

**THE FRENCH LANGUAGE :  
A LONG HISTORY FULL OF BORROWINGS.**

By

**Jean PRUVOST**

**University of Cergy-Pontoise,  
Directeur éditorial des Editions Honoré Champion  
Chroniqueur de Canal Académie (www.canalacademie.com)**

**It is evident that a language may evolve throughout the course of History to such an extent that the first written trace is absolutely incomprehensible.**

Let us consider a sentence taken from our very first text written in French, *les Serments de Strasbourg/ The Oaths of Strasbourg* (842) :

...sisaluarai eo. cist meon fradre karlo, et in aiudha et in cadhuna cosa. sicum om per dreit son fradra saluar dift.

Now let us take a look at the various alterations of this sentence throughout the evolution of the French language that the language historian Ferdinand Brunot (1860-1938) has reconstructed:

**In 12<sup>th</sup> century French:**

...si salverai jo cest mien fredre Charlon, et en aiude, et en chascune chose, si come on par dreit, en ço que il me altresì façet.

**In 15th century French :**

...si sauverai je cest mien frere Charle, et par mon aide et en chascune chose, si, comme on doit par droit son frere sauver, en ce qu'il me face autresi.

**In modern French:**

...je soutiendrai mon frère Charles de mon aide et en toute chose, comme on doit justement soutenir son frère, à condition qu'il en fasse autant.

Without the translation into modern French, it would be impossible to understand the text written in 842. In fact very few words have remained identical from 842 to nowadays. Punctuation hardly ever appears in the first text. Also, how can one spot the subject pronoun "I" in its initial form "eo" without being informed?

In order to understand the evolution of the French language, one has to retrace the major shifts and changes in language evolution while acknowledging the

important influences that different languages have had on French depending on the History of France and Europe.

In fact it is undeniable that the French language has been strengthened and enriched throughout its evolution from the influences of these diverse languages throughout History.

***1 French belongs to the Indo-European language family.***

Between -6500 and -5500 populations speaking the same language, undoubtedly from North-West Europe, near Ukraine, emigrated in successive waves throughout Europe and India. This is why this family of languages were later characterized and given the name Indo-European. Those peoples, who founded Gaule, Rome, etc, made the languages already existing disappear when they settled in Europe. Only Basque, which resisted, is now defined as a pre-Indo-European language.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the discovery of a very ancient Indian language, Sanskrit, which displayed similarities to the European languages, revealed that languages as different as Sanskrit from Latin, English, German, Breton, Russian, Persian and French shared the same language ancestor: Indo-European.

Striking similarities

French	Latin	English	German	Breton	Russian	Persian
six	sex	six	sechs	c'hwec'h	shest	shisht
mère	mater	mother	Mutter	Mamm	mat	modar
frère	frater	brother	Bruder	Breur	brat	baradar
père	pater	father	Vater	Tad	(atets)	pedar
sœur	soror	sister	Schwester	c'hoar	siestra	khalar

In fact, no written trace remains from Indo-European since it existed well before writing was invented. Linguists have now roughly reconstituted a group of Indo-European roots by comparing modern languages.

***2 The French language principally evolved from spoken Latin.***

***The Gauls and Latin.***

Just like Latin, spoken by a small people settled in Italie alongside the Tiber river, Gaulois, a celtic language like Breton, is part of the Indo-European family. When the Romans conquered a big part of Europe, and Gaul in -52, the Roman soldiers' and civil servants' use of spoken Latin spread quickly. In the 4<sup>th</sup> century, the Gaul language had nearly totally disappeared giving way to a Latin changed and adjusted with the Gaul accent and filled with Germanic loan words that corresponded with various Germanic invasions. While the French language mainly evolved from spoken Latin, it still contains a hundred Gaul words and a little less than thousand words of Germanic origins can be found. These words are not necessarily loan words, but more likely to be considered as hereditary words. In fact they were active participants in the birth of the French language.

### ***The Gaul substrate of the French Language***

The Gaul language was spoken by about 15 million people but was not a written language which made its disappearance easier. As Latin represented an administration and trade language, and as Romans taught the Gaul chiefs' children in Latin, Gaul progressively disappeared.

The only Gaul words that remained in the emerging French language were words attached to the land and to products that could not be sold. Thus, the word in French for "honey", (miel), has Latin origins while the word for "hive", an object which wasn't subject to trade, remained the Gaulo word- "ruche".

### **Words of Gaul origin that can be found in French**

<b>alouette</b>	<b>caillou</b>	<b>galet</b>	<b>raie</b>
<b>arpent</b>	<b>char</b>	<b>glaise</b>	<b>ruche</b>
<b>bâche</b>	<b>chemin</b>	<b>jarret</b>	<b>soc</b>
<b>borne</b>	<b>chêne</b>	<b>lande</b>	<b>suie</b>
<b>bouleau</b>	<b>druide</b>	<b>marne</b>	<b>tanche</b>
<b>bruyère</b>	<b>dune</b>	<b>mouton</b>	<b>tonneau</b>

The Gaul words in our language that survived are what linguists call a "substrate". A substrate is a language which was supplanted (in our case, Gaul) by another language during a conquest (the Romans' Latin) but which leaves influences in the language that supplants it.

### ***The Germanic invasions***

The first infiltrations on the Gallo-Roman territory began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, then the Barbarian people that had been long kept on the other side of the Rhine crossed the river in the 5<sup>th</sup> century. First, the Burgundians and the Vandals, then

the Franks who would give the territory their name with Clovis, King of the Franks in 481. From then on, new words from Germanic languages spoken by those new conquerors spread. Due to the Germanic influence, oral Latin, that still contained a few words in Gaul here and there, progressively changed into a language that would then be called Roman. As for the written language, it remained classical Latin, clearly differing from the spoken language.

Unlike Gaul words, Germanic words correspond to a “superstrate”. A superstrate is a language that the conquerors did not manage to impose. Instead, they adopted the language of the country they conquered to the detriment of their own, though leaving a few words in various fields. The Germanic languages left about 800 words in the French language, particularly in the fields of war, institutions and feelings.

