



## Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique. Perspectives diachroniques et traditions nationales

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## BOOK REVIEW

**Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique. Perspectives diachroniques et traditions nationales**, edited by Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Magali Sejjido, Lyon, ENS Éditions, 2013, 340 pp., ISBN 978-2-84788-389-3

*Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique. Perspectives diachroniques et traditions nationales* represents the next stage in a very active field of research on the history of French metalinguistic writing, language attitudes and ideology. Wendy Ayres-Bennett and Magali Sejjido have put together a volume which is innovative in several respects. First, the focus on good usage and sociolinguistic variation means that the participants were encouraged to go beyond providing a simple description of a metalinguistic text or a group of such texts. Instead, the authors of the individual studies address a certain number of higher-level questions about, for example, the notion of 'bon usage' and its relationship to other kinds of usage such as 'bel usage' and simply 'usage' itself. The second main innovation is an expansion beyond the usual center of interest, namely the French seventeenth century, which the editors call the 'période de la définition du "bon usage" par excellence' (p.10). The volume does contain studies of this period but it also opens up the field by including work which explores what happens from 1700 onwards. It offers a second, more notable, expansion by introducing a comparative perspective. Indeed, one third of the contributions consider traditions of good usage across a range of countries primarily in northern Europe. Although this book was put together after the conference 'Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique: perspectives diachroniques et traditions nationales' held at the University of Cambridge in 2009, it definitely does not read like the conference proceedings. This is primarily because of the set of innovations described above but it is also because of the network of connections between the different sections and papers.

*Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique* starts with an introduction and the rest of the book is divided into three sections. The introduction is brief but useful. It frames the volume by providing background information on the French tradition of 'remarques' which began in the seventeenth century, and by addressing a range of themes which cut across the volume as a whole including, for example, the different parameters of sociolinguistic variation treated by metalinguistic texts, and the different authorities used to determine what constitutes good usage.

The first part of the book, '*Le bon usage: les origines de la tradition française*', returns to the now well-studied French seventeenth century. A good number of the eight papers in this section serve to develop our understanding of this crucial period. In the first paper in the volume, Danielle Trudeau shows how the notion of 'bon usage' is prefigured in the Renaissance in Henri Estienne's (1576) *De Latinitate falso suspecta expostulatio*. Although writing about Latin, Estienne shares with the recognized founder of the French tradition, Claude Favre de Vaugelas, the principal aim of creating a more assured speaker by resolving areas of doubt (p.36). This prehistory parallels the move later in the book to explore later centuries and other languages so it too has the effect of calling into question the singularity of the French tradition. The final paper in the section by Philippe Caron also makes a significant contribution because it challenges on very concrete grounds the common perception that the Académie française was a true linguistic authority from the outset. Read together, a number of papers in this section highlight the varying levels of prescriptivism present in seventeenth-century dictionaries, grammars and books of remarks. Because of the volume's focus on sociolinguistic variation, most of the contributions place emphasis on works which are more open to variation such as Gilles Ménage's *Observations sur la langue française* (1672, 1676) (Marc Bonhomme & André Horak) and the first edition

of Pierre Richelet's *Dictionnaire françois* (1680) (Christine Cuet) (see also the contributions by Eric Tourrette and Chantal Wionet). The more purist stance of Bouhours is examined by Gilles Siouffi who tries to unpick why it was that his remarks were noticeably more purist than, for example, those of Vaugelas. Another thread running through these papers is an exploration of the notion of 'bon usage' itself and its relationship to 'usage' and 'bel usage'. Francine Mazière's essay is perhaps the most interesting in this respect because it considers how the notion of usage was used in different ways in different kinds of metalinguistic text. Her detailed study therefore sheds light not just on this key notion but also on the historical genres of metalinguistic writing.

Part 2, '*Le bon usage: de 1700 à nos jours*' extends the scope to examine the relationship between good usage and linguistic variation beyond the seventeenth century. An even wider range of text types is investigated by the studies in this section. This includes a short French/Franche-Comté dictionary (Chantal Rittaud-Hutinet), Alfons Haase's (1898) *Syntaxe française du XVIIe siècle* (Pei-Ying Chen), language columns in daily newspapers (Anna Bochnakowa, Wim Remysen), and editions of *Le Bon Usage* by Maurice Grevisse (1936) and by Grevisse & André Goosse (2007) (Jean René Klein). One study by Jacques-Philippe Saint-Gérand considers a total of six different types of text involved in the establishment of the norm between 1790 and 1930. Although Saint-Gérand does not have the space to examine each text in detail, he points to a fascinating turning point in the second third of the nineteenth century when the classical world view gives way to one informed by the methods and facts of linguistics; the authors no longer simply state what is and what is not unacceptable (pp.146-148). This and other studies in the section make it clear that good usage is not an historically stable notion. The most recent trend identified here is an increased acceptance of variation. This is seen across different genres including grammars (Klein), language columns in Canada (Remysen), and the ninth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1992-present) (Christophe Rey & Isabelle Pierozak) which gives greater recognition to regional lexical items. This second section as a whole highlights both the diversity and the continued popularity of text types which are involved in establishing what constitutes good usage.

The third and final section, '*Le bon usage: traditions nationales*' expands the scope in another direction by introducing studies of different national traditions. There are two papers on German (Nicola McLelland, Odile Schneider-Mizony) and on English (Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, Jaqueline Léon), and one each on the Netherlands (Gijsbert Rutten & Rik Vosters), Russia (Sylvie Archaimbault) and Hungary (Anne-Marie Houdebine & Ferenc Fodor). As Ayres-Bennett and Sejjido state, this part of the book shows very clearly that 'les Français sont loin d'être les seuls préoccupés par la correction du langage et par le respect du "bon usage"' (p.19). It goes further than that, however, by drawing attention at times explicitly and at times implicitly to similarities and differences between the traditions, as well as to moments at which they intersect. The national traditions definitely do not all develop at once but there is some overlap in the kinds of factors which explain their emergence. Social factors of various kinds seem to play the most important role, but Quintilian's name also comes up in a number of studies. Other similarities concern the loci of variation discussed both between traditions and over time, and also the criteria used to select different forms. Tieken-Boon van Ostade's study is a particularly good illustration of the richness of the history of metalinguistic writing. She shows that although Vaugelas' (1647) *Remarques sur la langue françoise* was the direct inspiration for the first guide to good usage in English by Robert Baker (1770), the English tradition turns into a tradition of bad usage ('mauvais usage') whereby authors of such guides present the forms to avoid rather than the forms to use. It is this third section of *Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique* which really opens up the field to new directions. Now that Ayres-Bennett and Sejjido have demonstrated the value of bringing together scholarship on different traditions, we are likely to see new questions being asked in future research. I am left wondering, for example, if there is something particular about negation that means that it is an important feature of discussions for both the French and

the German traditions (see Chen, McLelland). Tiekens-Boon van Ostade's paper also raises an important question: is there a difference in the impact that good and bad usage traditions have on the languages involved?

In sum, *Bon usage et variation sociolinguistique* is a very strong edited volume which will have a lasting effect on how metalinguistic texts dealing with good usage are treated in future research. It is a collection which by nature will be of interest to scholars working across a wide range of languages and to scholars working in a range of different fields.

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