

Sprache – Identität – Kultur

Carmen Marimón Llorca/
Sabine Schwarze (eds.)

Authoritative discourse in language columns: linguistic, ideological and social issues

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The authority of *usage*: Columns on language, from the purist- to the “scientific”

Abstract: Cet article se penche sur les notions d’usage et de bon usage dans les chroniques de langage de Suisse romande dans la 2e moitié du 20e siècle. Considérant ces deux notions comme des idéologies langagières, je cherche à explorer l’autorité qui s’en dégage dans deux genres différents, chez quatre auteur-e-s: les chroniques puristes et les chroniques descriptives scientifiques. On remarque d’une part que les auteurs puristes, pour qui “usage” renvoie immanquablement à “bon usage”, se cachent souvent derrière ce masque pour se donner une autorité qui paraisse plus “naturelle”. Les sources du bon usage restent fidèles à la tradition épilinguistique française. Au contraire, les auteur-e-s scientifiques dénoncent cette iconisation de l’usage et en introduisent une nouvelle définition: l’usage devient pluriel. Cette inclusion de la variation au sein du “bon usage” évolue durant le 20e siècle. Elle apparait en filigrane dans les articles de Redard dès les années 1950 lorsqu’il retourne l’argumentation puriste contre elle-même: les citations de grands auteurs commentant des “fautes”, lui permettant de légitimer celles-ci. Matthey dès les années 1980 met en question la notion même de norme et introduit un nouvel acteur à qui elle confert l’autorité de l’usage: le/la francophone, l’usager de la langue française.

Keywords: Usage, Language ideology, Language columns, French in Switzerland, Prescriptivism

1. Introduction

In epilinguistic discourse (Canut, 2007: 51), the notion of “*usage*” is commonly evoked to explain how French should be spoken or written, sometimes in the idea of “*bon usage*”. Much has already been said and written about these two concepts—typical of normative discourse on French (e.g. Ayres-Bennett & Seijido (ed.), 2013). This article, however, considers them from a critical sociolinguistic perspective (Heller, 2001). Viewing “*usage*” and “*bon usage*” as language ideologies allows us to emphasize their intrinsic power and the way that they help shape the social sphere. They provide means of differentiating acceptable and unacceptable linguistic behaviors, ultimately distinguishing those who fit into polite society from those who are excluded from a certain learned elite. In the case of columns on language, the focus is on who is entitled to write

in a newspaper, as the columnists usually comment on the language of their colleagues.

In this article, I explore the writing of four Swiss columnists, spanning the second part of the 20th century and exemplifying the two major types of Swiss newspaper columns on the French language: purist and “scientific”. Their use of “usage” and “*bon usage*” differs quite substantially, and shows just how versatile language ideologies can be.

2. “Usage” and “*bon usage*” as language ideologies

The codification of French has its roots in the 15th and 16th centuries (Trudeau, 1992). However, the propagation of “*bon usage*” dates back to the well-known *Remarques sur la langue française* (1647), by Claude Favre de Vaugelas. Georges Siouffi describes a shift in the way linguistic variation has been considered since the 17th century, leading to the creation of “*bon usage*” (2007: 661). Before then, grammarians mostly called upon geographical factors to explain linguistic variants. Since the 17th century, the framework which has been used is no longer solely geographical so much as, in essence, social: variation has become the indicator of a certain social class. Vaugelas participates in this shift, when he describes “*bon usage*” as “the way the sanest part of the court speaks, in accordance with the way the sanest part of current authors writes” (Vaugelas, 2009 : 67–68),¹ revisiting a notion that he borrows from the Italian tradition (Maryzs, 2010 : 192). If the king’s court is geographically located in Paris, the emphasis falls on the sociolect, with courtiers and contemporary authors establishing “*bon usage*” by their speech and writing respectively. Thus, “*bon usage*” can be defined as a kind of code that needs to be acquired by anyone who wants to belong to a certain social circle—in this case, the contemporary polite society of France. But Vaugelas’ text also exemplifies how “usage” has since been considered a key element of linguistic change. For Vaugelas, usage is the “*souverain maître*” (“sovereign master”). The author does not always appear to make judgments in his comments on language; he usually withdraws behind the authority of usage, writing also of the “*loi de l’usage*” (“law of usage”) (Siouffi, 2007: 679–682). Consequently, while Vaugelas’ notion of “*bon usage*” is often used to mark him out as an elitist and a purist, it has recently been shown that the way he handles variation in his writing is not as rigid and

1 “La façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour, conformément à la façon d’écrire de la plus saine partie des Auteurs du temps”.

narrow as academics once thought, and that the French grammarian was actually extremely interested in sociolinguistic variation (Ayres-Bennett & Seijido, 2011: 84).

Since the 18th century, language commentators have thus tended to call upon “*usage*” to explain linguistic change. “Usage” is the ultimate means of determining whether a new word is accepted into the language, as shown by this quotation from Bouhours:

Quelque beau, & quelque propre que soit un mot, il ne s’introduira pas malgré le public. Sa beauté & sa propriété ne peuvent rien contre l’usage. Les mots ressemblent à la monoye, qui quelque précieuse & quelque belle qu’elle soit, n’est bonne que quand elle a cours. (Bouhours 1674 : 63)²

This concept is always presented as natural and, hence, as yielding more influence than human intervention. In purist discourse, “*usage*” is usually equated with “*bon usage*”. As noted by Rey (1972: 18), normative discourse tends to conflate “*bon usage*” and norm with language itself. French becomes an object to be described and explained in grammar books and columns on language.