**Some words coming from Germanic languages which were fixed into the French language.**

<b>War</b>	fief	<b>Food</b>	esturgeon
balafre	gage	cruche	hanneton
broyer	rang	flan	hareng
butin	<b>Feelings</b>	gâteau	marsouin
effrayer	émoi	gaufre	mulot
éperon	épanouir	groseille	<b>Building</b>
épieu	hair	souper	beffroi
galoper	honte	<b>Body</b>	halle
garder	orgueil	babines	loge
guerre	regretter	crampe	salle
guetter	<b>Clothes</b>	guérir	<b>Colors</b>
hache	broder	hanche	blafard
heaume	coiffe	heurter	blanc
maréchal	écharpe	rider	bleu
sénéchal	étouffe	saisir	brun
taper	gant	tomber	gris
<b>Institutions &amp; celebrations</b>	haillon	<b>Animals</b>	sale
bannir	housse	brème	<b>Adverbs</b>
baron	moufle	chouette	trop
danser	poche	épervier	guère

**3. Old French (9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century) is closer to Latin than to Modern French.**

The first text written in French that we know dates from 842. The Oaths of Strasbourg were exchanged in Strasbourg between Louis the German in Germanic language, and Charles the Bald, in French, both pledging military allegiance to their brother Lothair. In order for it to be understood by the soldiers and to give

the oaths a high symbolic value, the text was written in Germanic and French, not Latin as it was the custom.

At the time, France was divided into two language zones. In the South, there were the dialects in which “oui” (“yes”) was *oc*, and which were afterwards called Languages of Oc. In the North, the dialects in which “oui” was *oïl* were the Languages of Oïl. The dialects of Oïl were predominant when Paris became the capital of the kings and Old French traces its origins from them.

Great literary texts were written in Old French from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. They were written in verse and were often sung, like *The Song of Roland* (in French “*La Chanson de Roland*”) which recounts stories of chivalry under Charlemagne’s reign, or like the novels of the court with, for instance, the hero Lancelot.

Like Latin, Old French contained declensions, i.e, the ending of a word changed depending on the function it had in a sentence. This allowed to position the words in a freer order than in Modern French. In fact, the subject could be found after the verb since its ending allowed its identification. Out of the six Latin declensions, only that of the subject and the complement remained in Old French.

#### ***4. Borrowings from the Normand language and the Arabic language enrich the French language.***

Following the Viking invasions in Normandy (10<sup>th</sup> century) and the establishment of the Arabic Empire, carrier of a very advanced civilization that exercised its influence from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the French language was enriched by borrowing words it lacked.

##### ***Borrowings from the Viking language***

The Normans (“Nortman”), the “men of the North” came from Scandinavia on long ships a little after 800. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century, they multiplied expeditions on to the French coasts. In 911, the king of France, Charles the Simple, gave Normandy to their chief, Rollon, under the condition that the latter became a Christian and that his people would no longer attack the French. From the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Normandy thus became a very powerful fiefdom with the Duke William who would take over England in 1066.

Meanwhile, the Viking descendants had adopted the French language. Therefore, they spread French in England when they conquered it. This is why a lot of French words are still found in the English language. Their pronunciation or spelling makes them hard to make out. Who would spontaneously recognize the word “boudin” in “pudding” or the French “fleurter, conter fleurette” in “flirt”?

The Normans brought the French language a few words a lot of which have something to do with what made the Vikings' strength: the mastery of sea navigation.

**Some words that the French language borrowed from the Norman language**

<b><i>Words of common languagz</i></b>	quenotte <b><i>Terms of navigation</i></b>	étais étambot étrave gréer guinder (hisser) hauban hune	narval quille tillac vague varech viking
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***Borrowings from the Arabic language***

When Mohammed died in 632, the Arabic conquest began and its civilization spread, leading to a huge Empire which shone from its outstanding cultural achievements and dynamic commercial momentum.

First, this flourishing Arabic Empire assumed its Greek intellectual heritage, which had fallen, and by the intermediate of medieval Latin and the numerous scholars and intellectuals gave the French language a plethora of scientific words in particular in the domain of medicine, alchemy, mathematics and astronomy.

Then, thanks to the Venitian and Genese trade that was set up by the Arabic Empire, the French language in transit through Italy was enriched with Arabic words that dealt with commercial activities which represented the true bridge between the Western world and the Eastern world. Finally, in Spain, the Moors, i.e, the Berber people who conquered the country, established a rich and original civilization which embodied a third means of borrowing for the French language until the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

After English and Italian, the Arabic language is one of French's main sources of borrowing, with around 270 words.

**Some words the French language borrowed from the Arabic language.**

alambic alchimie algèbre amiral arsenal avarie	calibre camphre chiffre coton douane échec	gazelle goudron hasard jupe magasin matelas	nuque orange raquette sirop sucre zénith
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azur	élixir	momie	zéro
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## **5. The French of the Renaissance (16<sup>th</sup> century) is a blossoming language.**

### ***A language that develops.***

French went on evolving in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Declensions disappeared little by little. Let us recall that declensions took after Latin and are a change in the form of a word ending according to its grammatical function, but also to the gender and number of the word. Thus, in Old French, regarding masculine words, the subject was almost always marked with an ending “s”. On the contrary, the absence of “s” was the marking of plural. The translation of “*li murs*” is “*le mur*” (“the wall”) and that of “*li mur*” is “*les murs*” (“the walls”). Some words had two very distinct forms according to their function. “*Garz*” was the subject form and “*garçon*” was the same word in its object complement form. Nowadays, two words with almost the same meaning have remained : *gars* and *garçon*.

Then in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the word order (subject, verb, complement) is decisive. Declensions progressively become useless. Teaching always took place in Latin, but writers wished French would take the dimension of a great literary language. From then on, like Italians had done, inspiration was drawn from the works and ideas of the Antiquity Greek and Latin writers that were translated into French. The Renaissance was well underway.

### ***François I and the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts***

On August 10, 1539, in Villers-Cotterêts, François I signed an ordinance applying to the whole kingdom. In the article 111, it was commanded that all the official documents be written in the French language. It was a strong display of the regal power, at the time to be able to impose a language on the State. In conformity with other European countries, the idea of a developing nation became apparent through a language turning into the language of a State.

### ***The writers of the Pleiad***

In 1549, the poets of the Pleiad, of which Ronsard and Du Bellay were the most famous representatives, publish *Défense et Illustration de la Langue Française* (Defense and illustration of the French Language) under the penname of Du Bellay. Essentially it was about “defending” the French language as a great literary language equaling Latin or Italian and about explaining how to illustrate that fact by exposing the great French texts, especially those in poetry.

The poets of the Pleiad advise to create new words to enrich the French language. Several rules are introduced.

