

New French: A Pedagogical Crisis in the Making

interesting

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WRITTEN/SPOKEN/MODERN/NEW FRENCH. IN PERSPECTIVE, foreign language pedagogy has shown amazing consistency over the last thirty years, with every major development favoring the promotion of speaking ability and listening comprehension to a level at least equal with that of writing and reading. This evolution is tied to broader sociological changes in the American educational system: concern with following a traditional curriculum and insuring that graduates exhibit the hallmarks of accession to a higher social class have given way to a new pragmatism and a sensitivity to other cultures. As opportunities for travel have spread from the upper to the middle classes, the notion that language study might allow students to interact face-to-face with members of a foreign culture—a kind of interaction primarily dependent upon spoken, not written, language ability—has become commonplace.

Furthermore, it is widely held in pedagogical circles that, while second-language acquisition cannot directly reproduce the ideal patterns of first-language acquisition, neither should it run counter to them. From the most primitive audio-lingual methodology through the "Natural" approach of Krashen, Terrell, et al., there is underlying faith in a sequence which lets the learner acquire spoken language structures before transferring them to writing, just as the native-speaking child does.

But increased emphasis on spoken language has involved more than disengaging the hand and eye in favor of the mouth and ear. Written and spoken languages themselves are never identical. The nature of written language is to

be conservative, since one of the functions of writing is transmission across time (see Joseph, 10 §2.1). In extreme circumstances, a single society may employ separate languages in writing and speaking. This condition is known as diglossia; it existed throughout Europe during the Middle Ages, when written Latin coexisted with spoken vernaculars, some closely related to it (e.g. French), some distantly related (e.g. German), some unrelated (e.g. Hungarian) (see Ferguson, Britto).

Diglossia continues to exist in much of the world. In Haiti, for example, French is the normal language of writing and formal functions. Haitian Creole, the normal spoken vernacular, is by every measure a distinct language. Creole is progressively usurping functional spheres from French, just as French usurped them centuries ago from Latin. Diglossias are thus "nativized" and undone.

In every country of the Francophone world Standard French is in competition for functional spheres, either with indigenous languages (Wolof in Senegal, Basque in southwestern France), with other ex-colonial languages (English in Quebec, English and Arabic in Lebanon), or with French dialects other than the Metropolitan Standard (*québécois* in Quebec, *jerriais* in Jersey).¹ Falling into the last category is the current linguistic situation of France itself. Consider the following pairs of questions:

- (1a) *C'est quoi ça?*
- (1b) *Qu'est-ce que cela?*
- (2a) *Toi tu viens d'où?*
- (2b) *D'où viens-tu?*
- (3a) *Ça coûte cher cette Fiat?*
- (3b) *Est-ce que cette Fiat coûte cher?*
- (4a) *Pierre i-l-aime pas Marie?*
- (4b) *Pierre n'aime-t-il pas Marie?*

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Most people would agree that we are not dealing with two separate languages here, but with two dialects of one same language, specifically the standard dialect and a socially-marked variant. For the linguist, the situation is very familiar: the (a) forms represent the current state of evolution, while the (b) forms represent a prior state which has been fossilized through the institution of the standard language. The linguist also knows that, barring any sudden upheaval in the historical course of Western civilization, the (a) forms will eventually replace the (b) forms within the standard language.

According to one linguistic theory, the pairs of questions may already indicate a substantial structural difference that could create a major linguistic schism in the near future, with Modern French giving way to a stage which we may tentatively term "New French."² In the 1960s, linguists (notably Greenberg) realized that the ordering of subject (S), object (O), and verb (V) is perhaps the crucial determining parameter of a language's structure. If a language has VO order, for example, we can predict that it will also have prepositions and prefixed inflections, while languages with OV order will have postpositions and suffixed inflections. When the Romance languages broke out of the preferred SOV order of Latin (*Paulus Mariam amat* "Paul loves Mary") and developed the SVO order which they exhibit today (*Paul aime Marie*), this typological change provided a sharp historical break.