“*Usage*” and “*bon usage*” are quintessential language ideologies (Schiefflin, Woolard & Kroskrity, 1998) and they are powered by this tacit conflation of language and norm. Any analysis which fails to recognize this fact may overlook the power which language holds on the social sphere. Language ideologies are “never about language alone. They also delimit peoples, define their natures, or their relations, and channel their movements through the world” (Woolard, 2002: 447). In other words, they illustrate how notions like “*l’usage*” and “*bon usage*” can possess authority and create social distinctions; that which is not considered to be “*bon usage*”, “in use” (“en usage”) or “in compliance with usage” (“conforme à l’usage”) is rejected as unworthy of polite society. By extension, the people using this rejected language are then set apart from a certain elite. This pattern is deeply rooted in these language ideologies, whose effects are therefore the same in Vaugelas’ text as they are in the Swiss columns on the French language which I explore in this article, even though these were written some centuries later. “*Usage*” and “*bon usage*” are known to most commentators on the French language, and widely used in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries (Ayres-Bennett & Seijido (ed.), 2013). Among others, one

2 Translation: “As beautiful and proper a word may be, it will not be introduced in the language if it is not backed by the public. Its beauty and propriety can do nothing against usage. Words are like coins, which as precious and beautiful as they may be, are good only when they are in force.”

of the most famous examples of this legacy is Maurice Grevisse's descriptive grammar, published in 1936 under the title "*Le bon usage*" and a best-seller to this day. Its sixteenth edition has recently been published in print and online (Grevisse, 2016).

3. Corpus: Language columns in French-speaking Switzerland

Since the 17th century, many publications in French-speaking Switzerland have focused on language, and especially the French spoken in the region (Aquino-Weber, Cotelli & Nissille, 2011). The first traces of epilinguistic discourse in the press date back to the end of the 18th century (Cotelli Kureth & Nissille, 2019). Indeed, the Romandie³ has been home to many language columnists, especially in the first half of the 20th century, a good majority of whom were more prescriptive than descriptive in their assessment of the language used by their contemporaries. At the time, purist literature on the French language was read by a large audience (Cotelli, 2014: 330–331). A small purist booklet, *Parlons français*, was written in Geneva by L.-T. Wuarin at the end of the 19th century, with 20 editions released between 1887 and 1918, most of which were best-sellers in French-speaking Switzerland. So significant is this legacy that George Redard ironically considered purists writing about the French language to be a part of the Romandie's "riches".⁴

Since the 1950s, only very few linguists have started columns of their own which boast a more descriptive approach to the subject. The first language column to take a more scientific approach was "Chronique de la langue vivante", printed periodically on the first page of the *Journal de Genève* in the 1950s and 60s, and written by the linguist George Redard (1922–2005), a specialist in comparative grammar, Sanskrit and ancient languages. Redard was a professor at the Universities of Neuchâtel and Bern, and worked for six years as a lexicographer for the *Glossaire des patois de la Suisse romande*, doing research on the Francoprovençal and Franc-Comtois dialects of Switzerland. Redard's articles are perfect examples of scientific descriptive columns. The opening

3 In French, French-speaking Switzerland is sometimes called *Romandie*, which is the equivalent of the more frequent *Suisse romande*.

4 "[Certains provincialismes] ont échappé à l'anathème des puristes de la tribu des ne-dites-pas-mais-dites (autre richesse de la Suisse romande)", in: "Provincialismes romands", *Vie et langage* 71 (1958), p. 75. Translation: "[Some provincialisms] have not been cursed by the purists of the don't-say-x-but-say-y tribe (another one of Switzerland's riches)".

article explicitly stated that the author did not want to pass judgment on precise constructions and words, instead aiming to educate the public on more general matters about language, and quoting many writers, linguists and grammarians. He structured his texts scientifically, always citing his sources and usually including at least a dozen footnotes in each article. Redard mainly relied on current literature to illustrate his views and prove his point, as the title of his columns (“*langue vivante*”) suggests. However, column titles can be deceptive; the language column called “*Le coin du linguiste*”⁵—written by Jean Humbert in *La Liberté* (1952–1960)⁶—cannot be described as a scientific column. Only in 1989 was a column published by another linguist: Marinette Matthey, then a sociolinguist at the University of Neuchâtel, and now a sociolinguistics professor in Grenoble, France. Between 1989 and 1998, Matthey wrote around forty articles a year in *L’Impartial*, a newspaper in La Chaux-de-Fonds (in the canton of Neuchâtel). Matthey’s choice of subjects for her columns was similar to that of Redard a few decades before her. She explained in 1991 that her point of view was “voluntarily far from value judgement”⁷; her focus was instead on providing the public with a less prejudiced view on language and questioning the main language ideologies of French, tackling, for example, the issue of loan words (especially to German)⁸ and bilingualism.⁹

The traditional purist columns are represented in this paper by the “*Chronique des gâte-français*” (literally, the “column of French wreckers”; the title speaks for itself as to the content of these articles) and “*Parlons français*”.¹⁰ The first was published in *L’Impartial* in the 1960s and written by Eric Lugin (1914–1991), who taught French as a foreign language at the University of Neuchâtel. “*Parlons français*” ran for more than two decades in the *Feuille d’Avis de Neuchâtel* (1957–1985) and was written by Claude-Philippe Bodinier, a journalist and novelist, and grandson of one of the first language columnists in Switzerland (Philippe Godet; see Cotelli, 2014). These two columns intend to correct their readers’ language, and make them aware of the sorry state in which their authors find the French language in Switzerland. They look for

5 Translation: “The linguist’s corner”.

6 A newspaper published in Fribourg (canton of Fribourg).

7 *IMatt*, 03.01.1991, p. 27: “C’est d’un point de vue volontairement éloigné des jugements de valeur que j’envisage les phénomènes langagiers”.

8 *IMatt*, 28.09.1989, p. 43; 05.05.1993, p. 35 ; 02.06.1994, p. 31 ; 12.12.1996, p. 28 ; 29.05.1997, p. 31.

9 *IMatt*, 13.02.1991, p. 31 ; 10.06.1992, p. 27.

