s de ne**  
 ART.DEF.SG actor Jean-Claude Van Damme ask-PRS3SG to his.PL fan-PL of NEG  
**pas croi-re aux rumeur-s selon lesquelles il**  
 NEG believe-INF in.the rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL 3SG.NOM.M  
**aurait eu un-e crise cardiaque sur un**  
 have.COND3SG have.PTCP.PST ART.INDF-SG.F crisis of.the.heart on ART.INDF.SG.M  
 tournage de film aux Etats-Unis.  
 shoot of film in.the United.States  
 'Actor Jean-Claude Van Damme asks his fans not to believe the rumours that he had a  
 heart attack on a film set in the United States.'  
 (*Le Soir*, 22 October 2010, p. 48)

By contrast, verbs of negative epistemic attitude are relatively rare in the Dutch and German sample. The counterparts of French *démentir* and its synonyms – Dutch *ontkennen* 'deny', *ontkrachten* 'refute', *ontzenuwen* 'refute', *smoren* 'smother', *weerleggen* 'refute', *weglachen* 'laugh away', and *tegenspreken* 'deny, oppose'; German *dementieren* 'deny', *zurückweisen* 'reject', *von sich weisen* 'dismiss', *widersprechen* 'oppose', and *entgegen treten* 'oppose' – account for only 14 (Dutch) and 9 instances (German) in the respective samples. In the French data, however, we find no less than 65 instances of these verbs.

In German and Dutch, a neutral attitude towards the content of the rumours prevails: their validity is neither endorsed (e.g. in a context like 'x confirms the rumours that') nor doubted. Such neutral non-commitment interpretations account for 80% (160/200) of the Dutch cases and even 87.5% (175/200) of the German ones. In line with this observation is the fact that the most frequent construction used in the main clause in combination with German *Gerüchte* is the existential construction *es gibt Gerüchte* 'there are rumours' ( $n = 59$ , see example (28)), while the equally neutral *Gerüchte kursieren* 'rumours circulate' takes up second position ( $n = 24$ ).

## German

- (28) Schon am Wahltag **gab es Gerücht-e, dass** Ben Ali in  
 already on.the election.day exist.PST3SG EXPL rumour-PL COMP Ben Ali in  
 ein-e Klinik eingeliefer-t und in-s Koma  
 ART.INDF-ACC.SG.F hospital admit-PTCP.PST and in-ART.DEF.ACC.SG.N coma  
 gefallen sei.  
 fall.PTCP.PAST be.SBJV.PRS3SG  
 'Already on election day, there were rumours that Ben Ali had been admitted to  
 hospital and had fallen into a coma.'  
 (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 20 September 2019, p. 8)

Similarly, in Dutch the neutral collocation *er gaan geruchten* 'rumours go/circulate' is the most frequent combination ( $n = 47$ ), followed by the existential construction *er zijn geruchten* 'there are rumours' ( $n = 33$ ).

## Dutch

- (29) Er **gingen** al **gerucht-en dat** leider-s van Al-Nusra niet langer  
 EXPL go-PST.PL already rumour-PL COMP leader-PL of Al-Nusra NEG longer  
 onderdeel wil-den zijn van de terreurbeweging.  
 part want-PST.PL be.INF of ART.DEF.SG.C terror.movement  
 ‘There had already been rumours that Al-Nusra leaders no longer wanted to be part of  
 the terror movement.’  
 (NRC.next, 29 July 2016, p. 17)

Note that the corresponding existential construction in French (*il y a des rumeurs* ‘there are rumours’) occurs only six times in the sample, whereas ‘neutral’ combinations with verbs of movement (*circuler* ‘circulate’, *courir* ‘run’) are only found twice. The only instance with the verb *circuler* is the following one (30).

## French

- (30) Signe de la défiance de la population envers la  
 sign of ART.DEF.SG.F distrust of ART.DEF.SG.F population towards ART.DEF.SG.F  
 classe politique, des **rumeur-s selon lesquelles** certain-s  
 class political ART.INDF.PL rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL certain-PL  
 parlementaire-s **auraient** déjà été vaccin-é-s  
 member.of.parliament-PL have.COND3PL already be.PTCP.PST vaccinate-PTCP.PST.M-PL  
**circul-ent.**  
 circulate-PRS3PL  
 ‘As a sign of the public’s distrust of the political class, rumours are circulating that  
 some members of parliament have already been vaccinated.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/02/en-tunisie-la-reception-de-1-000-doses-de-vaccin-offertes-par-les-emirats-fait-polemique\\_6071682\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2021/03/02/en-tunisie-la-reception-de-1-000-doses-de-vaccin-offertes-par-les-emirats-fait-polemique_6071682_3212.html))

Note that cases of neutral stance are not infrequent in French ( $n = 93$ , 45.5%), but they are clearly less prevalent than in Dutch ( $n = 160$ , 80%) and especially German ( $n = 175$ , 87.5%).