If Latin *Paulus Mariam amat* (SOV) was the normal way of saying "Paul loves Mary," one could topicalize "Mary" as the new or surprising information conveyed in the sentence by using SVO order: *Paulus amat Mariam* "Paul loves Mary." This, according to Vennemann, was the source of the pattern which would later become normal. Similarly, in current spoken French, one can make Paul the topic of *Paul aime Marie* by saying *Paul, il aime Marie* or *Il aime Marie, Paul*. To distinguish the two types, with the subject preposed or postposed to the central clause, the first is called "topic" and the second "antitopic" (see Lambrecht).

An influential theory enunciated in the 1970s (see especially Harris) holds that the antitopic structure represents the first step in the development of French toward a new VS typology: the lexical subject, *Paul*, follows the verb, while

the pronoun *il* is reduced to the status of an inflectional marker, just like the *-t* of Latin *amat*. Let us look at the word order of the answers to questions (1) through (4) above:³

(1a') *C'est un mot ça.*

V O S

(1b') *C'est un mot.*

S V O

(2a') *J'viens de Nancy moi.*

V O S

(2b') *Je viens de Nancy.*

S V O

(3a') *Non, ça coûte pas cher ça.*

V O S

(3b') *Non, elle ne coûte pas cher.*

S V O

(4a') *Non, i-la-déteste lui.*

O V S

(4b') *Non, il la déteste.*

S O V

If this is the case, if there really is a typological quantum leap between the dialects in question, then their schism into separate languages is not only inevitable but fairly close at hand on the historical scale. We would then be distinguishing not merely between "Modern" and "New" French, but between systems so different that a name other than "French" would better fit the emerging language.⁴

But whether or not French is in the early stages of establishing a VS order, the structural gap between the standard dialect and what most educated urban people speak in most circumstances is considerably wider than for any other major European language. Even if various English dialects are mutually incomprehensible, they show a fundamental structural cohesion; the same may be said of Spanish, German, Italian, Russian, Portuguese. In none of these languages is the living base of the standard dialect threatened by changes of this order.

The most salient structural changes in French are the following (Lambrecht: 6-7; Barnes: 3)

Changes Nearly Completed

- 1) Loss of special interrogative forms: *tu viens d'où?*
- 2) Replacement of *nous* by *on*: *est content(s)*
- 3) Generalization of *ça* as in *cela me plaît* → *ça me plaît*; *il pleut* → *ça pleut*
- 4) Replacement of certain syntactic forms:⁵ *il arriva* → *il est arrivé*; *il veut arriver* → *il arrive*

Changes Well Underway, with New French Forms Frequent

- 5) Elimination of *ne*: *il n'aime pas*
- 6) Loss of impersonal *il* in some constructions: *faut manger* / *il y a des problèmes*
- 7) Phonetic reduction of subject pronouns: *il(s) parle(nt)* → *i parle* (with *peut*)
- 8) Use of certain prepositions: *je viens avec*
- 9) Extension of possessive *à*: *à mon frère*

Change in Early Stages, with New French Forms More Frequent

- 10) Generalization of *que* as relative pronoun: *jouent là* → *les enfants que jouent là*; *l'homme que je parle*

The unusually conservative nature of modern French has rendered the process of adjustment to *le bon usage* of the language (notably under the influence of the seventeenth century), the emerging New French of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been one of the most difficult efforts at "protecting" the language from the insure that the distance from the living language grows, and inevitably results in a language that is most functional spheres by the time it is French that is only beginning

The most salient structural changes in New French are the following (adapted from Lambrecht: 6-7; Barnes: 3-4):

Changes Nearly Completed in New French

- 1) Loss of special interrogative word order: *d'où viens-tu?* → *tu viens d'où?*
- 2) Replacement of *nous* by *on*: *nous sommes contents* → *on est content(s)*
- 3) Generalization of *ça* as impersonal subject pronoun:⁵ *cela me plaît* → *ça me plaît* / *ce sera tout* → *ça sera tout* / *il pleut* → *ça pleut*
- 4) Replacement of certain synthetic verb tenses by analytic forms:⁶ *il arriva* → *il est arrivé* / *il arrivera* → *il va arriver* ~ *il veut arriver* ~ *il doit arriver*