10 Translation: “Let’s speak in French”.

faulty texts from other newspapers, journalists and official documents, then list and explain the mistakes. Much of their focus is on loan words (from German and English), but other topics are typically discussed, such as verb tenses (e.g. the subjunctive mode), syntax and the defence of the language.

These four authors can be considered language professionals: two linguists and university lecturers, a language teacher, and a journalist and novelist. They all worked with language(s) on a daily basis; writing language columns was just a small part of their language-related activities. However, their views on language matters are miles apart, with a clear distinction between the purist and the scientific. For example, in the 1960s, Redard and Lugin clashed over the use of adjectives, and Redard wrote an article (*JdG*, 23.09.1965) contradicting the opinions Lugin expressed in *L'Impartial* (*ILug*, 31.07.1965), notably on the condemnation of the expression “l’œil historique”. His accusation was that Lugin “scribbles about grammar and pretends, with no qualification, to be a defender of the language”.¹¹ Eric Lugin reciprocated this criticism with the following mockery of the scholar:

M. Walzer [the author of the criticized expression] a trouvé un défenseur en la personne d’un de ses collègues, spécialiste des suffixes grecs et des parlers indo-iraniens. Après plus de sept semaines de recherches, ce dernier a confié au « Journal de Genève » du 23 septembre un article de cent soixante lignes, bourré d’emprunts et armé de dix-sept notes, qui conclut que je me suis mis le doigt dans l’œil. (*ILug*, 30.10.1965)¹²

Referring to the fact that Redard was a specialist on Greek suffixes and Indo-Iranian dialects was clearly a way of undermining his authority. Lugin suggested that Redard was not an expert in French, and instead specialized in obscure subjects, like suffixes and dialects. The use of the word “parler” further emphasizes the gap between these historical languages and French. In French epilinguistic discourse, much is attached to the notion of “language”; French is historically described as a language which is corrupted by “dialects” (or “parlers”) (Cotelli Kureth, 2015: 167–168). Of course, this belittling of dialects needs to be put into perspective, given the high value attached to French as

11 “écrivai[[e] sur la grammaire et se [prétend], sans aucun titre, [le] défenseur de la langue”.

12 Translation : “M. Walzer found a defender in the person of one of his colleagues, specialist in Greek suffixes and Indo-Iranian dialects. After more than seven weeks of research, he entrusted the Journal de Genève on September 23 with a one-hundred-and-sixty-line article, overflowing with quotations and armed with seventeen footnotes, which concludes that I was entirely mistaken”.

an international language (and not a dialect), according to this language ideology.¹³ Lugin also ridiculed Redard's scientific approach when he mocked his use of quotations and footnotes—and, of course, persisted in his condemnation of the expression “l'oeil historique”.

The four columns thus exemplify two very distinct genres. Each writer knew the others' writings, and mostly despised them, claiming to have very different opinions about language. How do they implement the notions of “*usage*” and “*bon usage*” in their writing, and is it so different in the two genres?

4. Traditional purist columns

4.1. “Usage”: A versatile and creative concept

For Lugin and Bodinier, “usage” seems to be a protean concept which wields a great deal of power. One needs to “submit” to it “intelligently” (*ILug*, 11.01.1964, p. 2). It “allows” certain pleonastic expressions (*ILug*, 8.11.1969, p. 2). It can “rule in favour of exceptional forms” like *ayons*, *soyons* spelled with *y* (*FAN*, 22.06.1978, p. 2),¹⁴ but can also “demolish” logical rules.¹⁵ In the main, it is a creative concept: words and expressions can “come in” (*ILug*, 9.01.1965, p. 2) or “out” (*ILug*, 23.04.1966, p. 2) of usage. The choice of vocabulary underlines the intrinsic creative power of usage, as a judge who “rules in favour” (*FAN*, 22.06.1978, p. 2) or a general who “destroys” (“*battre en brèche*” in the original; see footnote 15). The war and judiciary metaphors also convey the social power vested in this concept. For these language commentators, “usage” is a reflexion of what is said—and, to some extent, is therefore fixed. It seems that very little can be done when “usage” has ruled in favor of an ill-formed expression or, conversely, rejected a perfectly French expression, favoring a loan word instead. For example, Bodinier laments the fact that the French word *électorat* has come to

13 In France, the most used word to categorize these other languages is “patois”. The use of “parler” here and not “patois” is explained by the Swiss context, where patois is a rather neutral word used by the speakers of those languages. In Switzerland, the word with the most negative connotation is “parler”, whereas in France it would be “patois”. On the history of “patois” in France, see Courouau (2005).

14 “Pourtant l'usage s'est nettement prononcé en faveur des formes exceptionnelles *ayons*, *ayez*, *soyons*, *soyez*, avec *y* et sans *i*. Ce sont les seules formes correctes” (*FAN*, 30.01.1969, p. 14).

15 “La règle logique selon laquelle ‘soit-disant’ ne doit s'appliquer qu'aux personnes (puisqu'une seule personne peut ‘se dire’) a été fortement battue en brèche par l'usage”.

mean “the right to be elected” and, at the same time, “all the electors”. He qualifies this semantic change as “deviationist”, even if it is supported by usage.¹⁶ This view is close to the way scientific columns seem to define “usage” (see 5.2.).

However, at the same time, both authors emphasize how “usage” is sometimes inconsistent. Lugin frequently demonstrates how it is “incoherent” (*ILug*, 7.12.1963, p. 2), “floating” (*ILug*, 18.01.1969, p. 2), “arbitrary” (*ILug*, 2.12.1967, p. 2; 12.12.1964, p. 2), and can on some occasions “vary” (*ILug*, 11.01.1969, p. 2) or “hesitate” (*ILug*, 29.07.1967, p. 2). Bodinier writes that “usage” is “uncertain” when dealing with place names (*FAN*, 30.04.1966, p. 20). However, at other times, what seems to “counteract” hesitation is “usage” (*ILug*, 10.08.1963, p. 2).

