

## LOCAL ANTHROPOGENIES - LINGUISTICS

### LOGICS OF TEN INDO-EUROPEAN LANGUAGES

# 1. FRENCH AND THE GARDEN

*Quoi qu'on die d'Italiennes, / Il n'est bon bec que de Paris.* (François Villon)

## 1A. The language

French, at least that of oil, is exceptionally equal. It forms a transparent film between the speaker and what he speaks of. But also between the speaker and he to whom he speaks, even between the speaker and himself. This goes to a certain incorporeity. Everything concurs to this effect.

### 1A1. Phonosemics

The accent that is regularly placed on the last syllable of the phonetic group (that can include several words) gives the utterance a calmly decided allure. The fact that, alongside consonants there are also multiple vowels and that the latter are oral and also truly nasal, ensures the stability of the diction, which is still balanced and smoothed by a very advanced point of application in the mouth. All phonetic productions are firmly dissimilated. The tessitura is larger than with Spanish but lesser than with English. At the same time, syllables are all pronounced with more or less equal lengths and impacts, which excludes variations of rhythm and of local intensity. The jolts in the evenness of syllables (gouvern'ment) betray foreign speakers, however expert they may be. This transparency has excluded noisy consonants, such as those that were truly aspirated (the different Arab 'h'), real gutturals (Dutch 'ch' or 'g'), or the eluding English 'the'. Even the 'r', formerly rolled in a first while, has been tampered down, filtered until it became this rare speciality, the Parisian softly guttural 'r'. Excessively long words such as 'communautarisation' are out of tune. In addition to some fluctuations of pitch and displacements of accents towards the first syllable, one of the few rare moments of insistence is the stridency, for example in the word 'injustice', which was predestined to this reinforcement of high frequencies because of the suite of a nasal 'è' ('in'), the 'ü' and the 'iss'.

Assuredly, the evenness of this verbal carpeting repulses the original pronunciation of foreign words, which are all Frenchified, particularly with an accent on the last syllable. Their

crude intrusion is obscene, since it almost always provokes an entrance of bodily or worldly noise in the French semics incorporeity. 'I come to it' excuses the correct naming of an English or Dutch club. It is rare that a French speaker briskly moving into English or Dutch should not provoke a moment of unease.

### *1A2. Semantics*

Many words are very good at designating an object (merlon, douve), tools (gouge, varlope), and the hence-developed actions (vriller, forer), thanks to which the environment is stabilized into substances that secondarily have qualities, accidents. In this respect, the French speaker often displays a very vast and fine knowledge. In the same frame of mind, we find many substantives defining general ideas, often judicial ('liberté, égalité, fraternité'), but also abstractly physicist ('ayant subi une rotation'). Seeing the appropriate incorporeity, analogical words such as 'hop', 'vlan', 'bof', are rare and reputed vulgar, as they trouble the evenness of the diction and of the idealization as they mime the vocal (even the whole) body. The whole descriptive vocabulary of concrete movements is poor compared to that of other languages, English in particular. As we know, an English speaker 'swims across the river' where the French speaker 'traverse la rivière à la nage': those draw two ontologies. Moreover, French has practiced the limitation of the lexicon since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. Racine's tragedy is based on the pathetic narrowness of the vocabulary, at the opposite of Shakespeare.

In this determining abstraction, word classes are very clear, and more often than not a word in a class does not automatically engender its corresponding in another: no 'concretude' for 'concret'; no 'planéité' or 'plainement' for 'plainness' and 'plainly'. Modes are also firmly set apart. To the opposite of the indicative is the conditional and the subjunctive, to which the imperfect and pluperfect add to the their general declaration the support of the initial 'que' ("que je fusse") and the evasive doubt of their final '-asse', '-isse', and '-usse'.

### *1A3. Syntax*

Finally, we reach a crucial choice. Many languages place the determiners canonically (epithet, determinative complement) before the determinatum: 'a black table', my brother's book; we are even led to think that this is the minimal syntactic mechanism, since we spare a preposition ('de') and that we directly see that the determiner concerns the determinatum, and does not have to create special terms to signal its function ('de', 'que', 'don't'). The French speaker does the exact opposite when he canonically places the determiner after the determinatum. 'la table noire' le livre de mon frère. For him, the environment is organised in substances (or in almost substantivized ideas) with their accidents. It is therefore essential that, except in some particular cases, the determinatum should come before (it is the essential) and that the determiner should follow it (it is the accidental).

The grammatical concord intervenes everywhere, in number, gender, right to the past participle. Indeed, it reinforces the dependence to the organising substances ('the little table that I polished') but specifically the whole subject hence appears to be complete, sufficient, like a good form, whose every element is a true integral part (integrating of the whole), with the least

background noise as possible. Hence, the term ‘phrase’ naturally designates the complete sentence in the sense of linguists, and not its main portions as with English. Therefore, the logical modalities affecting the ‘phrase’ in the French sense are also encompassing, and for this precede it. There are countless introductions such as: ‘Il serait utile que...’, ‘Il est évident que...’, ‘Je suis convaincu que...’, which are or missing (unthinkable or not thought of) in many other languages.