Let us summarise the main findings: this subsection has shown that expressions of negative epistemic attitude are significantly more prevalent in French than in German and Dutch. This is also indicated by the verbs with which the noun ‘rumours’ co-occurs most frequently in the respective languages: whereas in French, the verb *démentir* ‘deny’ is the most frequent full verb ( $n = 46$ ), Dutch and German show an outspoken preference for neutral collocations that can be associated with non-commitment (*er gaan geruchten* ‘rumours go’; *es gibt Gerüchte* ‘there are rumours’).

### 5.3. Is negative epistemic attitude formally marked?

A final question this study intends to answer is whether cases of negative epistemic stance – in French, Dutch, and German – show up a preference for particular markers. For French, we have seen that the conditional is the most frequent marker in the context of rumours. Given the relatively high frequency of negative attitude instances in French, it might be the case that the conditional is more often used when the speaker or a third person wants to

**Table 4.** Conditional and non-conditional use in French in negative, neutral, and positive stance contexts.

	+ conditional	non-conditional
<b>negative</b> ; + explicit verb of denial (e.g. <i>démentir</i> ‘deny’) ( <i>n</i> = 65)	39 (60%)	26 (40%)
<b>negative</b> ; all contexts ( <i>n</i> = 91)	53 (59%)	36 (41%)
<b>neutral</b> ( <i>n</i> = 93) (e.g. <i>à la suite de rumeurs selon lesquelles de</i> ‘following rumours that’)	53 (57%)	40 (43%)
<b>positive</b> ( <i>n</i> = 16) ( <i>x confirme les rumeurs selon lesquelles</i> ‘confirms the rumours that’)	8 (50%)	8 (50%)

express their doubt with respect to the content of the rumour or a straightforward denial of its validity. Interestingly, however, this does not seem to be the case, as Table 4 shows. If we focus on those cases in which an explicit verb of denial (*démentir* and its synonyms, *n* = 65) is used in the main clause and look at the proportion of conditional uses in the subclause, we do not find a significantly increased use of the conditional compared to its use in neutral contexts (chi-square = 0.1426, *p* value = .705725, not significant at *p* < .05) or its use in positive contexts (chi-square = 0.5272, *p* value = .467804, not significant at *p* < .05). The same holds if one compares all the negative instances with the neutral and positive ones: again, there is no significant decrease of conditional use in the neutral (chi-square = 0.1227, *p* value = .726153, not significant at *p* < .05) nor in the positive contexts (chi-square = 0.5081, *p* value = .47595, not significant at *p* < .05). So, although there is a slight tendency towards more conditional use in negative contexts (59% to 60%) and less conditional use in positive contexts (50%), this tendency is not significant on the basis of my data.

This means that in all three context types, we find conditional and non-conditional tenses, with the former being generally more pervasive, without there being a clear semantic difference between conditional and non-conditional use. Let us consider the following pair (31a, b), which exemplifies the use of different markers in a context of clearly positive stance. In (31a), we find the verb *confirmer* ‘confirm’ as main verb, of which *rumeurs* functions as a direct object. Also, for (31b), we can assume that the context in which the rumours occur is a positive one (the police – as a generally credible source – have reasons to believe particular rumours). In these positive contexts, we find a present tense *sont en cours* ‘are in progress’ in (31a), whereas the verb form in (31b) (*aurait quitté*) is a conditional.

French

- (31) (a) Pour les chroniqueur-s israélien-s, cet-te petit-e phrase  
for ART.DEF.PL columnist-PL Israeli-PL this-SG.F little-SG.F phrase  
**confirm-e** les **rumeur-s selon** **lesquelles** des  
confirm-PRS3SG ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL ART.INDF.PL

contact-s secret-s **sont** en cours depuis des mois  
 contact-PL secret-PL be.PRS3PL in progress since ART.INDF.PL months.PL  
 entre les monarchie-s arabe-s, Israël et les  
 between ART.DEF.PL monarchy-PL arab-PL Israel and ART.DEF.PL  
 États-Unis [...]