4.2. The iconizing¹⁷ process of “usage”

Notwithstanding this contradictory aspect of “usage”—that it is simultaneously seen as positive and creative on the one hand, and negative and chaotic on the other—both authors put much emphasis on its power over language and speakers. In their writings, an interesting simplification can be witnessed. “Usage” becomes iconized, taking the place of “*bon usage*” in most contexts. This explains, in large part, the power conferred on this notion. As I have noted above, this iconization is typical of purist discourse.

It is easy to see how important it is in purist columns to establish a norm for readers to follow and to distinguish clearly between what is and is not acceptable. Why, however, is it important to retain both notions when their characterizations are so similar? Unlike “*bon usage*”, the concept of “usage” is not marked. It appears—and is meant to appear—as natural as language itself. The adjective “bon” conveys a value, whereas “usage” on its own seems more neutral. The same can be said for phrases like “it is not French”, or “one says/does not say this in French”. Great authority is hidden in the way “usage” is defined in purist columns, and is linked to the way these authors view society, as their description of the people behind “usage” will show below.

4.3. The sources of “*bon usage*”

When the notion is described as “*bon usage*”, purist authors offer their readers a few glimpses of whom they consider to be responsible for creating “usage”.

16 “De même que le professorat est la fonction de professeur, l’électorat est l’aptitude à élire, le droit d’électeur. Le sens d’ensemble des électeurs est ancré dans l’usage, mais il faudrait éviter la prolifération de ce procédé ‘déviationniste’” (*FAN*, 20.01.1975, p. 3).

17 See Irvine and Gal 2000, on the notion of iconization for language ideologies.

Continuing Vaugelas' definition, purist columnists comment several times on who determines "*bon usage*". Bodinier thus reminds his readers that it is great writers who forge "*usage*":

Et c'est un fait qu'il ne suffit pas qu'un grand écrivain fasse une faute pour qu'elle cesse d'en être une. Il est vrai que les écrivains font la langue, déterminent l'usage, dans une large mesure. Leur responsabilité devrait donc les engager à se surveiller. (*FAN*, 17.01.1964, p. 14)¹⁸

As the saying goes, with great power comes great responsibility, and both authors are quick to point this out. Lugin often alludes to a "right to usage" ("droit de l'usage"), which his writings always contrast with a potential "right to abuse" ("droit de l'abus") (*ILug*, 12.10.1963, p. 2; 21.03.1964, p. 2).

Il faudrait un redressement qui empêchât la jeune élite "d'aspirer à descendre", et une restauration de la vertu du respect, qui rendrait au public le sentiment du prix de notre langue. Celle-ci est un trésor dont nous avons le dépôt. Parce qu'ils ont sur lui le droit de l'usage, plusieurs s'en arrogent le droit de l'abus. (*ILug*, 7.06.1969, p. 2)¹⁹

This "right to usage" is in the hands of the social elite, who—like the great writers—should take their responsibility seriously. This social group has the authority to use the language however it wishes, and thus participates in the creation of "*usage*". It is interesting to note, in passing, the typical reference to young people having less care for the language than their elders do, another commonplace language ideology in purist discourse (Yaguello, 1988: 91–100). Two main points emerge from these two quotations. Firstly, they clearly describe "*usage*" as being in the hands of the elite—note the emphasis on the "great" writers. Secondly, this group appears very human, making mistakes and succumbing to human urges. This accounts for the ambivalent image of usage described above, hesitating between "sovereign master" and "fluctuation".

Bodinier paints an even bleaker picture, detailing how things have changed since the 17th century.

C'est oublier que les choses ont bien changé depuis Louis XIII, et depuis Vaugelas pour qui le "*bon usage*" était "la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour": ce

18 Translation: "It is a fact that a mistake does not cease to be a mistake simply because it has been made by a great writer. It is true that writers make the language, and set usage, to a large extent. Their responsibility should thus make them more vigilant".

19 Translation: "What is needed is a recovery to prevent the young elite 'from yearning for descent' and a restoration of the virtue of respect, which would make public the feeling of cherishing our language. It is a treasure that has been entrusted to us. Because they have the right to usage, many assume the right to abuse."

qui limitait singulièrement le champ d'exercice. Aujourd'hui, l'Usage n'est plus le fait d'une élite de gens cultivés qui pouvait donner le ton, mais des journaux et autres innombrables publications, de la radio et de la télévision. Peut-on, sans réagir, laisser le champ libre au laisser-aller qui y règne ? (*FAN*, 15.07.1964, p. 1)²⁰

The wider reach of print and the development of mass media seem to be at the heart of the problem. Lugin and Bodinier fear that this diversification of the sources of usage will entail a “descent”—that is, a loss of control. “Usage” thus becomes a way of forming a new, smaller elite, “worthy” of the French language. It is not all writers, nor is it all newspaper and radio or TV journalists who are deemed worthy; instead, it is only those who take their responsibility seriously. There is never a clear instruction on who can rightly be part of this group, but it mostly seems to encompass cultured men²¹ of a certain age—as the young seem to present a danger, according to Lugin—as well as the great writers. It is quite likely that the two language commentators imagine that they would fall within such a group, even if this is never explicitly said. However, in writing their columns on language, much of their purpose is to show which newspapers, journalists and institutions²² are not taking their responsibility seriously.

4.4. “Usage” can be guided

Both authors agree that language columnists can help shape “usage”, because it can be “guided” (*FAN*, 28.05.1980, p. 3). The main guides mentioned by both language commentators are the Académie Française (*FAN* 15.06.1964, p. 1; *ILug*, 12.06.1965, p. 2), along with the dictionary, and grammarians and linguists. In 1964, Bodinier praised the Académie, as it had finally “quit its role

20 Translation: “We should not forget that things have changed since Louis XIII, and since Vaugelas, for whom “bon usage” was “the way the sanest part of the court speaks”, which seriously limited the discussion. Today, Usage is no longer the sole domain of an elite of cultured people who can set the tone, but newspapers and a host of other publications, radio and television. Can we cede ground to the come-what-may, and not react in any way?”