This syntactic grasping had to give way, in any event after the 17<sup>th</sup> century, to an explicit and balanced punctuation, devoid of overload and without gap. Specifically, relatives are firmly attached to the antecedents with an expressed relative, and the absence or the presence of comas distinguishes the defining relative clause and the explicative relative clause. Sentences are often linked by such adverbs as ‘par conséquent’, ‘en effet’, ‘néanmoins’, that organise them into paragraphs that are both consistent and integral. The passage from one paragraph to another supposes transitions that absorb a good part of the drafting effort. A well-drafted chapter recalls its main theme in regular intervals that has sometimes been called semantic ‘staples’. The baccalaureate comprises an essay that enforces these requirements

The interior rhymes and repetitions of words are held in contempt. In this equal fabric, they would create an insistence, solely tolerated to oratory or lyrical ends, as with Pascal. The obligation to vary terms has for consequence the antithesis or the subtle weighing between nearby terms: “elle vous prêche quand on lui parle”, writes Guez de Balzac. This may complicate the drafting and particularly the translation of scientific information, which favours the same words for the same things, but flourishes the moral discourse, which is fed of nuance, and sometimes fecundates the theoretical generalisation by encouraging it to explore other terms. In everyday life, the verbal variability pullulates word plays (“fils de pub”, “parti prix”) that is favoured by the neatness and small number of the different syllables used. Etymology is not very present to the speaker, except with a few writers (“procède” for “avance” with Valéry). Apart from the fact that Latin, which is at the root of many French words, has often-obscure etymologies, the ostensible semantic thickness would compromise the smoothing transparency and jolt the expression.

The taste for stability is such that the French speaker usually speaks as he writes, right until strange liaisons (vers eux = <z>eux). Furthermore, we stick to common use expressions. What has not been said or written is suspicious; and leads to opening the Littré to check whether the expression figures there. Hence, quotations are valorised as manifestations of culture, and being cultured almost demands for regular quotes: “as Jaurès said”, “as Montesquieu underlined”. Few neologisms, few foreign loans, the Académie has kept its watchful eye opened since around 1630, and the French speaker is marked by linguists as one of the most severe in the world on what Chomsky calls “linguistic competence”.

In summary, everything is designed for the designator to disappear before the designated (object, event, idea, interlocutor), so that it may be a mental equivalent, without jolts, without any vocal embarrassment and without too many meanders of the brain. Foreigners like to say that French speakers are superficial. The remark is malicious if we understand that they do not go to the bottom of things. It is pertinent if it notes that, even when they speak of jazz, madness or excesses, they are forced to bring everything to the thin, continuous, transparent, formally globalising and integrating layer: the French language.

## 1B. Cultural consonances

All this results in a self-assured speaker, who has the feeling of seeing clearly in his thoughts, and of being able to express any matter adequately: 'je vais être très clair', 'vous m'avez mal compris', 'vous m'avez mal lu'. Addressing listeners that are equally transparent, this speaker has a declared moral. He has political opinions that present themselves as morals, deciding of a Right and a Left. He knows what taste and good taste is. Human actions are understood as lines of conducts (120 lines in the Littré) rather than behaviours (5 lines in the Littré). Each individual has the obligation of knowing everything, and in certain circles, of having read everything, i.e. the texts read by the guests at the same table. Power is centralised like a phrase-sentence. If it is true that one speaks as one writes, the law is all the more written. This has made the international fortune of the Code Napoléon.

In the daily news, information, comment and opinion are more or less separate, since each is invited to have an opinion on everything in his language. It would seem trivial to linger on the arguments of the opponent, except to demonstrate their ridicule. Television news presenters assure transitions (concordes) between themes, in such a way that the entire news is orchestrated, agreed like a French 'phrase' or paragraph, which is not something that we find in the news of other languages. This is a case where it is useful to distinguish French speakers and French people, as Belgian French-spoken news display this same desire for a global nature, latent opinion and entertainment, which is something that Belgian Dutch-speaking news do not seek.

Naturally, the literature is very abundant and diversified (like consonants, oral and nasal vowels are in phonetics). For the same reasons, it is also constantly moralising. "Love itself is political", remarked Stendhal, who went on to add that the fright for ridicule is a foremost imperative. Everything is matter to discourse, in the etymological sense of a course proceeding by successive disjunctions (dis-duo-currere). The intelligentsia, which justifies itself by the task of maintaining the quote, enjoys a prestige unknown anywhere else. There is a beautiful style known as clean. There is very little humour, but an intensive use of irony, as everyone feels that he understands it all clearly so that others are fatally wrong. We shall note the extent to which all these practices are maintained by the obligation of not repeating words and of playing with almost synonyms in a subtle manner.

