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Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France

This book provides the first systematic study of sociolinguistic variation in seventeenth-century France. Drawing on a range of case studies, Wendy Ayres-Bennett makes available new data about linguistic variation in this period, showing the wealth and variety of language usage at a time that is considered to be the most 'standardizing' in the history of French. Variation is analysed in terms of the speaker's 'pre-verbal constitution' – such as gender, age and socio-economic status – or by the medium, register or genre used. As well as examining linguistic variation itself, the book also considers the fundamental methodological issues that are central to all socio-historical linguistic accounts, and more importantly, addresses the question of what the appropriate sources are for linguists taking a socio-historical approach. In each chapter, the case studies present a range of phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical issues, which pose different methodological questions for sociolinguists and historical linguists alike.

WENDY AYRES-BENNETT is Reader in French Philology and Linguistics at the University of Cambridge. Her most recent publications include *Problems and Perspectives: Studies in the Modern French Language* (with Janice Carruthers, 2000), *A History of the French Language through Texts* (1996), and *Les Remarques de l'Académie Française sur le Quinte-Curce de Vaugelas 1719–1720* (with Philippe Caron, 1996), which won the French Academy's Prix d'Académie.

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Methodology and Case Studies

Wendy Ayres-Bennett

University of Cambridge

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Preface

This study is the first systematic examination of sociolinguistic variation in seventeenth-century France. A primary aim is to enrich our knowledge of the wealth and variety of usages of seventeenth-century French by making available new data about linguistic variation in a period usually considered the most 'standardizing' and 'purist' of all periods in the history of French. It will be argued that a distorted image of seventeenth-century French emerges if only certain types of literary texts are consulted in conjunction with the work of grammarians and lexicographers. According to this rather narrow approach, our period witnessed the radical marginalization and elimination of variation and the standardization of French; this is symbolized above all in the foundation of the French Academy and the reign of good usage. It is, however, clearly fallacious to assume homogeneity of usage, whatever the nature of the speaker, register, location or context, for any period in the history of French. It is hoped that the study of non-standard usages in the seventeenth century will in turn have repercussions for the appreciation of literary texts, both in highlighting their specificity and in helping to sharpen notions of different genres. Through an understanding of the linguistic status of the variants selected by authors we may better understand the effects they are trying to achieve.

A second main aim of this study is to consider fundamental methodological issues which are central to all socio-historical linguistic accounts. First, and perhaps most importantly, we will need to address the question of what the appropriate sources are for the linguist favouring a socio-historical approach. Whereas sociolinguistic studies of contemporary French can construct a carefully balanced corpus based on a representative sample of different types of informants, historians of the language are obliged to use those written documents which have survived. This study will consider, for example, which texts best reflect non-standard and spoken usages, and will argue that it is necessary to try and seek convergence of evidence from a range of different sources. Secondly, we will need to explore how 'non-standard' forms are to be interpreted. Since we often lack precise details about the writer or speaker, or about the sociocultural and linguistic context of a given text, it can be difficult to evaluate variants. What texts, for example, best represent *français populaire*

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and to what extent is it possible to differentiate this from *français familier* or *français vulgaire*, or, for that matter, from features which are associated with spoken language generally? Also important is the avoidance of anachronistic judgments about a feature identified in a seventeenth-century text: a feature will not necessarily have the same value in the language system of the past as it has today.

Thirdly, I shall examine the relationship between variation and change. Change in progress is reflected in variation (although of course not all variation represents change in progress). Studies of past variation allow us to look for continuities and discontinuities, how innovations enter the norm and how variants are lost. Without studies of variation in earlier periods there is a danger of making false or exaggerated claims about, for example, the innovatory nature of modern spoken French, and of wrongly identifying certain contemporary features as presaging future developments in the language. Features which are said to be twentieth-century innovations may be found in earlier texts if a wider range of sources is consulted.

A number of parameters of variation have been selected for analysis. These are determined either by aspects of what may be thought of as the speaker's 'preverbal constitution' – here the gender, socio-economic status (SES) and age of the speaker – or by the medium, register or genre used. Where appropriate, the relationship between the different types of variation is explored. For instance, in Chapter 3 I shall discuss the extent to which differences of social class correlate with differences of register, while in Chapter 5, in considering variation according to the age of the speaker, I shall examine the relationship between variation and change. I decided not to treat regional variation systematically – partly since this is worthy of a monograph in its own right and partly because it is the area which has traditionally received most attention from historians of the French language. In each chapter a number of case studies have been selected, often based on information provided by the metalinguistic texts. In choosing these topics, I have tried to include phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical questions, since each of these poses different methodological issues.

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A: *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie Françoise,* first edition, 2 vols., Paris: La Veuve J. B. Coignard and J. B. Coignard, 1694.

C: R. Cotgrave, *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues*, London: A. Islip, 1611.

F: A. Furetière, *Dictionaire universel, Contenant generalement tous les mots françois tant vieux que modernes, & les Termes de toutes les sciences et des arts* [. . .], 3 vols., The Hague/Rotterdam: A. and R. Leers, 1690.

N: J. Nicot, *Thresor de la langue francoyse, tant ancienne que moderne* [. . .], Paris: D. Douceur, 1606.

O: A. Oudin, *Curiositez françoises, pour supplement aux Dictionnaires. Ou Recueil de plusieurs belles proprietez, auec vne infinité de Prouerbes & Quolibets, pour l'explication de toutes sortes de Liures*, Paris: A. de Sommaville, 1640.

R: P. Richelet, *Dictionnaire françois, contenant les mots et les choses, plusieurs remarques nouvelles sur la langue françoise* [. . .], Geneva: J. H. Widerhold, 1680.

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