-First of all, words can be borrowed from Latin to fill up the gaps of French. For example with words such as “exceller”- “to excel”- or “inversion”, were taken from Latin, then had the endings frenchified.

-They declared that one also should feel free to borrow provincial terms, or terms from craft industry or old abolished words that can be rejuvenated.

-They also advised to build compound words by associating adjectives and substantives like “aigre doux” (“sweet-and-sour”) that have remained in the language or by placing a verb and its complement side by side such as, for instance, “l’été *donne-vin*” (“*wine-giving*” summer), “le mouton *porte-laine*” (the “*wool-wearing*” sheep). One may note that these last three words have not been successful.

-Adding suffixes and particularly diminutives is also welcome and acceptable. *Mignonelette* (cute+diminutive), *doucelette* (sweet+diminutive), ect.

-Finally, building words by making nouns out of infinitives is supported. L’*aller* (the “going”), le *chanter* (the “singing”), le *mourir* (the “dying”), le *vivre* (the “living”), le *savoir* (the “knowing”).

The writers of the Pleiad’s attitude towards the French language vouches for the global feeling of those who wrote at the time: French must be enriched.

## ***6. A number of borrowings from classical Latin and Italian nurtured the French language.***

In the 16<sup>th</sup> like in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, French is marked by the adaptation of a lot of Latin words and by the addition of around 2000 words borrowed from Italian.

### ***The birth of doublets***

In a context in which the French language mostly comes from spoken Latin that changed little by little, Latin words progressively changed pronunciations since the Roman conquest of Gaul. Thus, the Latin *diurnum* gave way to the French word *jour* (day), the *d* being pronounced /d□□/ first and then /□/. The same process occurred with *causum* that gave way to *chose* (“thing”). The *c* pronounced /k/ in Latin became /k]/ first and /]/ subsequently.

It is in that context of phonetic evolution that, for instance, the word *hospitalem* (from *hospitis*, the one who hosts others), lead to the French word *hôtel* (“hotel”), the verb *auscultare* to *écouter* (“listen”), and the adjective *fragilem* (from *fragilis*, brittle) to *frêle* (who lacks strength).



One has to remember that in the Middle Ages, almost all the knowledgeable pieces of writing were in Latin, but that from the 14<sup>th</sup> century and more particularly from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, scholars and writers translated a large number of Ancient Latin or Greek texts into French. Then, they created French words directly from those ancient languages. For instance, the Latin noun *hospitalem* was taken and directly gave way to the French word *hospital* (*hôpital*) (“hospital”), the Latin verb *auscultare* gave way to the verb *ausculter* (“to sound”), and *fragilem* to the adjective *fragile* (“fragile”).

By borrowing Latin words in their original form (*auscultare* changed into *ausculter*) and introducing them into the French language, while already current French words with the same origins from those Latin words were in existence (*écouter* (“listen”) has a remote root with *auscultare*), writers and scholars created what we called doublets. *Ausculter* and *écouter* are doublets.

### Some doublets in the French language.

<i>Latin words</i>	<i>Words coming from Latin and altered by time</i>	<i>Words rebuilt from the root</i>
Acrem	aigre	âcre
augustum	août	auguste
auscultare	écouter	ausculter
blasphemum	blâme	blasphème
canalem	chenal	canal
captivum	chétif	captif
causum	chose	cause
claviculam	cheville	clavicule
dotare	douer	doter
fragilem	frêle	fragile
gracilem	grêle	gracile
frigidum	froid	frigide
hospitalem	hôtel	hôpital
implicare	employer	impliquer
masticare	mâcher	mastiquer
mobilem	meuble	mobile
nativus	naïf	natif
operare	œuvrer	opérer
pensare	peser	penser
potionem	poison	potion
rationem	raison	ration
recuperare	recouvrer	recupérer
sacramentum	serment	sacrement
singularem	sanglier	singulier
spatula	épaule	spatule
vigiliam	veille	vigile
vitrum	verre	vitre

### ***Borrowings from Italian***

First of all, a certain fascination with the Italian language captivated the French poets. In fact, these poets wanted to illustrate the French language in literature following the example of the Italian writer Petrarch who had done so with the Italian language. This event led to Ronsard translating Petrarch's poems and making him a poetic model.

The fact that Catherine de Médicis was Regent of France from 1560 to 1580, with the main political figure of Italian Cardinal Mazarin, explains the presence of a large number of Italians in court, within the Church and in financial circles. These circles of the royalty and the court were rich linguistic environments for the exchange between Italian and French. As a matter of fact, speaking Italian or borrowing words from it was held in great respect. It was a reaction similar to what we have observed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarding English.

Criticism against the excess of the italianizing linguistic fashion rose inevitably thanks to Henri Estienne. In 1578, in *Deux dialogues du nouveau langage françois italianisé* ("Two Dialogues of the New Italianized French Language") addressing "the tutti quanti readers", Henri Estienne did not hesitate to deride those who expressed themselves in "italianized French".

However, around 2000 words were borrowed from Italian, especially in the vocabulary areas of war, sea, fashion and music. Italian is one of the languages of Europe from which French borrowed the most, but as they both descended from Latin, the phonetical assimilation of words took place smoothly enough that we no longer recognize those words as italianisms.

#### **Some words borrowed from the Italian language.**

alerte	caporal	s'enamouracher	moustache
artisan	caprice	douche	pantalon
banque	caresse	escalier	pilote
brave	carrosse	estafette	sentinelle
burlesque	carnaval	façade	sonnet
cabinet	concert	frégate	spadassin
caleçon	courtisane	infanterie	virtuose

### ***7. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French language stabilizes.***

The 17<sup>th</sup> century followed with the establishment of an absolute monarchy marked by centralism and the concern of the State to impose its norm in all domains including the domain of language.

#### ***Malherbe and the "purity" of the language.***

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the French language lost its unity and, right from the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Malherde, a poet at court, sought to keep the literary language under control. Unlike the concept of a “heterogeneous national language”, specific to Ronsard, he wanted a language to conform to a usage that would be understood by both great lords and “*crocheteurs du Port-au-Foin*” (the lowest subjects of the King). Defending a simple, clear style, he suggested the deletion of words the common language did not retain.

He defended the notion of “the purity” of language, for example, by banishing latinisms, provincial vocables, technical words, archaic expressions, terms qualified as “dirty” or “low” (barber, breast) and all the words that can be ambiguous. According to him, clarity and sobriety were the two most favorable criteria in order to express oneself. According to Malherbe, exaggerated images or inaccurate metaphors were to be removed.