Changes Well Underway, with both the Modern French and New French Forms Frequent

- 5) Elimination of *ne*: *il n'aime pas Marie* → *il aime pas Marie*
- 6) Loss of impersonal *il* in some contexts: *il faut manger* → *faut manger* / *il y a des problèmes* → *y a des problèmes*
- 7) Phonetic reduction of subject pronouns: *tu as vu* → *t'as vu* / *il(s) parle(nt)* → *i parle (nt)* / *vous avez peur* → *vz-avez peur*
- 8) Use of certain prepositions as adverbs: *je viens avec vous* → *je viens avec*
- 9) Extension of possessive *à*: *la voiture de mon frère* → *la voiture à mon frère*

Change in Early Stages, with Modern French Form More Frequent

- 10) Generalization of *que* as relative pronoun: *les enfants qui jouent là* → *les enfants que jouent là* / *l'homme de qui je parle* → *l'homme que je parle*

The unusually conservative nature of Standard French has rendered the situation more difficult. Though it has seen periodic phases of adjustment to *le bon usage* of a socially dominant class (notably under the aegis of Vaugelas in the seventeenth century), the attitude toward the emerging New French in the last two centuries has been one of retrenchment. Such efforts at "protecting" the standard dialect insure that the distance from its dialect base will grow, and inevitably result in its becoming a classical—i.e., dead—language, replaced in most functional spheres by a Standard New French that is only beginning to emerge.⁷

The Pedagogical Dilemma. Language teachers know that students, in interacting with their French-speaking peers, will be exposed to far more type (a) than type (b) questions. In fact, if a type (b) question is ever addressed to them orally, it will be in the sort of formal or artificial situation which the average student rarely encounters. On the other hand, the teacher knows that in such a situation the student who poses a type (a) instead of a type (b) question may well receive a negative social judgment. The object of American education has decidedly never been to place students into a lower social class than the one in which they originate.

This is the crisis at hand: a foreign-language pedagogy moving steadily in the direction of oral proficiency and cultural openness encounters a spoken language which is the butt of cultural prejudice, perhaps even more among American teachers of French than among the general educated French population.

As the chasm between Modern and New French widens, we shall be forced to choose from among the following options. (A) represents the status quo. (B) and (C) involve a change of either language focus or pedagogical orientation. (D), (E), and (F) envisage teaching both languages, each with a pedagogy appropriate to its functional domain.

A. *Maintain the present course, an oral approach to a language which is steadily becoming restricted to written contexts.* The disadvantages of this option should already be clear: it is inconsistent with the goals of the proficiency movement to spend time training students for oral ability in Standard Modern French, when that is less and less likely to be the language of normal interaction with their peers. Oral drills of inversion questions (*D'où êtes-vous?*) and complex inversion questions (*Pierre d'où est-il?*), for example, more closely resemble the artificial use of classroom Latin or Greek than training in a living language.

B. *Maintain the oral approach, but de-emphasize Modern French in favor of New French.* This option would change the linguistic focus. The advantage is a greater consistency with the goals of the proficiency movement as well as of the natural approach. An important characteristic of any standard language is that it is never altogether "native" to anyone; features of it must be learned (rather than assimilated) in the cultural institution of education (see Joseph, 10

§1.3). As Modern French becomes restricted to exclusively "standard" contexts, this aspect of it grows. Therefore, attempting to have non-native students "assimilate" it is patently artificial.

The disadvantage to this option is that, although New French is on the rise, Modern French is far from dead, and is likely to persist in formal written usage through the next century. Universities have never seen their role to be that of producing illiterates in a foreign language, so long as that language has a tradition of alphabetic writing.⁸

C. *Maintain the emphasis on Modern French, but revert to a reading-writing based methodology.* This choice, which shifts the pedagogical orientation, has the advantage of being methodologically consistent. Modern French would be treated as a classical language, which in time it will become. Furthermore, by concentrating our efforts on reading and writing, we could produce outstanding proficiency in these areas, which students could then use as a basis for developing oral skills.