United.States

‘For Israeli columnists, this little phrase confirms the rumours that secret contacts have been underway for months between the Arab monarchies, Israel and the United States [...].’

(*Le Soir*, 23 May 2017, p. 8)

- (b) [...] la police local-e a indiqu-é avoir  
 ART.DEF.SG.F police local-SG.F have.PRS3SG indicate-PTCP.PST have.INF  
 des raison-s d’ accord-er du crédit aux rumeur-s  
 ART.INDF.PL reason-PL of give-INF ART.INDF credit to.the rumour-PL  
**selon lesquelles** Luka Rocco Magnotta **aurait** **quitt-é**  
 according.to REL.F.PL Luka Rocco Magnotta have.COND3SG leave-PTCP.PST  
 le Canada.  
 ART.DEF.SG.M Canada

‘and local police have indicated that they have reason to believe rumours that Luka Rocco Magnotta – as has been reported – has left Canada.’

([https://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2012/06/01/le-tueur-sadique-de-montreal-serait-il-en-france\\_1711217\\_3222.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/ameriques/article/2012/06/01/le-tueur-sadique-de-montreal-serait-il-en-france_1711217_3222.html))

The following pair (32a, b) contains the complex preposition *à la suite de* ‘following’, which introduces the rumours at stake in a neutral, non-committal way. In (32a), a pluperfect is used (*avait truqué*) and in (32b) a past conditional (*serait venue*), again without there being any obvious difference regarding the epistemic stance towards the rumours.

#### French

- (32) (a) Des émeute-s avaient [...] éclat-é dans le quartier  
 ART.INDF.PL riot-PL have.PST3PL break.out-PTCP.PST in ART.DEF.SG.M district  
 chinois d’ Honiara lors des election-s legislative-s de 2006,  
 Chinese of Honiara during ART.INDF.PL election-PL legislative-PL of 2006  
**à la suite de rumeur-s selon lesquelles** des  
 in ART.DEF.SG.F wake of rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL ART.INDF.PL  
 entreprise-s proche-s de Pékin **avaient truqué** le vote.  
 company-PL close-PL of Beijing have.PST3PL rig-PTCP.PST ART.DEF.SG.M vote  
 ‘Riots broke out in the Chinese district of Honiara during the 2006 legislative elections, following rumours that companies close to Beijing had rigged the vote.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/11/25/manifestations-et-emeutes-dans-les-iles-salomon-pour-exiger-la-demission-du-premier-ministre\\_6103521\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/11/25/manifestations-et-emeutes-dans-les-iles-salomon-pour-exiger-la-demission-du-premier-ministre_6103521_3210.html))

- (b) Un-e vidéo [...] montr-ait de nombreux habitant-s  
 ART.INDF-SG.F video show-PST3SG ART.INDF numerous resident-PL  
 envahiss-ant la rue, [...] à la suite  
 invade-PTCP.PRS ART.DEF.SG.F street in ART.DEF.SG.F wake  
**de rumeur-s selon lesquelles** la police  
 of rumour-PL according.to REL.F.PL ART.DEF.SG.F police  
**serait ven-u-e** arrêt-er des dissidents.  
 be.COND3SG come-PTCP.PST-SG.F arrest-INF ART.INDF.PL dissident-PL  
 ‘A video showed large numbers of residents taking to the streets in defiance of  
 the 8pm curfew, following rumours that the police reportedly had come to arrest  
 dissidents.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/02/13/birmanie-la-pression-augmente-sur-les-militaires-qui-multiplient-les-arrestations\\_6069848\\_3210.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/02/13/birmanie-la-pression-augmente-sur-les-militaires-qui-multiplient-les-arrestations_6069848_3210.html))

Finally, we also find instances with present tense (*projette* in (33a)) and imperfective past tense and pluperfect (*était, avait eu* in (33b)) after the negative verb *démentir* (for the more frequent cases with conditional marking, see examples discussed earlier, (25), (26a), and (27)).