21 I mention men and not women because, at the time, the members of the Académie française were all men (until 1980, when Marguerite Yourcenar became its first female member). It should also be mentioned that the emancipation and participation of women in public life has been slow to emerge in Switzerland: for example, women have only been entitled to vote at the federal level since 1971.

22 Schools, administrations, cultural organizations, etc.

of ‘usage clerk’ and directly intervened in the fight” (*FAN*, 15.07.1963, p. 1).²³ Its 330-year history makes this institution a “competent authority” to “fight corruption” and “install signposts” (*Ibid.*) that everyone should follow. However, a few years later, Bodinier bemoans the Académie’s wait-and-see attitude:

L’Académie française, qui pourrait éventuellement servir d’arbitre, ne semble pas près de s’engager sur la voie du “dirigisme”, elle se borne à enregistrer l’usage après coup. (*FAN*, 28.05.1980, p. 3)²⁴

For our language columnists, the authority of the Académie is essentially still no more than an aspiration. They would have liked to be able to rely on its authority, and use it as a “referee” at the times when “usage” went against their idea of “*bon usage*”.

Similarly, both authors expressed disappointment with many contemporary dictionaries. In the French epilinguistic tradition, the dictionary appears to be as much of an authority as the Académie itself. For most French speakers, a word is only French if it appears in the dictionary (Yaguello, 1988: 85). This ideology has been detrimental to regional words, which have only started to be included in dictionaries since the end of the 1970s (Poirier, 2003). Bodinier and Lugin focus on the *Petit Larousse*, and vilify most dictionaries on the grounds that they belong to the category of “dictionary of usage” and not “dictionary of language”²⁵; according to them, “most of them register the usage of the day (whatever it may be!) and do not claim to guide it”²⁶.

Le fait que les récentes éditions des Larousse enregistrent le pluriel « quintuplé, ées » avec le sens de « jumeaux, jumelles nés au nombre de cinq », mais négligent quintuplet(s) [the word which, according to Lugin, is the correct one], laisse le problème entier. Ces dictionnaires d’usage choisissent les mots qu’ils accueillent d’après la fréquence de leur emploi. Ils constatent cet emploi sans juger s’il est bon. Aux grammairiens et aux linguistes de statuer sur son bien-fondé. (*ILug*, 5.12.1964, p. 2)²⁷

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- 23 “ [S]i l’Académie française renonce à son rôle passif de ‘greffier de l’usage’, pour intervenir directement dans la lutte (en publiant d’opportunes mises à l’index), c’est précisément parce que l’action est toujours payante.”
- 24 Translation: “The Académie française, which could maybe serve as a referee, does not seem ready to set out on the path to ‘interventionism’; it limits itself to registering usage after the fact”.
- 25 “un dictionnaire d’usage et non de langue” (*FAN*, 9.08.1975, p. 2).
- 26 “Quant aux dictionnaires, ils enregistrent pour la plupart l’usage du moment (quel qu’il soit !) sans prétendre non plus le guider” (*FAN*, 28.05.1980, p. 3).
- 27 Translation: “The fact that recent editions of the Larousse dictionaries record the plural ‘quintuplé, ées’ with the meaning of ‘twins born in fives’, but neglect

The dictionary editors simply add more words with each edition, without analyzing the linguistic worth of what is included. The fear of purist columnists is that people will believe these dictionaries of usage, and use them as a basis for their own acceptance of contentious words (especially English loanwords).²⁸

The end of the quotation shows that both our columnists consider grammarians and linguists to be the real authorities on language and usage. It is ultimately their own work, as grammarians, which will “guide” usage. Their articles are designed to show their public—the educated, mature readers who take an interest in the French language, and thus possibly the elite discussed above—the many mistakes which newspapers, official texts and advertisements are currently making. They want to instruct their readers, teaching them the “*bon usage*” of grammarians and linguists (that is to say, of themselves).

4.5. “Bon usage”: A wild card?

All in all, Lugin and Bodinier mainly evoke the notion of “*bon usage*” to explain what can’t be demonstrated by rules, as seen in this example on the pronunciation of the French town Auxerre:

La prononciation “Aukserre” est donc à rejeter. Ces mêmes Parisiens qui disent “Ausserre” ne manquent pourtant pas de faire entendre KSS dans le nom de la ravissante église qui fait face à l’entrée principale du palais du Louvre, Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois. Anomalie? Arbitraire? Il faut bien convenir que le bon usage, notre maître à tous, ne laisse pas d’agacer parfois. (*ILug*, 12.12.1964, p. 2)²⁹

In their writing, “*bon usage*” is presented as a logical fact, despite its apparent “anomaly”. “It is a fact that the French ‘bon usage’ is to give the number first, and then the street name: 73, rue de la Maladière. Besides, this is logical, because an address goes from the specific to the general, from the name of the person

quintuplet(s), does not help to solve the problem. These dictionaries of usage choose the words they allow according to their frequency. They include this usage without judging whether it is good. It is for grammarians and linguists to rule on their legitimacy.”

28 *FAN*, 9.08.1975, p. 2 ; 28.05.1980, p. 3.

29 “The pronunciation ‘Aukserre’ needs to be rejected. The Parisians who say ‘Ausserre’ pronounce a KSS in the name of the pretty church facing the main entrance of the Louvre Palace, Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois. Anomaly? Arbitrary? It should be agreed that *bon usage* — which rules over all of us — can sometimes be very annoying.”

to the name of the town” (*FAN*, 15.12.1965, p. 21).³⁰ Here, the author alludes to another typical language ideology about French—the idea that French is the clearest and most logical language in the world (Yaguello, 1988: 119–126; Cotelli Kureth, 2015: 165–166)—to reinforce the authority of usage and emphasize its naturalness.