By advocating rigor and order, by leaving imagination and emotions aside, and by prescribing the respect of the common usage, Malherbe contributed to the purification of the abounding 16<sup>th</sup>-century language. Victor Hugo would later reproach Malherbe for simply parking words in castes with “noble” words on one side and “plebbed” ones on the other.

***Preciousness and the refined language that is sometimes also affected.***

In the Hôtel de Rambouillet, Catherine de Vivonne gathered together most of the writers from 1608 to 1645. This included Malherbe, Racan, Vaugelas, Voiture, Corneille, La Rochefoucault, Mme de Sévigné, Mme de La Fayette, etc. From the very beginning, the writers were drawn to the appeal of fine conversation in contrast with Henri IV’s over-soldiery court. Other salons were also created, like the Marquise of Scudéry’s.

Preciousness (the fine language) was born into these salons through the search for distinction in manners, in feelings and language. It primarily was about escaping common reality. This trend was seen throughout Europe. There was a euphuism in England (from the novel by J. Lily, *Euphus*), marinism (from the name of a napolitan poet Marin) concettism in Italy (from “concetti”, the sally), and gongorism (from the name of the Cordovan poet Gongora) in Spain. They all represent precious trends that influenced the French “precious” mind. It is only in 1654 that the latter adjective’s meaning is used while the trend began to decline.

The supreme art of conversation was subject to a particular use of the language. In order not to sound “rude”, one endeavor to “refine the style” was to avoid popular words, profession terms and technical terms, thus creating a distinction between “low” words and “noble” words which caused the French language to suffer until the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

New words, neologisms, were also created, some of which have remained (*incontestable, anonyme, enthousiasme*). Speakers made periphrases and metaphors allowing them not to speak in a common manner with each other. Thus “to not understand” became “to have a thick intelligence”, and “to be sad” “to have a dark soul”. However, the effort to put more and more subtlety in the language became excessive and it is understandable why the regular guests of these salons, first respectfully named “the precious ones”, became ridiculous before society even before the satiric play by Molière “Les Précieuses ridicules” (“the Ridiculous Precious Ones”) was published.

Preciousness put the French novel, the letter and overall depiction in literature through a new movement. It also marked the evolution of the French language with the seal of good usage being the result of a refined search for expression the furthest possible from the common phrase.

**Some neologisms from preciousness remained in the French language.**

<p><b>Phrases :</b>          avoir l'âme sombre,          avoir l'intelligence épaisse,          travestir sa pensée,          châtier la langue,          un billet doux,          le mot me manque,          laisser mourir la conversation,          faire figure dans le monde,          c'est du dernier cri,</p>	<p>être brouillé avec quelqu'un,          avoir de l'esprit,          perdre son sérieux,          rire d'intelligence avec quelqu'un,          briller dans la conversation.</p> <p><b>Words :</b>          féliciter,          enthousiasmer,          anonyme,          incontestable.</p>
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**Some funny periphrases now sunk into oblivion**

<p>Les chers souffrants : les pieds.          Les belles mouvantes : les mains.          Les trônes de la pudeur : les joues.          Les perles de la bouche : les dents.          Les miroirs de l'âme : les yeux.          Le conseiller des grâces : le miroir.          La jeunesse des vieillards : la perruque.          L'affronteur du temps : le chapeau.          Les tétons : les coussinets d'amour.</p>	<p>Les commodités de la conversation :          les fauteuils.          L'universelle commodité : la table.          Le supplément du soleil : le chandelier.          Le soutien de la vie : le pain.          Un bain intérieur : un verre.          Le flambeau du silence : la lune.          Le haut du jour : midi.</p>
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**Vaugelas and the good usage.**

In 1635, Richelieu founded the French Academy and in 1694, the first edition of the Academy's dictionary meant to fix the meaning of words was published. First, Vaugelas was entrusted with the dictionary's editing. A regular guest at the Hôtel de Rambouillet, published in 1647 the *Remarks on the French language* which set

the doctrine of good usage based on the language usage that was “the most refined part of the Court and its writers at the time”, particularly the language usage of women who seemed the most natural and spontaneous to him.

The *Remarks* did not aim to think about the language, their goal was to make decisions on behalf of good usage if such word, such phrase or such turn of phrase was correct. Vaugelas, concerned about an accurate and pure language, remote from ambiguity and reason-driven, became a particularly followed leading expert of classical language.

***The classical language compared to the current language.***

Though the 17<sup>th</sup> century language was rather close to the 20<sup>th</sup> century one and though reading Molière’s, Racine’s and Corneille’s plays is quite delightful, one notices, on the one hand, that some words used back then disappeared or turned into archaisms. On the other hand, some simple words have been prefixed. Finally, some words changed meanings or were given a much stronger meaning.

Thus, among the disappearances, some conjugations no longer exist. For instance, Corneille made one of his characters say “je ne l’orrai pas” (“I won’t hear it”), using the future form of the verb *ouïr* (“to hear”). Likewise, Charles Perrault made the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood* repeat: “Tire la chevillette et la bobinette cherra” (“Pull the wooden latch and the little plug will fall”), future form of the verb “choir” (“to fall”). In the same way, “il me la baille belle” for “il me fait croire ce qui n’est pas” (“he makes me believe what is not so”), “j’ai *ouï* dire” for “j’ai entendu” (“I heard”) and “moult difficultés” pour “beaucoup de difficultés” (“a lot of difficulties”) are now used as archaisms.

Simple words such as “*passer* 120 ans” (“live beyond 120 years”) were prefixed from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “*dépasser* 120 ans”. “Se *tenir* de pleurer” (“To keep oneself from crying”), “se *tirer* plus loin” (“to retreat further away”) were not crude at all, the usage of the following centuries added a prefix. One now says “se *retenir* de pleurer” and “se *retirer* plus loin”.

Finally, some words changed meanings. For instance, the meaning of “tout à l’heure” (“earlier/later”) was “maintenant” (“now”), “fortune” (“wealth”) meant “positive or negative lot”, “injurer” (“insult”) meant “unfairness”, “énervé” (“to get angry”) meant “to remove energy, to weaken”, and “fier” (“proud”) was a synonym of “fierce, cruel”. In general, words had a way stronger meaning than today. The weakening of meaning is a normal language process.