#### French

- (33) (a) Les deux pays ont dément-i les rumeur-s  
 ART.DEF.PL two country.PL have.PRS3PL deny-PTCP.PST ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL  
**selon lesquelles** Washington **progett-e** d’install-er des  
 according.to REL.F.PL Washington plan-PRS3SG of install-INF ART.INDF.PL  
 base-s militaire-s dans ce pays d’Afrique de l’ Ouest.  
 base-PL military-PL in this.SG.M country of Africa of ART.DEF.SG West  
 ‘The two countries have denied rumours that Washington is planning to set up  
 military bases in the West African country. bases in the West African country.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/03/29/au-ghana-l-accord-militaire-avec-les-etats-unis-conteste-dans-la-rue\\_5278011\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/03/29/au-ghana-l-accord-militaire-avec-les-etats-unis-conteste-dans-la-rue_5278011_3212.html))
- (b) [...] il avait dément-i les rumeur-s selon  
 3SG.NOM have.PST3SG deny-PTCP.PST ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL according.to  
**lesquelles** il **était** en train de mour-ir d’ un  
 REL.F.PL 3SG.NOM be.PST3SG in course of die-INF of ART.INDF.SG.M  
 cancer et **avait eu** un-e attaque.  
 cancer and have.PST3SG have.PTCP.PST ART.INDF-SG.F attack  
 ‘he had denied rumours that he was dying of cancer and had had a stroke.’  
 ([https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/09/05/robert-mugabe-souffre-d-un-cancer-de-la-prostate-selon-un-cable-de-wikileaks\\_1567984\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2011/09/05/robert-mugabe-souffre-d-un-cancer-de-la-prostate-selon-un-cable-de-wikileaks_1567984_3212.html))

The findings for French can be interpreted in more than one way. Although no significant difference can be established between the marking of negative, neutral, and positive stance – which seems to suggest that tense selection is more or less random – we should not forget that the French conditional is the dominant tense form in this context and that the frequent use of the conditional goes hand in hand with an increased frequency of negative stance contexts in the context of *rumeurs*, a feature that is absent in Dutch and German.

Table 5. Dutch *zou* in positive, neutral, and negative stance contexts.

	positive	neutral	negative
	(e.g. <i>confirm rumours that</i> ) ( <i>n</i> = 9)	(e.g. <i>there are rumours that</i> ) ( <i>n</i> = 160)	(e.g. <i>deny rumours that</i> ) ( <i>n</i> = 31)
Dutch <i>zou</i> ( <i>n</i> = 54)	1	36 (22.5%)	17 (55%)

To conclude this subsection, let us have a look at the Dutch and German data with respect to whether and how negative stance is coded. In both Dutch and German, negative stance instances are relatively infrequent: the Dutch sample contains 31 negative instances and the German one 22 instances. Interestingly, though, the Dutch sample shows up a significantly increased preference for *zou*, as 17 out of 31 negative instances (55%) have *zou* in the subclause, i.e. one third of all *zou*-instances in the corpus (*n* = 54) occur in a negative environment, as Table 5 shows.

By contrast, the instances of neutral epistemic stance only feature *zou* in 22.5% (36/160) of all cases, whereas the positive ones (*n* = 9) exhibit only one occurrence of *zou*. The association of *zou* with negative contexts is statistically significant (chi-square = 12.3685, *p* value = .000437, significant at *p* < .05). In the three following examples, we find negative contexts (‘rumours are very unlikely’ in (34a), they are ‘refuted’ in (34b), and ‘put to an end’ in (34c)) combined with the use of reportative *zou*.

Dutch

- (34) (a) De [...] **gerucht-en dat** het orkest de  
ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL COMP ART.DEF.SG.N orchestra ART.DEF.PL  
#MeToo-beschuldiging-en **zou hebb-en aangegrepen** als welkome  
#MeToo-allegation-PL REP.SG have-INF USE.PTCP.PST as welcome  
aanleiding om de relatie met Gatti te beëindig-en,  
occasion to ART.DEF.SG.C relationship with Gatti to end-INF  
**zijn** om meer reden-en **zeer onwaarschijnlijk**.  
be.PRS.PL for several reason-PL very unlikely  
‘The rumours that the orchestra – as has been reported – has used the #MeToo  
allegations as a welcome reason to end its relationship with Gatti are highly  
unlikely for several reasons.’ (NRC.next, 3 August 2018, p. 1)
- (b) Altice **ontzenuw-de gerucht-en dat** de Portugese tak van  
Altice refute-PST.SG rumour-PL COMP ART.DEF.SG.C Portuguese branch of  
het [...] telecombedrijf te koop **zou staan**.  
ART.DEF.SG.N telecom.company for sale REP.SG stand.INF  
‘Altice refuted rumours that the Portuguese branch of the telecom company  
reportedly was up for sale.’ (NRC.next, 1 September 2018, p.6)
- (c) De Syrische vicepresident Farouk al-Sharaa vertoon-de zich  
ART.DEF.SG.C Syrian vice.president Farouk al-Sharaa show.up-PST.SG REFL