But for nearly a century the evolution of language instruction has gone unerringly in the direction of living languages. The academic community and the general populace have come to recognize that the study of classical languages, while valuable for a humanistic education, must nevertheless take second place to the need to enable our students to communicate with their compeers across the globe. People will always study Modern French, just as they study Old French and Latin, but as the linguistic changes outlined above continue to progress, these people are destined to become a minority.

Finally, the notion of building oral skills upon written ones is counter-natural, since the native learner proceeds in the opposite sequence.

D. *Teach students simultaneously to speak New French and write Modern French.* This is in a sense the ideal goal, since it would put the student in the position of doing just what the French (in steadily increasing numbers) are doing. It is, alas, unfeasible: one French is as much as most students can cope with. Two at once would be cruel and unusual.⁹ Nor is it pedagogically sound, since a cognitive need for sequenced learning has been recognized and generally accepted.

Assuming then that this is not our working methodology but our ultimate goal, what is the optimal ordering of tasks to help us attain it?

E. *Teach students first to write Modern French, then to speak New French.* This option has most of the advantages and disadvantages of (C) above, including the fact that it represents a counter-natural order. But as Modern French loses ground as a spoken language, this is the option most likely to appeal to the American academic community. Indeed, to a large extent this option is already taking place *de facto* in current university curricula, where students receive a heavy dose of New French in second-year conversation courses (depending, of course, upon the linguistic conservatism of the instructor).

It seems altogether likely that early in the next century—which is to say, within a few years—French departments will simply begin to recognize in an official manner that the languages used in the conversation and grammar courses are more than casually divergent, and the option described here will be effectively in place. The essential question will then be at what point to make the crossover. During the first year? Between the first and second year? Meanwhile, instruction in written Modern French will have to continue in order to stave off interference from New French.

F. *Teach students first to speak New French, then to write Modern French.* It follows from all the remarks that have preceded that this option provides the greatest consistency with the natural sequence and proficiency approaches. Unlike (E), it will not come into place by default, but will require a minor revolution. The problem of timing is the same: how much acquisition of L2 should be attained before we impose learning of L2 ½? Here, clearly, is a direction for a major research initiative.

The crisis will persist only so long as a Standard New French is still in the making, and Modern French retains significant functional domains. During this transitional period, Modern French cannot drop to the status of an option. One important tool holds promise for facilitating the introduction of written Modern French at a mid-point in the curriculum: the computer. If CAI becomes the domain of written Modern French, after a period of concentration on spoken New French, the change of media may help students cope with the need to keep the two linguistic systems mentally

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stratified. What is more, the problem of language teaching is seeking the precise justification for introducing CAI directly.

Conclusion. French-language education faces a unique crisis: the wide gap between Modern French and the growing exclusion of French from the oral and formal domains. Traditional language methodology, which emphasizes oral and the natural world, is in motion of New French, but such a development is being put together wrongly—by acceding to cultural prejudices.

As the importance

NOTES

I am grateful to Ralph Tarter for his valuable discussion and comments. I would gladly share the views stated here.

¹The term "diglossia" is restricted to two languages are socially stratified. If both languages are involved, we may use the more inclusive term "superposition" (J. H. Greenberg, "Diglossia and Superposition").

²Through most of this century, the French spoken in the south has been called *le français populaire* (see Sauvageot). André Léo's *français avancé*, which connotes the informal French of the south, is a Modern French. When that term is used, the terms will cease to be appropriate. (Lambrecht 100-01, n. 11).

³The symbol O here indicates a complement.

⁴More recent work has forced us to question these assumptions. Lambrecht questions the traditional basis for saying that antitopic is dominant over topic structure. He argues that subject pronouns are the markers (a proposal dating back to Barnes). Barnes casts doubt even upon the traditional method of finding evidence that either s

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stratified. What is more, it might well solve the problem of language teachers who have been seeking the precise justification and context for introducing CAI directly into instruction.