**Some 17<sup>th</sup>-century words with a way stronger meaning**

inquiétude : agitation	ravissement : enlèvement
déplaisir : profonde douleur	étonner : frapper comme le tonnerre
ennui : chagrin violent, désespoir	charme : sortilège
manie : folie, rage	enchanter : ensorceler

### ***Looking for a logic in language.***

In 1660, *Grammaire générale et composée* (*General and Composed Grammar*) was published in Port-Royal (hence its frequent naming “Port-Royal Grammar”). In this work the Jansenists Arnaud and Lancelot justified the use of language through logic. The grammar of a language was presented as a result of universal reason. The conception was taken up again in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the language remained classical and bore out the choices made in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. As a matter of fact, Voltaire and most of its contemporaries stated that language perfection had been reached in the course of the century of Louis XIV, a century that Voltaire called “the Great Century”.

Grammar was more and more justified by logic, at the same time when philosophers began representing a new authority. Dumarsais and Beauzée, who collaborated on the *Encyclopédie*, as well as Condillac and Urbain Domergue, claimed they could explain language in its tiniest details depending only on logic. This marked the moving away from the authority of only usage in the evolution of the French language. Thus, in 1739, French priest Abbé d’Olivet of the French Academy didn’t hesitate to publish *Grammar Remarks on Racine*.

In 1784, Antoine Rivarol was awarded by the Academy of Berlin for his speech *Discours sur l’universalité de la langue française* in which he tried to prove the superiority of a language whose syntax seems “natural”. Along with his contemporaries, he was convinced that the Classical Age and 18<sup>th</sup>-century writers brought language to a state of perfection. The controversial 20<sup>th</sup>-century notion of “French language genius” comes mostly from it.

### ***Words borrowed from England and invented words in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.***

The increase in the number of voyages, the development of sciences, the interest in knowledge conveyed by the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and d’Alembert brought a great amount of words either borrowed from English or entirely created to meet the progress of science. The examples are Linné, who wrote a botanic lexicon with thousands of species, and Lavoisier, who built up a lexicon of chemistry from Greek roots.

Philosophers thought of England as an advanced country regarding politics and economics. Thus, English became the language from which the most words were borrowed . Some words were integrated into French and its phonetic patterns insomuch that the origin of the word is impossible to find unless one knows the word’s history. For instance, the “redingote” corresponds to the transformation of the English word “riding coat”.

### **Some words borrowed from the English language in the 18<sup>th</sup> century**

bifteck	cabine	grog	meeting,
brick	club	humour	punch
budget	coke	importer	spleen

*At the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French Revolution occurred.*

In 1790, priest Abbé Grégoire launched a large investigation on the languages spoken in the provinces. Its explicit goal was to find out “the means to annihilate the dialects and to make the use of the French language universal”. The Revolution indeed aimed to create a national unity and in 1794, the report priest Abbé Grégoire presented concluded that the use of French only is necessary. The investigation shed light on the French language being used only along the important axes of communication and in large cities. The Convention had already implemented an extremely tough policy struggling against the dialects in order to impose the use of French only throughout the country.

The French Revolution renewed its political and administrative vocabulary by changing the institutions as displayed in the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie's Supplement containing the new words in use since the Revolution* which was published in 1798, whereas the Academy had been suppressed. The 369-entry *Supplement* was indeed dedicated to new meanings or words brought by the French Revolution and over 60 % of the latter was included in the next edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*.

Some of those words will be withdrawn like those –though sounding very poetic– corresponding to the revolutionary calendar, *vendémiaire* (September), *brumaire* (October), *frimaire* (November), *nivôse* (December). On the contrary, others have definitively settled in the French language and have even gone beyond the borders like all the metric system words imposed in 1794.

#### **Some words that settled in the French language during the French Revolution**

are	département	hectare	litre,
carmagnole	école normale	kilogramme	préfet
cocarde	guillotine	kilomètre	sans-culotte

*8. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French language was enriched and settled throughout the country through school.*

*The Romanticists were against the constraint of the classical language.*

Until around 1850, Romanticism imposed itself as literary school. Under the First Empire, censorship forced the writers to develop a style imitating the classical

style (“neoclassical”), but the great writers blossomed out of the constraints in opposition to Napoleon I’s authoritarian régime. Thus, Benjamin Constant, Mme de Staël and especially Chateaubriand were at the birth of Romanticism. The “vague of passions” was made in fashion and, from 1820 to 1850, a new generation imposed itself. It was that of the “children of the century”, according to Musset’s statement.

Gathered for the most part around Victor Hugo, the romanticists stood up for the right to individualism in art, and therefore for the possibility not to imitate the ancients, which partly freed the language.

Their interest in foreign literatures like that from England (Walter Scott, Byron, Shakespeare), that from Germany (Schiller, Goethe), their fascination with Italy and the East where some of their novels or plays take place, as well as an advanced taste for the Middle Ages as the novel by Victor Hugo, *Notre Dame de Paris* showed, and finally, their attraction to all that is picturesque, led the romanticists to be opposed to the purity of the classical style. On the contrary, they recommended a colorful language, endowed with a rich vocabulary, with no distinction between noble and low or concrete words. This is what one had to acknowledge when Victor Hugo stated that there had to be given “a red hat to the old dictionary”.

The romanticists opened up the vocabulary to new perspectives by freeing the language from the rigid standards imposed by Classicism, drawing new lexical forms from History, from other civilizations and from any register.

***The Realists and the press denoted the changes in the world and society.***

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the great scientific discoveries. The industrial revolutions indeed changed the French life significantly. The century of the steam engine and the railway was also the century when the gas engine (1860), the dynamo (1870) and the electric light bulb (1879) were created. In parallel, the world of industry and of the great banks that gave rise to new social classes, developed. On one side, the middle classes, either the lower ones or the powerful business representatives, blossomed. On the other side, the urgent need for a working force for industry and expanding cities gave birth to an urban proletariat whose misery and living conditions were tragic.

The Realism writers, especially Emile Zola, accounted for that reality through their novels read throughout France. These novels and this style served to carry, spread and share a whole vocabulary denoting the changes of a world undergoing an industrial and economic evolution with a profoundly mutating society.

The expanding press worked as a standard to the French language countrywide and went along with the daily evolution of the lexicon through the contact of new realities such as public transportation (*tunnel, rail, wagon, tender, tramway,*



steamer...) or medicine (*analgésique* (pain-killer), *hydrothérapie*, *homéopathie*...).