gisteren in het openbaar [...], waarmee hij een  
yesterday in ART.DEF.SG.N public with.which 3SG.NOM.M ART.INDF.SG  
einde maak-te aan de gerucht-en dat hij naar  
end put-PST.SG to ART.DEF.PL rumour-PL COMP 3SG.NOM.M to  
de rebell-en zou zijn overgelopen.  
ART.DEF.PL rebel-PL REP.SG be.INF defect.PTCP.PST  
'Syrian Vice President Farouk al-Sharaa showed up publicly in Damascus  
yesterday, putting an end to rumours that he – as was reported – had defected  
to the rebels.'  
(NRC, 27 August 2012)

For Dutch, therefore, we can posit a link between negative epistemic stance and an increased use of reportative *zou*. The situation is quite different in German. For one thing, reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> hardly occurs in combination with *Gerüchte* (*n* = 5). Of these five instances, four occur in a neutral context and one in a negative one. There does not seem to be an association between negative epistemic overtones and the use of reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> in German. This raises the question whether negative epistemic overtones are marked in German at all. This does not seem to be the case. The following Table 6 presents an overview of the forms found in the complement clauses introduced by *dass* in distancing contexts. Of course, the absolute numbers are small, but the high formal variation is nevertheless striking. We find no less than seven different tense or mood types in these 22 instances: present indicative (IND.PRS), past indicative (IND.PST), pluperfect indicative (IND.PST.PRF), indicative *sollen* (*soll*<sub>IND</sub>), indicative future tense (IND.FUT, with the auxiliary *werden*), present subjunctive (SBJV.PRS), and past subjunctive (SBJV.PST), without one type being clearly dominant. Remarkably, indicative forms are just as frequent (*n* = 11) as subjunctive ones (*n* = 11).

Table 6. Verb forms in negative contexts (German).

negative contexts	IND.PRS	IND.PST	IND.PST.PRF	<i>soll</i> <sub>IND</sub>	IND.FUT	SBJV.PRS	SBJV.PST
<i>n</i> = 22	6	2	1	1	1	8	3

This finding corroborates the conclusion that epistemic distance is not explicitly marked in German in this particular context. Indicative forms and subjunctive ones – the latter mainly to be interpreted as markers of indirect speech – can be used here, depending on what aspects of the rumours the writer wants to emphasise. The following instances exemplify some of the variation found in contexts of negative epistemic stance: a present indicative *ist* in (35a), a pluperfect indicative (*aufgehoben hatte*) in (35b), and a present subjunctive (*unterstütze*) in (35c).

German

- (35) (a) Jäger tritt dem Gerücht entgegen, dass  
Jäger counter.IND.PRS3SG ART.DEF.DAT.SG.N rumour against COMP  
sein Verein neben Würzburg ebenfalls von der  
his.NOM.SG.M club alongside Würzburg also by ART.DEF.DAT.SG.F



Insolvenz bedroh-t ist.  
 insolvency threaten-PTCP.PST be.IND.PRS3SG  
 'Jäger counters the rumour that his club, along with Würzburg, is also threatened with insolvency.' (*Der Tagesspiegel*, 31 March 2004)

- (b) **Gerücht-e**, dass die Agentur die Tsunamiwarnung  
 rumour-PL COMP ART.DEF.NOM.SG.F agency ART.DEF tsunami.warning  
**aufgehoben hatte**, bevor die Welle auf Land  
 lift.PTCP.PST have.IND.PST3SG before ART.DEF.NOM.SG.F wave on land  
 traf, **erwiesen sich als falsch**.  
 hit.IND.PST3SG appear.IND.PST3PL REFL as incorrect  
 'Rumours that the agency had lifted the tsunami warning before the wave hit land proved to be false.' (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 1 October 2018, p. 8)
- (c) [...] der Unternehmer [...] **dementier-te** **bei** Radio Swoboda  
 ART.DEF.NOM.SG.M entrepreneur deny-IND.PST3SG at Radio Swoboda  
 [...] **Gerücht-e** **dass** er Timoschenko  
 rumour-pl COMP 3SG.NOM.M Timoshenko  
**unterstütz-e**, [...]  
 support-SBJV.PRS3SG  
 'The entrepreneur denied rumours on Radio Swoboda that he supported Timoshenko.' (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 October 2018, p. 7)

