

# Brief introduction to the French language (with reference to the French of francophone countries) / Brève introduction à la langue française (avec référence au français des pays francophones)

French is the official language of twenty-nine independent states and is spoken, to a greater or lesser extent, in fifty-one or fifty-two countries.<sup>1</sup> Most recent calculations suggest that over 200 million use it as a first or second language. Although not as diffuse as English, but certainly more so than Spanish, since it enjoys currency on five continents and Spanish

<sup>1</sup> Henriette Walter suggests fifty-two in *Le français d'ici, de là, de là-bas* (1998, p. 135). The figure 1 beside a country indicates the authors' serious reservations about any validity over claims for *francophonie* for this country. The figure 2 beside a country indicates that French is spoken by a percentage of the population, and this could vary from country to country, who use it as a mother tongue, or as a major second language: Albanie 1, Belgique, Belgique (communauté francophone), Bénin, Brunswick 1, Bulgarie 1, Burkina Faso, Burundi 2, Cambodge 1, Canada: Nouveau, Cap-Vert 1, Centrafrique, Comores, Congo, Congo (République démocratique = RDC), Côte d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Dominique 1, Égypte 1, France, Gabon, Guinée, Guinée-Bissau 1, Guinée Équatoriale, Haïti, Laos 1, Liban 2, Luxembourg, Macédoine 1, Madagascar, Mali, Maroc 2, Maurice, Mauritanie, Moldavie 1, Niger, Pologne 1, Roumanie 1, Rwanda 2, Sainte-Lucie 2, São Tomé et Príncipe 1, Sénégal, Seychelles 2, Suisse 2, Tchad, Togo, Tunisie 2, Vanuatu, Viêtnam, Zaïre.

There exists some residue of French in countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Lebanon as a result of the French presence in their colonial past. Algeria provides an interesting case, since, following independence in 1962, French was disowned and, to some extent, replaced by its rival English, with the result that, since the 1980s, numerous Algerian students have pursued their university careers in the UK, USA and Canada, and not in France. Political choices are visible here. However, French has experienced a resurgence of interest, and one may calculate that 30 percent of Algerians speak and write French.

Nevertheless, this list does not include the following, and there seems to be no understandable reason for this: Quebec, Guyana, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Monaco, Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, and Mayotte where French is an official language. This may well be because some of these countries, islands and territories form part of metropolitan France. One could also cite in this category characterized by French as an official language: the Îles Anglo-Normandes (Channel Islands), the Val d'Aoste (Aosta Valley) and Louisiane (Louisiana) in the USA.

only on three (the Americas, Europe and restricted parts of West Africa), it provides a form of expression not only for France and peripheral countries, principalities or areas such as Belgium, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Andorra and Saarland, but also for numerous countries in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa (most frequently called the Maghreb), for Quebec where 80 percent of the population speak French as their first language, the West Indies (notably Martinique and Guadeloupe), Guyana, Madagascar, Haiti, Tahiti, Reunion, Mauritius, parts of Louisiana, and New Caledonia. It still has some lingering cultural value in Vietnam and Cambodia, which formed part of the old French Indochina Empire. A global means of communication, it is therefore a language to be reckoned with.

How did the French language acquire such a privileged and exalted position, having, like its sister Romance language Spanish, and the North European English language, both of which have challenged it over the centuries for primacy of place, set out on its universal path from relatively inauspicious beginnings? Its most distant source lies in the group of Indo-European, or Asian-European, languages which gave rise to Greek, then to Latin which splintered itself into the so-called Romance, or Neo-Latin, languages of French, Provençal, Spanish, Catalan, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian. Each of these languages, or sublanguages, like Valencian (related to Castilian Spanish and very similar to Catalan), Corsican (related to Tuscany Italian) or Galician (which is very close to Portuguese), reflects the final development of Vulgar Latin, a popular and spoken form of Classical Latin associated with Virgil, Caesar and Ovid. Vulgar Latin itself was the *lingua franca* spoken in different areas of the Roman Empire, and as this *lingua franca* slowly broke free from a central stem, it disintegrated and followed the disparate and diffuse paths of Roman administrators, colonists, soldiers and traders. All Romance languages are really the result of a kind of *créolisation* (a linguistic process involving two separate communities, one of which is European), to use the current French term.