***School spread the French language throughout the country.***

The Revolution did not manage to implement primary teaching led by the State, even though the word “primary teaching” dates from 1791. When Napoleon seized power, he in fact lost interest in elementary teaching to create what was then on called the “lycée” (high-school) in 1807.

In 1832, Louis Philippe managed to create a State elementary teaching with law-prescribed reading taught from French books and not from Latin ones, as it had always been the case by then. In 1833, the piece of legislation proposed by Guizot imposed to every city to foster at least one public school and supported the creation of a normal school of teachers in each district. The knowledge of spelling was paramount to whomever wanted to access the public jobs as it represented a selective test of the corresponding competitive examination.

The French language spread and its teaching became very effective when in 1882, education that had been free since 1881, became mandatory until the age of 12. France was about to acquire a linguistic unity that came true in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

***In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two important dictionaries stood as standards.***

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the reflection on language escalated. The comparison of languages and everything about their history was of particular interest. This led the linguists to reconsider the universal logic philosophers believed in. Different systems from one language to another were acknowledged even though filiations between the languages from the Indo-european family had been carefully established.

Two dictionaries deeply marked the end of the century by becoming standards. The first one was that of Emile Littré, an erudite physician, who finished his *Dictionnaire de la langue française* in 1873 (4 volumes to which a Supplement was added). The dictionary was based on numerous quotations, with a positivist (and therefore) historical conception of the language. The word meanings were normally classified according to the historical filiations of meaning, with Darwin’s widespread idea in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that languages live and die like living organisms. From that point of view, Littré favored the description of the 17<sup>th</sup> century French as he is convinced that the French language reached its peak in the Great Century. Littré’s *Dictionnaire* was not updated and when the sales stopped, the dictionary remained in use in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This gave it a certain glory as it was a dictionary whose quotations were chosen in works published before 1830.

In 1876, another dictionary was published. It is Pierre Larousse's, *Le grand dictionnaire universel* (15 volumes to which 2 Supplements will be added). P. Larousse, the son of a blacksmith and an innkeeper, first became a teacher. He then left to Paris to self-educate himself. After the publication of a first school-designed dictionary, *Le nouveau dictionnaire de la langue française* (1856), he designed the *Grand dictionnaire universel* as a piece of work which was both a language dictionary and an encyclopedic dictionary. The 24 000-page *Dictionnaire*, written in an enthusiastic style, that could be booklet-purchased, was very successful. It was subject to rewriting from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Larousse house went on publishing dictionaries describing the language of the time while giving updated encyclopedic knowledge throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dictionary became an autonomous resource for all the French. This reinforced the large success of the *Petit Larousse illustré*, first published in 1905.

### ***9. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French language re-invents itself***

We lack the necessary distance to fairly analyze the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the two World Wars, the generalized schooling, the evolution of communications and information, internationalization and the exceptional booming of new technologies which lead to the Internet in the late century have a great influence on language.

For instance, a 1976 survey made by two linguists (Désirat and Hordé) on the *Petit Larousse illustré* showed that around one entry out of seven was deleted, introduced or modified from 1949 to 1960.

#### ***The French language facing the influence of the English language***

The dazzling progress of technology, from the atomic to the electronic era, made the technical vocabularies associated to products often from the United States develop. The borrowings from American English started with World War I which spread the American culture and the idea of economic and technological superiority consolidated with World War II.

A lot of English words are used in French. For instance, there are machines directly designated by an English word: *tank, bulldozer, tanker, scooter, Jeep, custom*. Or there are terms taken from entertainment and information: *prime time, show, star, crooner, show-biz, hit-parade, compact-live, zapping, interviewer, casting, spots, flash, top model...* The excessive (and sometimes biased) use of English words made the defenders of the French language react in a violent way.

Thus, René Etiemble published *Parlez-vous français?* which denounced a fashion he encouraged people to fight against. In the same way, in 1966, the Government founded the High Board for The Defense and Expansion of the French Language. In 1972, Georges Pompidou established Commissions of Terminology, in charge of creating propositions to enrich French and its various professional vocabularies.

In 1975, the Bas-Lauriol law was unanimously voted in Parliament. The law made French mandatory in any transaction, denominations and users' guides of products, in the writing of job offers and contracts...However, the law was not followed, and Catherine Tesca, The Head of the Francophonie was forced to reset the debate in 1992 when a change of Government allowed Jacques Toubon to widen the project and to have a law protecting the French language adopted.

By widening the Bas-Lauriol law and by setting means of penalty, the law made the use of the French language mandatory in mass retail and services, in public advertisement, in contracts and rules, in commercials...

However, it is hard to roll back the numerous new words borrowed from English with the objects, the corresponding practices, in a world where communication is international and often delivered real-time through TV, radio and the Internet.

It nevertheless seems that the French language absorbs only what it can include, and that a lot of borrowings, most of which are nouns, have a limited life time. *Teenager* and *drink* are no longer in fashion. *Un adolescent* or *un ado*, *un verre*, *une boisson* are more common than their English counterparts. While remaining careful and favoring *baladeur* over *walkman*, *libre-service* over *self-service* and *nouvelles* over *news*, there is no reason for us to worry. The French language also knows how to naturally defend itself.

There exist fake borrowings such as *pressing* (dry cleaners), *footing* (jogging), *zapping* (montage), *tennisman* (tennis player) and *caravaning* (camping in a trailer). Those are in fact words that do not exist in the English language. They were made up with an Anglo-Saxon sounding as a fashion.

The influence of the English language is not always through borrowings. Some English words and phrasing are in fact consciously or unconsciously copied, i.e translated literally into French. Thus, "*gratte-ciel*" was copied from the American English word "skyscraper". The same process occurred with "*ce n'est pas ma tasse de thé*" (it's not my cup of tea), "*organiser une table ronde*" (to organize a round table), go on a "*lune de miel*" (honeymoon) and "*donner le feu vert*" (to give the green light) which are English phrases.

### ***The French language re-invents itself.***

The developing of the media, especially of radio (since around 1920), cinema and TV (invented in 1935 and spread in the households after 1950) put in touch

multiple oral variations of French. In the same way, ads, songs, variously styled live radio- or TV-shows spread a more spontaneous and open language increasingly escaping formatted genres more.