## 6. Conclusions

The study presented in this paper has shown that French, Dutch, and German clearly differ with respect to the use of their reportative markers in subclauses after 'rumours'. Whereas in French, a clear preference for the use of the (reportative) conditional could be established (44.5% of all instances in the corpus have the reportative conditional in the subclause), this tendency is less prominent in Dutch – with reportative *zou* + INF occurring in about 10% of all instances – and completely absent in German. The frequent use of the reportative conditional in French combines with the observation that in the French data, the combination *rumeurs selon lesquelles* occurs remarkably often in contexts of negative epistemic stance, for instance, in combination with the main verb *démentir* 'deny' (or one of its synonyms). The most frequent verb in the French sample is indeed *démentir*, whereas in Dutch and German, neutral collocations prevail (e.g. 'rumours go', 'rumours circulate', and 'there are rumours'). This lends credit to the hypothesis that in French journalistic prose, the general epistemic stance towards *rumeurs* is more negative than in Dutch and German. The fact that *rumeurs* strongly associates with the conditional – which has been described as a marker of epistemic distancing (Celle 2020), of uncertainty (Merle 2004), or of contestation (Haillet 1998) – points to the same direction.

As a reportative marker, Dutch *zou* + INF is found to strongly associate with contexts of negative epistemic stance, but such contexts are not as dominant in Dutch (neutral contexts clearly prevail, accounting for 80% of all cases) as they are in French. For German *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF, no association whatsoever between reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> and negative epistemic stance could be detected. In fact, it seems that negative epistemic stance is not formally marked in

German at all. An interesting observation for German pertains to the fact that *rumeurs* are also conceptualised as referring to speech acts, parts of which can even be quoted. This is at least suggested by the highly common use of the present (and sometimes also past) subjunctive – as a marker of indirect speech also giving prominence to the reported speaker and the original speech act – in subclauses after *Gerüchte*.

That *soll*<sub>IND</sub> patterns completely differently than the French conditional (and to a lesser extent Dutch *zou*) can be accounted for on multiple grounds. First, whereas the conditional and *zou* are tightly connected to the expression of negative epistemic stance in their main use (note that the hypothetical/counterfactual use of both markers appears to be the most frequent one in present-day journalistic prose, see Mortelmans 2024), *sollen* more strongly associates with a (positive) inclination towards realisation of what is being planned or intended. Second, both the conditional and *zou* contain past tense morphology and hence often evoke a past temporal point of reference (which is clearly the case in their function of signalling ulteriority in the past), which is distinct from the present speaker's point of reference. By contrast, reportative *soll*<sub>IND</sub> is closely tied to the present indicative in German and does not evoke an alternative point of reference. More difficult to account for are the (mainly quantitative) differences between the French and Dutch reportative markers: while it is clear that both associate with negative epistemic stance, the French conditional in general occurs more frequently in negative stance contexts.

Remarkably similar are French and German in the relatively frequent occurrence of the epistemic modal *pourrait/könnte* in the subclause following *rumeurs/Gerüchte* (*pourrait*: *n* = 15/200; *könnte*: *n* = 21/200). This hints at another meaning aspect connected to rumours: that what is being rumoured about is conceptualised as possible by the speaker.

Finally, I hope to have shown that a comparative, strongly empirical approach to linguistic data like the one presented in this paper can provide important insights regarding the various language systems. The French conditional is an inherently different reportative from the German one, which is an insight that cannot be won by studying the French conditional and the Dutch *soll*<sub>IND</sub> + INF construction in isolation.

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#### Abbreviations.

1	first person
2	second person
3	third person
ACC	accusative
ART	article
AUX	auxiliary
COMP	complementiser
COND	conditional
DAT	dative
DEF	definite
DEM	demonstrative
EXPL	expletive

GEN	genitive
HON	honorific
IND	indicative
INDF	indefinite
INF	infinitive
IRR	irrealis
NOM	nominative
NEG	negation
OBL	oblique
PASS	passive
PERF	perfective
PL	plural
PRS	present
PST	past
PTCP	participle
REL	relative
REP	reportative
SBJV	subjunctive
SG	singular

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