As far as France is concerned, or Gaul as it was known in the early centuries of the Christian era, Vulgar Latin split into two main strands: *langue d'oïl* in the north and *langue d'oc* in the south. Similar to the languages of Italy and Spain, the *langue d'oc* retained much of the sound system derived from Vulgar Latin and entrenched itself to the south of a line running approximately from Bordeaux in western France to Grenoble in the east. It maintained the Latin vowels intact to a large extent, while dropping consonants. A similar phenomenon occurred in Spain and Italy, especially in the latter where the modern Italian language is distinguished by the almost total disappearance of consonants from the end of all words, whether they be verbs (*andare*), nouns (*ragazzo*) or adjectives (*inglese*).

With respect to the *langue d'oïl*, and this is our chief interest, the first text that is clearly not Latin, but still in dialect form, is the *Serments de Strasbourg* (*Strasbourg Oaths*, 842). This composition of distinctly non-Latin includes not

only the first piece of so-called French, in a dialect impossible to locate, but also the first piece of German, drawn up by Charles le Chauve (Charles the Bald) on the French side and Louis le Germanique (Louis the Germanic) on the German side, both committing themselves to an alliance against Lothaire I (Lothair), the Frankish emperor. However, the first recognizable literary creation in *langue d'oïl* is *La Cantilène* or *Séquence de Sainte Eulalie* (880), which eulogizes in song the martyrdom of Saint Eulalia in Spain in approximately the year 304.

The *langue d'oïl* expanded rapidly outwards across northern France in the thirteenth century, having already started to gain ground on an international scale in the eleventh century with the successful invasion of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, and here French, with its wider administrative functions, held sway in the courts of England until 1350, with the result that two languages cohabited in England for hundreds of years: French and Anglo-Saxon. The doublets *beef* (from French *bœuf*) and *cow*, *pork* (from French *porc*) and *pig*, and *mutton* (from French *mouton*) and *sheep* are pertinent illustrations of the two parallel languages in the England of the Middle Ages. The linguistic differences reflect the social gaps: French food on the table provides a French word emanating from the ruling class while the animals tended in the fields maintain their Anglo-Saxon linguistic origin.

In the thirteenth century, while French was starting to loosen its grip in England, the opposite was happening elsewhere in Europe. In the Comté de Savoie (between France and Alpine Italy), one comes across a document written in French in 1253 (see Condeescu 1975, pp. 168–169), while in 1265 French became the official language of the realm of Naples, superseding the Toscan version of Italian, since the said realm was acquired by the counts of Anjou. Some Italian writers favored French as their mode of expression, witness Brunetto Latini who, between 1260 and 1266, drew up *Li livres dou trèzor* (*Treasure Books*), during his exile in France. The wondrous, captivating adventures of Marco Polo, of Venice provenance, found expression in the French language (*Le livre de Marco Polo*), and attracted numerous translations in Europe during the Middle Ages.

Certain watershed dates serve to highlight and explain the intense attachment the French nation feels and nurtures for its language, and it seems advantageous to recall them. The year 1539 provides a landmark in that it presided over the drawing up of the document (*ordonnance*) of Villers-Cotterêts which was not the fruit of competition between Latin and all the regional languages but rather the result of the *langue d'oïl* gaining ascendancy over all the remaining vernacular languages. Latin was no longer a choice in this case. Even before this date, in 1490, Charles VIII had decreed that all judicial inquiries and trial proceedings should take place either in French or in a regional language. Furthermore, 1512 witnesses the act of Louis XII who had pronounced a decree against the use of Latin, pointing out

that such a promulgation relegated Latin to a secondary position, although it still survived most energetically in the Catholic liturgy, a tradition that still lingers to this very day in a somewhat idiosyncratic way in the activities of the late Monseigneur Lefebvre, in western France. Again, François I<sup>er</sup> had, himself, confirmed in 1531 that all legal proceedings should take place “en vulgaire et langage du pays.” Throughout all this insistence on the domination of the vernacular over Latin, the *langue d’oïl* profited at the expense of all the other regional languages, including, naturally enough, the *langue d’oc*.

The *langue d’oïl* had thus finally overcome its southern counterpart, the *langue d’oc*, by the beginning of the sixteenth century, so that the flourishing French Renaissance enjoyed an expansive, prestigious medium at the hands of Rabelais, Montaigne, Ronsard, Marot, Du Bellay and Calvin. The Renaissance period enabled the French language to acquire such a privileged status that the French nation likes to think it is unique.