Lexical creativity was favored by two factors. On the one hand, there was the varied and free press with its own style and subjects . On the other hand, there was a literature both rich and diversified, with writers like Raymond Queneau, Frédéric Dard, Paul Valéry, Nathalie Sarraute and the francophone writers from Québec to Senegal. Those factors made the written form freer in order to serve the content, thus making the audience used to neology and a free and mixed expression.

During the second half of the century, fairly new phenomena like acronyms and portemanteau words developed.

-Acronyms represent words formed by the initial letters of a united group of words: SNCF, RATP, RER. They could spread only in a society filled with administrative or economic structures organized in various ways and where communication must be fast and long phrases avoided. Phrases or proper nouns can be acronyms. SVP (s'il vous plaît) (please), NDLR (Note de la Rédaction) (note from the editor), PPDA (Patrick Poivre d'Arvor) (famous TV news presenter), the USA...

### Different types of acronyms

Acronyms spelled with their capital letters : the SNCF, the RATP, the TGV, a CAP.
Acronyms spelled or pronounced like words : the ONU (can also be pronounced <i>onu</i> ).
Acronyms pronounced like words and keeping their capital letters : the OTAN.
Acronyms partially spelled or syllabized : CAPES, CD-ROM (ou cédérom)
Suffixed acronyms : le RMiste, cégétiste, capésien.
Some acronyms are pronounced like ordinary words, they may or may not encapsulate word beginnings and are often designed to be easily remembered: l'Oulipo (Ouvroir de Littérature potentielle) ; la Forpronu (Force de Protection des Nations Unies).
Acronyms were lexicalized so well that we forget they were acronyms : the radar (radio detection and ranging), the laser (light amplification by stimulated emission).
Various formulations : K7 for cassette ; in PCV for "taxe à PerCeVoir".

-A portemanteau word is a word resulting from the association of two cut words or more. They allow to economically and very noticeably gather several concepts. Sometimes, portemanteau words are easy to identify. They may have a literary origin (like Motherlant's *nostageria*) or may be practical (*restotel*). Sometimes, one forgets they are portemanteau words (*Information* and *automatique* gave *informatique* (computers)) or unconsciously guesses they are

(*bureautique, domotique*: the *informatique* for the office for the home, *-tique* being the truncation of *informatique*).

If portemanteau words are already subject to play on words with Rabelais with, for instance, the Sorbonagres (*Sorbonne*, and *onagre*, “big donkey”), they acquired a certain interest with Lewis-Carrol and *Alice in Wonderland* where portemanteau words are evoked.

### Some portemanteau words

<p><b>Portemanteau words of literary origins :</b>  le Sorbonagre (Rabelais) ;  la nostalgie (Montherlant) ;  le Petit Fictionnaire illustré,  spécouler (A. Finkielkraut) ;  parlementeur (B. Vian) ;  goncourtiser (Céline).</p>	<p><b>Portemanteau words in the language:</b>  une foulitude,  le photocopillage,  le franglais,  un distribanque,  un restotel,  un internaute.</p>
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### *From cant, the secret language of the “dangerous classes”, to slang*

Slang represents the secret language of groups on the margins of society, also presented as “dangerous classes” until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was used by beggars and skilled gangsters of every big city’s “Cour des miracles” until the 17<sup>th</sup> century and popularized in 1831 by V. Hugo in *Notre Dame de Paris*. It was also spoken by the so-called Coquillards gang who wore a shell on their neck to pretend they were pilgrims going to Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle. They gave part of their jargon away while tortured in 1455. It was spoken by the famous gangster Cartouche, beat up on the wheel in Place de Grèves in 1721 after being interrogated upon his secret language, thus inspiring many literary hacks. Finally, slang was used by the Chauffeurs of Orgères and revealed at a trial in 1800, and in the works of Vidocq, a former convict who became a police officer, who published his *Mémoires* in 1828.

As an initiates’ language designed to be incomprehensible to others, we can cite *Louchébem* still spoken in the 1920’s by the butchers of La Villette. Some languages like *Largonji*, attested by Vidocq, or *Javanais* that appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, consist in concealing words. Thus, as in *Largonji* and *Javanais*, in which *av* had to be added between each syllable, *Louchébem* consists in concealing the word by changing the first letter into an *l* while putting the former at the end of the word before an invariable suffix like: *-èm, -oc, -muche, -ès...* Thus in the *Louchébèmes’* slang ( **Louchébèmes** = bouchers (butchers)) “C’est parti, on va boire un coup!” (Let’s go get a drink) becomes “C’est lartipèm, on lavem loibème un loukès!”

Slang thus truly fascinated the 19 and 20<sup>th</sup> century writers who, while using its attractive strength, made it popular. We can quote among the most famous ones, Balzac (the character of Vautrin in *Illusions Perdues* in 1837 and in *Splendeurs et Misères Courtisanes* in 1839), V. Hugo (*Les Misérables* in 1862), E. Zola (*L'Assomoir* in 1877), J. Rictus (*Le Coeur Populaire* in 1914), H. Barbusse (*Le Feu, Journal d'une Escouade* in 1916), Céline (*Voyage au Bout de la Nuit* in 1932 and *Mort crédit* in 1936), J. Genet (*Querelle de Brest* in 1947), Auguste Le Breton (*Du Rififi chez les Hommes* in 1953), Léo Malet (Nestor Burma dans *Nouveaux Mystères de Paris* from 1954 to 1959), A. Simonin (*Touchez pas au Grisbi !* in 1953), R. Queneau (*Exercices de Style* in 1947 and *Zazie dans le Métro* in 1959), A. Boudard (*Le Corbillard de Jules* in 1970, *L'Argot sans Peine* in 1970), F. Dard (the *San Antonio* series from 1950 to 2000). Songwriters and singers also made slang popular as well from Aristide Bruand (*Nini Peau d'Chien*) to Renaud (*Laisse béton*) through P. Perret (*Les Jolies Colonies de Vacances, Tonton Cristobal*).

The fact that in 1901 Aristide Bruand was the author of *Dictionnaire de l'argot au XXe s.* and that P. Perret published the *Petit Perret illustré par l'exemple* shows the same trend: make widely known a language that was from then on thought as “cheeky chat” and a free means of expression, creative and fun, far from the need for survival that engendered it for a class out of the margins of society. This explains the massive publishing of dictionaries dedicated to the “green language”. The latter denomination was chosen in 1852 to refer to a secret and unusually crude language (the *tapis vert*'s in this case (green carpet)).