Furthermore, Lugin uses the notion of “*bon usage*” to reject certain practices. For example, he criticizes the use of *convoler* (as in the expression *convoler en justes noces*) to mean “marry”, which he found in a caption in a newspaper, an expression typical of “popular language”, and “contrary to *bon usage*” (*ILug*, 15.11.1969, p. 2).³¹ The columnists again link “*bon usage*” to diastatic variation. What is rejected is labeled “low class”, and unworthy of appearing in a newspaper.

Lugin and Bodinier, like many purist commentators, frequently hide behind the authority of “*l’usage*” when deciding for or against a word. However, it is with equal frequency that they fall back on their own authority, when usage is “floating” (*ILug*, 7.12.1963, p. 2). “*Bon usage*” thus functions as a wild card, introduced to justify the acceptance or rejection of an expression, the final decision lying ultimately with the grammarian, who clutches this card like a gambler with an otherwise feeble hand.

5. Scientific descriptive columns

5.1. A different paradigm

As I have already noted, the two types of language column differ vastly with regard to aim, philosophy and focus. Both Redard and Matthey criticize the purist point of view. On more than one occasion, Redard explicitly rejects traditional language columns. In his first article (*JdG*, 3.11.1955, p. 1), he distinguishes the obligations of a “grammarian in charge of safeguarding the language”³² from those of a linguist. He demonstrates the linguist’s “nuanced” perspective (*Ibid.*) by questioning the acceptability of a construction of the French verb *se rappeler* (*se rappeler de quelque chose* rather than *se rappeler*

30 “C’est un fait que le bon usage français est de donner d’abord le numéro, suivi du nom de la rue : 73, rue de la Maladière. Il est d’ailleurs logique, puisqu’une adresse va du particulier au général : du nom de la personne à celui de la localité.”

31 “La langue populaire tend à en faire un synonyme de se marier; c’est encore contraire au bon usage, donc peu digne d’une légende de l’*Impartial*.”

32 “Un grammairien préposé à la sauvegarde de la langue”.

quelque chose). He shows that, even though it is rejected by all purists and prescriptive columnists, it is widely used by a number of very famous authors, who establish its usage in so doing. His line of argument closely follows that of Grevisse in *Le Bon Usage*, which is far less purist than its reputation would indicate. By opening his article with a quote from Cocteau's address to the Académie française (when he uses *se rappeler de*) and showing the history of the different variants, Redard is mainly trying to establish that language evolves "without taking into account the purists' injunctions"³³ (*Ibid.*).

Even though Matthey also prides herself on a scientific approach to language matters, rejecting the notion of the mistake,³⁴ her approach partially differs from that of Redard. She rarely quotes literary authors, attempting to convince not as a philologist but as a sociolinguist. Her views are quite similar to Redard's, but expressed far more clearly. Like Redard, she discusses the construction of *se rappeler*. Her concluding point is, however, quite different from that of her colleague.

(. . .) Qu'on ne s'y méprenne pas: il ne s'agit pas de substituer le point de vue linguistique dénué de jugements au point de vue classiquement normatif sur la langue. Il est normal qu'un professeur de français fasse respecter les règles de grammaire, d'autant plus que les élèves en sont souvent demandeurs.

Le point de vue linguistique peut cependant nuancer la notion même de règle. Ainsi, pour prendre un exemple entre cent, il est abusif de proclamer qu'on ne peut pas dire *se rappeler de quelque chose* et qu'il faut dire *se rappeler quelque chose*. « Bien que très répandue, la construction *se rappeler de* est considérée par les grammairiens comme incorrecte », précise le Petit Robert. Dans la mesure où l'usage réel présente régulièrement les deux formes, pourquoi s'obstiner à en condamner une ? Au nom de qui ou de quoi les grammairiens tracent des frontières entre ce qu'ils jugent correct et incorrect ?

La nature a horreur du vide dit-on et les grammairiens n'aiment pas trop la variation, comme s'il fallait épurer la langue de formes parasites. Or, la variation n'est pas parasite, elle fait partie de la langue, elle n'est pas un accident malheureux qui menace sa cohésion.

33 "sans égards (. . .) aux interdits des puristes"

34 *IMatt* 03.01.1991, p. 27: "Or un linguiste n'est pas un dictionnaire ambulant flanqué d'un livre de grammaire, c'est quelqu'un qui étudie et analyse les faits de langue et qui tente de les décrire de manière cohérente. La notion de faute n'est pas pertinente dans cette perspective". Translation: "But a linguist is not a walking dictionary flanked by a grammar book; it is someone who studies and analyses facts, and attempts to describe them in a coherent way".

Quand on parle de règle, on met sous cette étiquette des choses très différentes : la règle qui veut qu'on dise *se rappeler quelque chose* est totalement arbitraire, elle ne repose que sur un jugement de grammairiens.

Par contre, une règle de l'accord entre le sujet et le verbe en français qui se base sur une description des faits linguistiques observés a une meilleure assise. C'est donc cela qui me tient à cœur : relativiser la vision normative de la langue. Vous l'aviez deviné ? (*IMatt*, 03.01.1991, p. 27)³⁵

Like Redard, she questions some language prejudices, and tries to convince her public that both *se rappeler quelque chose* and *se rappeler de quelque chose* are legitimate. However, her approach is general and theoretical. She does not show that well-known authors have used the criticized variant. Unlike Redard, who tries to use purist discourse on “usage” against itself, she seeks to convince by questioning the very notion of norm.