Various cultural bodies have watched over the French language either to preserve its integrity against the hegemony of the latterly ubiquitous English language, or to deliberate on its development, notably lexical. These bodies include the strictly traditional Académie française, created nearly 400 years ago in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, and whose function was, and still is, to promote a *bon usage* or “correct” use of the French language. One of its statutes recommends: “travailler avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences.” The apogee of this purifying endeavor was reached in *le grand siècle*, under Louis XIV, when the playwright Racine formulated a chasteness and immaculateness of language unrivaled to this day.

In the seventeenth century, the often weekly assemblies called *salons*, especially those of Mme de Lafayette, Mme de Rambouillet, Mme de Sévigné and Mlle de Scudéry, were most instrumental in crystallizing the *bon usage*; these were not only literary circles where the art of the novel was discussed in the form of the now less well-known *L’astrée*, *Cyrus* and *Clélie*, but also *cénacles* composed exclusively of men, like the grammarians Valentin Conrart (1603–1675) and Vaugelas (1585–1650), whose *Remarques sur la langue française* (1647) set forth the linguistic principles for *le bon usage*. Authors like the two cited aimed to “improve” the language and called upon the Académie française to preside over its destiny. Indeed, Vaugelas, according to the Père Bouhours, “devint une autorité en matière de bon usage, à la cour comme à la ville.” The *salons* and the function of the Académie offered proof that France had acquired a conscience in matters artistic, and this explains why literature, art and music are regarded as topics of national concern. The influence of the Académie on the language led to a flourishing of French among English writers and artists who luxuriated in an influx of French vocabulary, particularly in the eighteenth century, similar

to the reverse contemporary trend which provokes much indignation in high places of modern France. There has even been a serious governmental attempt in recent years to sanction and financially punish firms that allow the use of English in preference to the use of French. The *loi Toubon* of August 4, 1994 related to the defense of the French language made this very clear: *franglais* is not a practice to be encouraged. Italian and Spanish are suffering equally from this linguistic invasion, notwithstanding the protestation of purists.

The golden age of French literature experienced, and even rejoiced in, what writers considered the perfect linguistic tool that provided it with a beauty, harmony and rhythm that Conrart and Vaugelas promoted with their work on the minutiae of the vocabulary and grammatical constructions, preparing the austere and highly intellectual medium in which Corneille and Racine were able to express themselves.

While the eighteenth century saw passionate debates centered on the fundamental questions of the existence of God, the reorganization of society, and the exploration of the world and universe, all encapsulated in the *Encyclopédie*, *purisme* or linguistic purity still held sway. In his *Journal de Savoie* (1817), Georges Marie Raymond (1769–1835), member of the Académie de Savoie, contributed a regular column on regional French. In this *Journal*, the author wrote less to raise awareness of the French language than to offer prescriptive rules on *le bon usage*, suggesting expressions, even Italianisms, to avoid. The French Revolution gave a new thrust to the expansion of the French language, carrying it beyond the frontiers of the *Hexagone*, in the wake of Napoleon's conquests in Italy and central Europe.

French followed in the footsteps of the colonisers and bequeathed to much of the world, from Black and North Africa (the latter known as the Maghreb in French) to Quebec, the Pacific and the Caribbean, a polished tool of linguistic identity. This explains why modern similarly crusading groups such as the Haut comité de la langue française, created by Charles de Gaulle in 1966, have arisen not just in France, but also in Belgium (Service de la langue française) and Quebec (Office québécois de la langue française). It also explains the Conseils supérieurs de la langue française de France, de Belgique et du Québec which, while offering more liberal views than the Académie française, all serve to protect and confirm the language as a unit and mode of utterance as a contribution to the world's intellectual achievement.