World War I (1914-1918) played an important part in the mixing of different ways of speaking, especially in the hopeless environment of the trenches where popular terms and slang spread. Words such as *bafouille* (letter), *casse-pipe* (disaster), *Panam* (Paris), *pépère* (cushy), *picrate* (cheap wine), *se ratatiner* (to become wizened) are examples coming from the front. In the same way, words already created through the contact with the Arabic language at the time of colonial wars in North Africa spread: *bézeuf* (a lot), *kif-kif* (all the same), *barda* (baggage), *clebs* (dog), *fissa* (very quickly), *gourbi* (shack), *guitoune* (shack)... Thus, in 1919, Gaston Esnault wrote *Le Poilu tel qu'il se parle* and in 1965 he published with Larousse his *Dictionnaire historique des argots français* which was considered as a standard.

However, in 1980, when J. Cellard and A. Rey published a piece of work on the various uses of slang that were added to the language, it seemed right to them to entitle it *Dictionnaire du français non conventionnel*. The notion of slang was then put into other perspectives. It was heightened by the Romantic current for nearly mythical purposes, in order to reduce it to popular words to the eyes of society, therefore conveying social exclusion. J.-P. Colin and J.-P. Mével took bearings at the end of the century in a new Larousse's *Dictionnaire de l'argot* (1990) while Pierre Merle mentioned the “Blues de l'argot”. The language

customs based on bearings both freer and less marked partly erased the notion of slang to favor the expressive use of popular terms in a language with numerous versions of register.

***A language open to the dialects of the suburban cities.***

Made popular through songs, local radio stations and movies, a dialect at first limited to the suburban areas spread. It was a mark of identity conveying marginalization and some kind of revolt. Mostly based on Verlan, which consist in pronouncing words the other way around by reversing syllables, the dialect of those suburban areas takes on a fun aspect that the press takes advantage of and that we found in everyone's plays on word no matter their age. A few words quickly occurred in the general dictionaries like *ripou* (corrupt police officer), *meuf* (from *femme*, "woman"), *keur* (abridged Verlan from the word *arabe*), *beurette* ("Arabic woman"), *keuf* (from *flic*, police officer) and lose their primary function as a jargon bound to a social group. *Zicmu* (music), *oim* (me), *relou* (annoying) are nearly new funny lexical units.

Trendy French is also part of a kind of language game that appeared in the 1980's and spread through the media, the communication means and conversation. A few examples, mostly oral, are already considered as old like "au niveau du vécu" (in my experience), "quelque part" (somehow), "ça m'interpelle" (it strikes me). "C'est délire" (it's wicked), "galère" (hardship), "(le) top" (very good), "le pied" (very good), "il y a un lézard" (there's a problem) were quickly outmoded phrases that took part in a collective imaged and affectionate expression.

Without calling into question the basis of the language, those ways of speaking are renewed and reactivate some linguistic phenomena in their own way. For instance, there is the unconventional derivation consisting in switching a word's grammatical category, by sometimes turning adjectives into adverbs (voter *utile*, roulez *français*) (vote in a useful way, drive the French way) or substantives into adjectives (*être très province*, *être très café*) (to really be into province, coffee)...

The "politically correct", which also occurs in the language use for social purposes and is somewhat like political cant, made to not precisely depict reality but to conceal it, spread in a few fields without reaching the overuse observed across the Atlantic. Thus, to be deaf, blind can be translated into "politically correct" euphemisms like *malentendant*, *non-voyant*, *à mobilité réduite*. If a "prisoner" can in an amusing way become "a jail guest" copying the American phrase, the fear of ridicule and perhaps the recalling of the Molière play denouncing the "ridiculous precious ones" do not seem to make the periphrasis commonly used...

Ultimately, all those register variations being widely spread and analyzed by the media, everyone at least passively knows them. One is therefore tempted to use them effectively in a suitable situation, either in a fun or expressive way by

possibly playing with the contrast effect compared with the language register expected. Observing political speeches and “short sentences” or mottos (“*Touche pas à mon pote*” (Don’t touch my friend)) is enough to be convinced that those various dialects are far from being socially bound and expand French to a language with more and more open variants.

### ***The spelling, a renewed debate***

June, 19 1990, a report on the “arrangements” designed to “eliminate a certain number of inconsistencies and absurdities” from the French spelling was officially presented by The Superior Council for the French Language created by Michel Rocard when he was Prime Minister.

The report of the committee in charge led by Bernard Quemada, Vice-President of the Superior Council for the French Language and head of the *Trésor de la Langue Française* (1971-1994, 16 volumes) is approved successively by the Prime Minister and by the French Academy.

Even though the debate started by the press was impassioned and the report entitled *Les rectifications de l’orthographe* was published in the *Journal Officiel* on December, 6 1990, no note from the ministry was posted in the *Bulletin Officiel de l’Education Nationale*.

Those adjustments “moderate in their nature and their expanse” as the report’s introduction states it, applied to five matters and less than 800 words many of which were rarely used. They were about the hyphen (*autoécole* instead of *auto-école*), the compound words’ plural (*abat-jours* instead of *abat-jour*), the circumflex accent (*abime* instead of *abîme*, *il connait* instead of *il connaît*), the past participle of pronominal verbs (the agreement of the past participle *laissé* was made invariable: *je les ai laissé partir*) and inconsistencies to correct (*évènement*, instead of the traditional spelling *événement*, too different from the pronunciation). All the linguists were in favor of those adjustments applied in about fifty journals and a few pieces of work like that dedicated to the *Nouvelle histoire de la langue française*. However, given its absence of official means of spreading in the Education Nationale, one has to admit that those corrections letting people free to keep the traditional spelling have passed too slowly in the written French language.

According to various scientific investigations, it seems that the French spelling has not changed in a century. There would not be any noticeable recession or improvement. However, the success of the yearly spelling contests organized since 1985 by the journal *Lire* shows the obvious attachment of the French to the issues arising from the written forms of a language.

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Françoise Gadet (University of Paris X) considers that 20<sup>th</sup>-century French main feature lies in the modifications of our attitudes toward the French language as we experience it. In fact, the distance marked between the oral and the written French language tends to be less strong than in the previous century especially in the field of the lexicon, with numerous possible intermediaries between the practices of



spontaneous spoken language and practices of a finely-written one. We shall agree with her considering that within a same language, rich with numerous variations, the contemporary usage tends to manipulate the richness displayed according to the situations encountered.

Far from weakened, 20<sup>th</sup>-century French has perhaps never been so rich.

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