Descartes' philosophy changed the language signs into a universal vision of the world. There is a "good sense" (and not only "common" sense), that is the thing most shared in the world, each thinking that they have enough of it so that there are clear and distinct ideas, the idea of 'perfect' even contains its existence, it is God, who has the good sense (or the good taste), although his will is infinite, to act according to the most direct, the most transparent, rational ways. Logic is immediate, global, and fits completely in the visual grasping of equivalent proportion  $A/B=C/D=M/N$ , no more. 'Moi' is a word that has a powerful voice; its grammatical functions allow it to give the 'je' a consistency, 'moi, je', and to treat it like an object: 'je me vois moi'. Hence, the Cartesian 'moi' is also a clear and distinct ideal, in some ways the first. Of course, it is substance, the determinatum par excellence of all determiners,

like with Montaigne (“car c’est moi que je peins”), then with Corneille (“moi, Moi, dis-je, et c’est assez”), Biran and Valéry (“inépuisable Moi!...”). In the general transparency of the language, its incorporeal is such that “Moi”, René Descartes, “j’ai vu que je pouvais feindre que je n’avais aucun corps, et qu’il n’y avait aucun monde ni aucun lieu où je fusse”. French psychoanalysis will speak of “Moi” and of “Sur-moi”, where Freud spoke of “Ich” and “Über-Ich”).

This language, like all others, favours some technical, political, economic performance and disadvantages others. Let us remember a few examples at random and in summary, leaving the reader to complements and nuances.

The world’s best cartography and road mapping – worthy of the written punctuation – are consonant with this language structure and fantasy. In printing, Garamond and Didot. Declarations that are sufficiently abstract to conquer part of the planet, such as the Declaration of Human Rights, or still to clarify (‘mettre à plat’) some international negotiations (Jean Monnet). The taste for great and developed designs: Concorde, Ariane, Eurèka, Superphénix, Sophia-Antipolis. A scientific monthly magazine, entitled ‘La Recherche’, whose synthetic capacities are unequalled. A precocious education of children made easy by a clear voice, which soon creates small adults. A general demand for excellence, whose minimum is defined nationally in the Baccalaureate. Physical and mental handicapped and school-retarded are perceived as false notes. The Nobel Prizes are sacred leaders of people.

In the same way, garments that make the body evident and integrated, like the sentence, thereby creating an amiable fashion, Coco Chanel and Christian Dior. A cuisine of sauces, which are as agreeing as the past participle concord. A guillotine that excels in smooth and perfectly disjunctive executions (“Tout condamné à mort aura la tête tranchée” has triggered the conjoint admiration of Stendhal and Claudel). ‘À la Française’ gardens, sorting, cutting, pruning nature’s wild growths and withering, placing wooded paths like discourses. A rare classical music, like its German counterpart, and in any event one that is not very fugal (Rameau, Debussy), and that is transparent right to its timbre effects (Ravel). Few popular choirs, like in England.

Impressionism, the French pictorial moment, is probably the most surfacing painting ever produced. It continues today in the balanced light that irradiates from the television set, where, apart from news of a very high image and rhythm quality emanates a universally sold advertising ‘French touch’. Correlatively, an almost invincible difficulty to understand that cinema is not filmed moral theatre, but a play of lateral, multidimensional photonic movements. Moreover, in the colourful television, one finds none of these ‘talk shows’ or these debates and reports where Joe and Jane Smith intervene, and that fill the screens of other languages, English, Italian, but also those of the peripheral French, Canadians, Belgians, Swiss, etc... Rather, some monarchic “Grands échiquiers”.

Every language, because of its phonosemic coherence, produces ‘reactive formations’ in the sense of psychologists. Here, it is the abundance of Gallic wordplays, due to the already phonetic availability, but also that the speaker does not perform ‘ça’ that his language does not speak of ‘ça’, unless the voice is altered (nymphomaniac heavy breathing of advertising). Similarly, since La Fontaine’s *Contes*, the incessant ‘spirit’ allusions are probably due to the need of adding the rawness of things to the smoothness of the expression. Klossowski’s haute couture pornography in *Roberte ce soir* and Céline’s hand sewn decay are only conceivable in

French and because of French. Simpering is also a phenomenon that is more present than in other areas of languages. We can think that because of the obliqueness of the pose and of the diction it allows to somewhat rise to the surface of the body as it eludes it.

Finally, Mallarmé's text in literature, Lacan's in psychoanalysis, both of which are faraway from everyday speech, are only understood as breakings into the field of a language that is very stabilising, both structurally and in fantasies \*.

**Henri Van Lier**

*Translated by Paula Cook*

**Note:**

\* The [Histoire langagière de la littérature française](#), produced by France Culture, can be listened to on the present internet site under the heading "Philogénies" and was only possible in French because the equalities of the languages where the singularities defining the 'subject languages' of every writer are bluntly apparent and diversified.