It must be stated at this very early stage (and we shall return to this point on numerous occasions throughout this introduction) that, with respect to the rise of French, and indeed all the Romance languages, following the fragmentation of Vulgar Latin, the lesson is very clear and unequivocal. There exists an edifying principle at stake here, and it is a principle that risks running counter to the traditional French adherence to the purity of their language. French, like Spanish and Italian, is essentially a modified, even,

dare one say it, debased form of Latin. A type of expression finally considered faulty or incorrect in Latin slowly generated new patterns, culturally exciting and linguistically attractive, which ultimately resolved themselves into modern French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian. The tension between the spoken and written word, in the aftermath of Rome's declining empire and the conquering intrusion of Germanic tribes, both approximately in the fifth century, led to the domination of the former over the latter. What is considered a solecism or linguistic incongruity at one stage of a language's development may be construed as the standard for tomorrow. As an illustration, the colloquial and even journalistic *après qu'elle soit arrivée*, frequently censured by the purists, may one day oust the more written form *après qu'elle est arrivée*, or at least achieve a linguistic parity with it, just as *C'est les meilleures voitures* may one day be considered as equally acceptable as *Ce sont les meilleures voitures*. Similarly, one wonders how long it will take for *He came with William and I* to gain acceptability alongside *He came with William and me*, even though the pronoun *I* can only be, in a contemporary setting, the subject of a sentence.

Moreover, if the opinions of purists had prevailed in the desire to keep French in a uniform state, we would still be saying and writing “*espérer de faire quelque chose*” (see Pascal 1950, p. 84) instead of *espérer faire quelque chose*, and pronouns in the following structure would still be preceding the auxiliary verb: “*je ne te les pourrais pas dire de bouche*” (p. 84), instead of *je ne pourrais pas te les dire*. Similarly Voltaire, a century later, writes in *Candide*: “*Comment donc ! dit-il, en pouvez-vous douter ?*” instead of *pouvez-vous en douter ?* (1988, p. 66). The colorful *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* of Chateaubriand uses this construction on every page of what is a lengthy work by any standard. In the ironic, jocular style of *Les caves du Vatican* (1914, p. 13), Gide writes: “*mais pour simple qu'il désirât sa cravate, ... encore la voulait-il choisir.*” French literature of the Middle Ages saw such a construction as standard, just as it is common currency in both contemporary Italian and Spanish. Furthermore, the past historic would still be in colloquial usage in French, and again just as it is common currency in both Italian and Spanish these days.

Some grammarians increasingly realize that their role, even responsibility, in the scrutiny and analysis of language consists less in prescribing and preserving norms, and, in the case of the French language, in arbitrarily imposing the Parisian variety or *francien* mode of expression, as it once was in the Île de France, on the rest of France and the numerous other French-speaking countries, than on observing its development, and actively contributing to this development. It should be added parenthetically here that, according to some commentators on the French language, notably Belgian linguists, *francien* was not the only form of French available. Resistance to change has been a mark of the *francien* variety of the French language. (A parallel resistance to change may also be viewed in the

attitudes of certain, but ever diminishing numbers of, English speakers of English in relation to American speakers who often say “different than” or “different to,” rather than “different from.” It should be said in passing that Jane Austen, for instance in *Pride and Prejudice*, frequently resorts to “different to.”)

What is undeniable is that the cultured inhabitants of a variety of French-speaking countries speak a very similar language, which makes them all intelligible to each other. Indeed, their grammatical discourses are remarkably similar. A consistent and conspicuous feature of the French language is that, although any endeavor to embrace the French of France in the same context as that of an African country, or of the Maghreb, Quebec, Martinique and so on, may appear futile, its grammar is broadly consistent everywhere. Notwithstanding the numerous and inevitable lexical differences, the French grammar of the New Caledonian Francis Carco in *L'homme traqué* or *Jésus la caille* differs little from that of the Algerian-born Albert Camus's *La peste*, or again from that of the Senegalese poet Léopold Senghor in his collections *Éthiopiennes* and *Nocturnes*. The French of Marguerite Yourcenar, of Belgian descent, and the very first female to be admitted to the male bastion of the Académie française in 1981, corresponds to grammatical criteria (see *Mémoires d'Hadrien*), just as does that of Marguerite Duras who was born in French Indochina (see *Moderato cantabile* and *L'amant*), or even that of the Belgian Nobel Prize winner Maurice Maeterlinck in his plays and *Essais*, notably *La vie des abeilles*. The prolific Belgian compatriot of Maeterlinck, Michel de Ghelderode, has acquired fame in the French-speaking world with such plays as the notorious *Fastes d'enfer*, while the Algerian-born novelist Assia Djebar has followed in the footsteps of Marguerite Yourcenar by being admitted to the Académie française in 2005. Last but not least, the Senegalese novelist Abasse Ndione, who publishes regularly with the prestigious publishing house Gallimard (see the novels *Ramaka* and *Mbëkë*), contributes such articles as *Temps de disette au Sénégal* to *Libération* (August 9/10, 2008). The list is endless.