The best example of the change of paradigm is the way Matthey explains the role of the dictionary. The purist columns have usually criticized those dictionaries which they consider to be “dictionaries of usage”, which accept words according to their frequency without casting any judgments on their validity (*ILug*, 5.12.1964, p. 2). By contrast, Matthey openly admits her rejection of such judgments, criticizing the view that dictionaries should dictate usage or “play the role of policeman”:

35 Translation: “Don’t misunderstand: the idea is not to substitute the linguistic point of view, stripped of all judgement, with the classical normative point of view on language. A French professor will usually ask his students to apply grammatical rules, not least because they tend to ask for them. The linguistic point of view can, however, put the very notion of the rule into perspective. So, to take one example among a hundred, it is illegitimate to proclaim that one cannot say *se rappeler de quelque chose*, and that one must say *se rappeler quelque chose*. Even though it is very widespread, the construction *se rappeler de* is considered incorrect by grammarians’, the *Petit Robert* declares. Where real usage regularly presents both forms, why persist in condemning one? In the name of who or what do grammarians draw boundaries between what they judge correct and incorrect? It is said that human nature abhors a vacuum, and grammarians dislike variation, as though language needed to be purified of parasitic forms. Yet, variation is not a parasite, but a part of every language, it is not an unfortunate accident threatening its cohesion. When one speaks about a rule, one encompasses some very different things: the rule stating that one should say *se rappeler quelque chose* is totally arbitrary, and rests solely on grammarians’ judgement. By contrast, the rule of agreement between the subject and the verb in French, based on a description of observed linguistic facts, has a better foundation. This is what I want to do: put the normative point of view on language into perspective. But you knew that already.”

Un “c’est pas dans le dictionnaire” condamne n’importe quelle forme, l’éjecte de la langue française et la rejette dans le n’importe quoi, d’où la tentation de faire un dictionnaire pour tenter de créer un usage officiel. Ce volontarisme linguistique est maladroit car un dictionnaire entérine l’usage, il ne le provoque pas. (*IMatt*, 29.11.1990, p. 39)³⁶

Her point of view is also very different from the purist columns when she discusses who is behind “usage”. She does not mention a social elite, nor well-known writers, so much as every single person writing and/or speaking French (especially “writing” when she discusses the 1991 French spelling reform).

[. . .]a balle est dans notre camp, puisque nous sommes tous des usagers (au moins potentiels) de la langue écrite. L’usage c’est aussi moi, donc, et comme je trouve les propositions de réforme plutôt raisonnables, je vais tenter de les appliquer, petit à petit, en commençant par celles qui ne me posent pas trop de problèmes. (*IMatt*, 16.10.1991, p. 39)³⁷

5.2. A rarer but still powerful notion

Overall, “usage” is less prominent in scientific descriptive columns. In the articles discussed above, the notion appears briefly, but is rarely the main focus. However, as with purist columns, “usage” seems to hold considerable power in the scientific columns. For Matthey, it is possible to distinguish between two types of usage. She mentions usage in passing when she discusses the question of *se rappeler de*, noting that “the real usage presents both forms regularly” (*IMatt*, 03.01.1991, p. 27). Her mention of “real” is interesting, because it implies the existence of an unreal usage—perhaps the language influenced by the “arbitrary rules” found in grammar books and dictated by “official” dictionaries, mentioned at the end of the quote. Real usage is the sum of what is said and written in French by any French speaker; as she tells her readers, “we are all users” (*IMatt*, 16.10.1991, p. 39). Even though Redard does not go as far as this, his “usage” is much more changeable than the “usage” of the purist columns. He concludes his own discussion of *se rappeler de* with a reference to “usage”,

36 Translation: “Saying ‘It’s not in the dictionary’ is a condemnation for any word. It ejects it from the French language and casts it into limbo, hence the impetus for a dictionary which tries to create official usage. This linguistic voluntarism is awkward, because a dictionary ratifies usage, rather than provoking it.”

37 Translation: “The ball is in our court, as we are all users (at least potentially) of the written language. So, usage means me as well, and as I find the reform proposals quite reasonable, I am going to try to apply them, bit by bit, starting with the ones that do not bother me too much.”

arguing that “usage alone decides, and—in a unique paradox—creates the very tradition which renders it immutable, one step at a time” (*JdG*, 3.11.1955, p. 1).³⁸ For the linguist, as language is in perpetual mutation, usage is the force which simultaneously exemplifies and establishes this change.

5.3. From “*bon usage*” to *variation*

As shown above, linguists question what grammarians term “*bon usage*”. In his article on the use of the negation *ne* after *sans que* (as in “*sans que cela ne comporte aucune obligation*”), usually considered as a hypercorrection, Redard restates what is said by eminent grammarians and found in books by “good writers”, then contrasting it with quotations using the rejected construction from the most famous authors of 17th to 20th century French literature, such as Mme de Sévigné, Chateaubriand and Claudel, among others (*JdG*, 23 december 1957, pp. 1–2). Without mentioning it directly, his article tries to question what is usually called “*bon usage*”. He establishes that, contrary to most grammarians’ opinions, usage is not “absolute” but variable, especially over time, concluding with an appeal to change and tolerance.

[. . .]absence de *ne*, courante dans le langage parlé, l’est moins dans le style relevé. (. . .) Les grands écrivains ne donneront-ils pas aux bonnes gens le droit de s’en débarrasser ? Hélas ! non, tant qu’il y aura des académies gardiennes de la lettre morte, et qu’ils voudront tous en être. On peut avoir un autre avis. Du moins la tolérance est-elle de règle. (*Id.*, p. 2)³⁹

To change his readers’ perceptions of “*bon usage*”, Redard usually follows the same pattern. He deconstructs the iconized version of “usage” found in purist columns and calls on his understanding of usage as encompassing variation to counter the grammarians’ harsher critiques: “[. . .]usage has proven [them] wrong” (*JdG*, 18.12.1961, p. 1).⁴⁰ For him, quotations from well-known authors can only be understood to legitimize the use of questionable expressions.

38 Translation: “L’usage seul décide et, singulier paradoxe, crée lui-même la tradition qui, d’étape en étape, l’immobilise”.