Conclusion. French-language pedagogy faces a unique crisis: the widening structural schism between Modern French and New French, and the growing exclusion of the former to written and formal domains. The steady evolution of language methodology in the direction of the oral and the natural would seem to dictate promotion of New French over Modern French, but such a development is blocked—not altogether wrongly—by academic tradition and cultural prejudices.

As the importance of New French as a

 NOTES

I am grateful to Ralph Tarica & Jeffrey Chamberlain for valuable discussion and commentary. They do not necessarily share the views stated herein.

¹The term "diglossia" is restricted to cases where distinct languages are socially stratified. When dialects of one same language are involved, we may employ the more all-inclusive term "superposition" (Joseph, "Superposed Languages").

²Through most of this century the emerging language has been called *le français populaire* (see Bauche) or *le français parlé* (see Sauvageot). André Martinet preferred *le français avancé*, which connotes the inevitability of its overtaking Modern French. When that happens, of course, all these terms will cease to be appropriate. On "New French," see Lambrecht (100-01, n. 11).

³The symbol O here indicates any non-subject verbal complement.

⁴More recent work has forced a weakening of these assertions. Lambrecht questions whether there is any empirical basis for saying that antitopic structures are becoming dominant over topic structures, while accepting the idea that subject pronouns are becoming mere inflectional markers (a proposal dating back to W. von Wartburg). Barnes casts doubt even upon the latter idea, since she fails to find evidence that either structure is becoming gram-

spoken language grows, however, we will finally have no choice but to deal with it as an academic subject matter. The result is likely to be two opposite courses of action. Students' training will begin either with written Modern French (option E) or with spoken New French (option F), followed by a transition to the other. (F) is favored by current pedagogical theories and orientations, (E) by entropy. Linguists and methodologists working in French who concur in the preferability of option (F) should begin now to consider the struggle that lies ahead, and to establish research programs that will help set the proper course before entropy does its work.

maticalized (see also Joseph, rev. of Barnes). Further undercutting the notion of a typological cycle is evidence that Spoken Latin may not have been SOV as previously supposed (see Panhuis; also Joseph, "Inflection").

⁵The *ça pleut* type is considerably less frequent than the others (see Olsson).

⁶The *passé simple* is, of course, extremely infrequent in New French. On the evolution of the verbal tenses, see further Fleischman.

⁷New French is approaching the intermediate stages of standardization by Kloss's (52) ordered list of criteria (an English translation appears in my *Eloquence & Power*, §4.3.4). Its cultural domains are manifold and mostly popular—non-informational television and radio broadcasts, advertisements, popular music and theater—though with some notable "high" cultural manifestations in literary works by Céline, Queneau, Vian, et al. Kloss considers use in non-fictional writing (*Sachprosa*) to be essential for standard-language status; New French is in the early stage at which its non-fictional use, while common, is restricted to humorous contexts.

⁸The case could be made that the student who does not learn new French is culturally semi-literate.

⁹French textbooks vary in the amount of New French structures introduced and the manner of characterizing them. Sandberg and Zask have probably gone farther than any other textbook authors in basing dialogues on authentic New French, but I have heard teachers who use *Le Français à propos* attest that students do not emerge with a good sense of what structures are appropriate in what circumstances.

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Mildenberger Prize to Omaggio

THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA has awarded its seventh annual Kenneth W. Mildenberger Prize to Alice C. Omaggio, Associate Professor of French at the University of Illinois, for her book *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction* (Heinle 1986). The prize, awarded for an outstanding research publication in the field of teaching foreign languages and literatures, consists of a check for \$500, an embossed certificate, and a year's membership in the MLA.

The selection committee, the members of which are appointed by the MLA Committee

on Teaching and Related Professional Activities, consisted this year of Madeleine B. Therrien, Gloria Flaherty, Vivian Kogan, Gladys E. Saunders, and John Underwood. The committee's citation of the award reads: "Using proficiency as the organizing principle, Omaggio's book investigates a wide range of issues in second language learning. Remarkable for its thorough documentation, its originality of thought, and its clarity of presentation, her timely volume is a highly effective tool for teacher training and for methodology courses."

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