The examples of the authors cited above illustrate the worldwide diffusion of the French language which gave rise to the phenomenon known as *francophonie*, difficult to translate in one word but in a paraphrase: the French-speaking world, or a worldwide language. The term *francophonie*, born in 1880, stimulated discussions at a variety of *sommets de la francophonie*, as Henriette Walter calls them. It was given a considerable impulse by the Senegalese president Léopold Sedar Senghor, the Tunisian president Habib Bourguiba and Habib Diori who, in 1962, launched a constitution for a francophone community. The other significant landmark in the francophone universe occurred in 1986 when a large number of countries were represented at a Paris conference: *Conférence des chefs d'état et de gouvernements ayant en commun l'usage du français*. The fifty-two countries, referred to at the beginning of this introduction and listed at



the end, apparently subscribe to this common linguistic and even ideological ideal, if *Les correspondances du ministère des Affaires étrangères* (1998) is to be believed. However, the imagination has to be stretched when, in some curious manner, countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Moldavia, Spanish-speaking Equatorial Guinea or islands like English-speaking Dominica in the Caribbean are included in this list. Justification must lie in the tenuous relationship between, for instance, the creole French in Dominica and the nearby islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Despite this stricture, French has survived strikingly well in many parts of the world in the face of an ever intrusive and galloping English. An excellent case in point is the island of Mauritius where the official language is precisely English but, paradoxically, 60 percent of the population speak French as their mother tongue, while also speaking English, creole (a mixture of eighteenth-century French and seamen's French, with a contribution from parts of Africa and Madagascar) and Hindi. French and English vie with each other on Mauritian radio and television. French has experienced a resurgence in Algeria where, after the declaration of independence from their French colonial masters in 1962 and the concomitant rejection of French in favor of English, it is estimated that 30 percent of Algerians now speak French as their mother language, and 30 percent use French occasionally, and this despite Algeria's failure to become involved in the community of francophone countries, notwithstanding Assia Djébar's election to the Académie française. Similar figures may be obtained for Morocco where the novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun won the Prix Goncourt in 1987 for his *La nuit sacrée*. One could pursue the enumeration of these statistics in relation to Black Africa, Quebec, Guyana and so on, but suffice it to refer to the list at the beginning of this introduction to observe the full extent of *francophonie*.

In all these francophone countries, it is wise to distinguish between the French spoken by the cultured and well-educated classes, and that spoken by the popular strata of society where formal instruction is not so evident. Furthermore, the syntax, if not the pronunciation or vocabulary, of the French spoken by the well-tutored social groups in, say, Algeria, Reunion, Mauritius, Senegal, Quebec or Guyana, to take just a few countries selected at random across the globe, is conspicuously uniform, and for this we doubtless have to consider the centrifugal power of metropolitan France, contested by many, and certain well-respected dictionaries such as *Le petit Robert*, *Le petit Larousse* and the *Littré*, in tandem with the Académie française. Such a uniformity facilitates the establishment of an all-embracing French grammar. It should be added that, whereas the French of the *Hexagone* has retained a high degree of homogeneity, in whichever francophone country one finds oneself, the local language, dialect or creole differs markedly and inevitably from one country to another, since different amorphous linguistic, social, geographical and political forces are incessantly at work.



It should also be pointed out that, although the linguistic hegemony enjoyed by French is unrivaled in France, there do exist other languages that coexist alongside it. A quotation from Graham Robb's *The Discovery of France* proves this very point. For all the wide variation in statistics, he asserts: "the various forms of Occitan have at least two million speakers, Alsatian 1.5 million, Breton half a million, Corsican 280, 000, Basque and Flemish 80, 000 each (in France), Francoprovençal 70, 000. Figures for major dialects like Auvergnat, Norman and Picard are unavailable, though they can still be heard in daily use" (2007, p. 65). Needless to add, the speakers of these minority languages have the admirable but often unrecognized versatility to express themselves in the national tongue, although in some cases their accent seems disconcerting to speakers of "standard" French.