39 Translation: “The absence of *ne*, common in the spoken language, is found less in formal language. Won’t the great writers give the common people the right to get rid of it? Alas no, not while there are academies which are wardens of dead letters, academies which they’d like to be part of. One can have a different opinion. At the very least, tolerance is the rule.”

40 “l’usage [leur] a donné tort.”

Matthey tackles the question of “*bon usage*” head on. She discusses the thirteenth edition of Grevisse’s well-known grammar *Le Bon Usage*; going back to Vaugelas and the history of the notion, she summarizes that “we are informed” (“Nous voilà au parfum”, *IMatt* 17.03.1994, p. 31). This comment introduces irony, and a distance from Vaugelas’ definition. Her description of Grevisse’s vision further emphasizes this: “*Bon usage* originates from a kind of mutual consent, rather than an unstinting adherence to the way a few privileged people speak” (*Ibid.*).⁴¹ This “mutual consent” seems quite close to the notion of “usage” in Redard’s articles. However, Matthey and Goose—Grevisse’s follower—go a step further. In the 14th edition, and particularly its conclusion, Goose introduces “mini-revolutions”, according to Matthey.

Premièrement, la référence à l’écrit est moins présente: on veut décrire le français d’une manière aussi complète que possible. Deuxièmement, on observe non plus l’usage, mais les usages: par ce petit pluriel, c’est l’existence de la variation linguistique qui est légitimée. Enfin, on prend en compte la situation de communication : c’est l’existence des différents registres langagiers (c’est-à-dire des différentes manières de parler selon la situation dans laquelle on se trouve) qui est cette fois légitimée. (*Ibid.*)⁴²

What Matthey describes as three mini-revolutions are in fact part of the same process: the movement from the iconization of “usage” as “*bon usage*” to the acceptance of variation (usages, in the plural) and what Matthey also calls “real usage”.

5.4. An ambiguous notion

With their new understanding of usage as encompassing variation and being in the hands of every French speaker, our two linguists still seem to show “usage” to be an ambivalent notion. On the one hand, “usage” is beyond the reach of grammarians, who no longer own it. Redard connects the purists’ endeavours to the way in which fascists and Nazis tried to rid Italian and German of foreign words, concluding that:

41 (...) le bon usage est plutôt issu d’une sorte de consentement mutuel que d’un alignement sans faille sur la manière de parler de quelques privilégiés.”

42 Translation: “First, the reference to the written language is less prominent: the aim is to describe French as completely as possible. Secondly, what is observed is no longer usage so much as usages: with this small pluralization, the very existence of linguistic variation is legitimized. Finally, the communicative situation is taken into account: the existence of different linguistic registers (that is to say, different ways of speaking according to the situation in which we find ourselves) is now legitimized.”

Pas plus que l'histoire, la langue ne se soumet aux impératifs que certains dangereux illusionnistes croient pouvoir lui imposer pour un millénaire. . . (*JdG*, 3.10.1957, p. 3)⁴³

The article in question is about English loanwords, and Redard suggests that new loans be accommodated in the same way that French words like *paquebot* (from the English *packet-boat*) were, substituting others with a French equivalent when available (*parcage* instead of *parking*), and simply accepting the words that bring a new nuance to the language (like *shopping*). This article, characteristic of his position, places him in diametric opposition to the purist commentators who wholeheartedly reject all vocabulary coming from German and English. However, his presentation of “usage” still bears certain similarities to that of his purist contemporaries—for example, when he writes that one needs to “obey the irrevocable decision of usage” (*Ibid.*).⁴⁴ Even though Redard’s understanding of the word is different, he still presents “usage” as one of the most powerful forces in linguistic change, and refers to it—just like the purist columns—as a most natural linguistic phenomenon.

Matthey is less clear in her writing, using the notion infrequently. However, the introduction of “real” usage and her inclusion of all speakers of the language as “users” together revolutionize the way the notion works, injecting a measure of anarchy into the authority of “usage”.⁴⁵ However, the way she seems to rely on this notion—with its new definition—to explain certain linguistic phenomena seems quite close to the way Redard and the purists establish “*bon usage*”.

6. Conclusion

The four authors present three very different definitions of “usage”, even though they all agree that it is floating and arbitrary, while at the same time functioning as the “sovereign master”. In the end, it is mainly what lies behind “usage” which differs between the purist and scientific language columns: an elite group versus all the speakers of the language; “*bon usage*” versus variation. However, the versatility of language ideologies can still be highlighted. Indeed, the same language ideology—“usage”—is put forward by Lugin and Bodinier, Redard and even Matthey, with very different results. The authority of usage, and especially “*bon usage*”, is evoked by Lugin and Bodinier to

43 Translation: “Like history, language does not submit to the decrees that dangerous illusionists think they can impose for a millennium.”

44 “obéir à la décision sans appel de l’usage”.

45 Even if she never advocates for the abolition of all rules and norm (*IMatt*, 03.01.1991, p. 27).

condemn linguistic items considered unworthy of inclusion in a newspaper. Grammarians sometimes hide behind this nameless persona (Berrendonner, 1982), especially when they need to account for something that has no logical explanation. By contrast, Redard and Matthey question the notion of “*bon usage*”. In his articles, Redard endeavours to legitimate the language traditionally labeled as aberrant by appealing to the authority of usage by well-known authors—“la plus saine partie des auteurs du temps”, as Vaugelas would have it. Matthey offers a more modern vision of the notion, openly questioning the authority of “*bon usage*”, and trying to shift from the authority of “usage” to that of “usages” and users (“les usagers”). In her discourse, the acceptance of variation is the goal, in exact opposition to the purist columns which seek to erase variation and establish “*bon usage*”. In the end, she, too, relies on the authority of “usage” to achieve her aim; in casting herself and her readers as “users”, she redraws the boundaries of this authority, allowing for the creation of “usages” that are all accepted in different circumstances, countries and media.

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