A shift in emphasis on the appreciation of language and its assessment in the context of the constantly evolving written and spoken word has taken place in recent years. It no longer behoves commentators of language to establish patterns and models according to which all expression is judged, or provide a code of syntax and speech, or strict linguistic analysis, so that we should all unvaryingly write and speak like the creations of Shakespeare or Cervantes or Racine. A grammar is no longer required to be prescriptive but rather to put before the public what kind of language most people agree upon. Encouraging us to speak like books is manifestly not an activity to be promoted. This still constitutes a danger for the members of the Académie française whose hidebound pronouncements persist in alienating large sections of the French-speaking public. Moreover, creative writers exhibit an increasingly restive attitude toward the Académie, to the extent that a growing number of seats remain stubbornly vacant.<sup>2</sup>

This explains why a language in the constant process of change, particularly with respect to pronunciation and vocabulary, should not be subject

<sup>2</sup> The state of the Académie française is parlous indeed. At the risk of appearing too critical, one may note that the average age of its members in 2008 was 79, which seems to correspond to its status as the oldest institution in France. It is woefully conservative, even obscurantist, ruling as it does with a linguistic iron fist. One may quote two examples to justify this assertion. First, when the last spelling reforms took place in 1990, the Académie initially accepted them but then withdrew them, yielding to pressure from the purists. Second, any commission seeking French equivalents of burgeoning English technical terminology must submit their proposals to the Académie.

An ever dwindling number of creative authors tend their candidature for election, for as André Gide remarked in the 1930s: "C'est comme une hérésie d'y prétendre." Philippe Sollers is quoted in the *Nouvel observateur* (March 5, 2008) as saying: "Elle est réservée aux médiocres, à ceux qui ne laisseront pas de traces durables... Le vrai problème de l'Académie française, c'est qu'on risque d'être élu." For some, the Old Lady is *en panne*.

to such restraints that risk weakening its vitality and innovative aspirations, and it must be emphasized that most well-informed, contemporary linguists view any language, not just French, as subject to inevitable and reinventive fluctuations that reflect the vicissitudes of life. The French Académie still serves regretfully as a serious brake on the creative processes of language, maintaining its commitment to the centralizing influences of Napoleonic institutions. As against non-French speakers of French, Belgians, for instance, its members still ascribe to themselves the symbolic value of the ultimate reference for the French language, even though the Académie has not published a grammar since 1932. It exerts a restraining influence on the status of French as a world language. In an e-mail sent to one of the present authors by the Belgian linguist Daniel Blampied, one reads: “À la différence de l’Académie française, les grammairiens belges mettent au premier plan le concept d’évolution de la langue.”

At the same time, the foreign learner of a language should be aware of what is meant by “correct,” or “incorrect,” and here there exists a fine line between the two judgments. If a native French speaker makes utterances accepted by most of his/her compatriots, these reach a degree of linguistic and even social acceptability. If, in contrast, a speaker of French, probably a foreigner, makes a statement that few native French speakers would allow, anywhere in the world, then that statement is “incorrect.” One could discuss the use by a native speaker of the imperfect subjunctive in certain contexts where it might or might not be appropriate. Usually, an argument for its use may be made, however archaic a subjunctive form may sound (and a group in France meets regularly and idiosyncratically to maintain its use), but what is certain is that the possible contentious issue of the use of the imperfect subjunctive does not give rise to benchmarks of “correctness” or “incorrectness” in the same way as saying *mon femme* instead of *ma femme*, as one would hear in Reunion creole, a solecism which would provoke unmitigated condemnation if it were uttered as part of a standard French sentence. The study of French grammar requires us to adhere to what most French speakers say and write, but this does not entail a rigidity or straitjacket of language which obliges us to follow the paradigms set by some grammars that still constantly, and unhelpfully, quote classical writers like La Fontaine, Racine, Corneille or Voltaire as a means of illustrating and justifying a grammatical rule. Grevisse’s *Le bon usage* is not innocent in this matter. The present volume aims to adopt a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, approach.

From the modest, even humble status of a vulgar tongue in the Gallo-Roman period, the French language has emerged from the *langue d’oïl* most vigorously and triumphantly, shaking off the challenge of its competitor the *langue d’oc*, and has become the medium for a rich literary output, an analytical tool that can be applied to a multitude of tasks, whether in works of a didactic or scientific nature, or in public acts of government