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Episodes in the History of the French Language: An Examination of the Reciprocal Influences of the French Language and French Society

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I. Introduction

  For the historical linguist, every word is a portrait. Some are new, with crisp color and a highly reflective gloss. Some are faded, and in sepia-tones. Connections are made when two photographs from disparate times depict the same person at different stages of life.

  The field of linguistics concerns itself partially with how languages differ from one another: the constellation of different sounds humans produce, symbols which convey those sounds graphically, and the precise stringing together of words to communicate greater meanings. There is far more to know about the diversity of language than the human mind will hold. The aspect of linguistics that makes it a science, however, rather than simply a catalog of variety, is its emphasis on the characteristics that are shared by all languages. These common attributes are known as linguistic universals.

  The linguistic universal that inspired this research project is the universal of linguistic evolution. Every language in existence (as well as those which have become extinct) has undergone change. From the moment that a language comes into use, it begins to evolve, and the changes do not cease until the very last speakers have died out. Thus, fluency in a language is meaningless without an understanding of the people, events, conflicts, and triumphs that have made it what it is.

  The aim of this research paper is twofold. First, it seeks to present a narrative of the most significant periods in the progression of the French language from its beginnings in ancient times to present day. Given the breadth

of this topic and the wealth of relevant information, it is necessary for the sake of succinctness that this paper addresses only the most significant episodes in the linguistic history of French, with more attention given to prevailing ideas and movements than to linguistic and historical minutiae.

Secondly, this paper will investigate the indissoluble bond between language and society in the context of the French-speaking world. This paper asserts that French society has simultaneously influenced and been influenced by its language, and that the language has become inextricably linked to the French national identity and character. The validity of this argument is not clear within the confines of history, political science, or linguistics alone. Through the analysis and synthesis of the language itself with history and politics, this paper will illustrate for the reader the connection between the French language and French culture.

This paper will also offer the reader a rare perspective on the history of the language: literature. Although several studies of the history of French already exist, such as Rickard's *A History of the French Language* (Hutchinson & Co., 1976) and Nadeau and Barlow's *The Story of French* (St. Martin's Press, 2006) they do not make use of extended literary excerpts in the original language. This paper contains several textual examples from Latin, Old French and Modern French, with accompanying modernizations and English translations, to help the reader see the progression of the language and its connection to the culture.

The speakers of any language continually shape it. New words are introduced to express new ideas and inventions, and outmoded words fall into

disuse. There is strong evidence for a connection between language and the way speakers perceive their world. For instance, the language of the Inuit people above the Arctic Circle contains nearly fifty separate words for snow, which predisposes its speakers to perceive fifty different types of snow. This is known as linguistic relativism. It tells us that language has a direct influence on the consciousness of its speakers. A society and its language necessarily hold enormous influence over one another; neither could exist without the other.

The French language belongs to the Indo-European family, in the Romance subgroup. Like the other Romance languages, French is a direct descendant of Latin. Thus, this history will begin with an overview of the structure of the Latin language, as well as an account of life in ancient France. The following section will deal with Old French, the official divergence of French as a language distinct from Latin. The linguistic changes during this period are particularly rich in light of the sociopolitical turmoil in the vacuum left by the fall of Rome. The paper will then address Modern French, which arose at the end of the sixteenth century and is the pedagogical form used to this day. Topics of language regulation and standardization will be covered in this portion, with special attention paid to the French Academy. This section will also address the influence of American English and Arabic on today's French speakers.

As a final point, the era of globalization has accelerated the extinction of many of the world's less-spoken languages. Those who wish to participate in the worldwide political and economic scene turn primarily to English in order to compete globally. In the last century, French has lost considerable ground in

terms of being a diplomatic, economic, and academic lingua franca. In spite of its

subversion by English as the world's second language of choice, there are more

French speakers now than there have ever been before, and French is an official

language of no fewer than thirty-three countries, as well as one of the six official

languages of the United Nations. These contradictory data points raise a number

of questions about the role of the French language worldwide, as well as the

future forms it will assume. In tracing the history of French over the centuries, this

paper will attempt to link the French language with the character and identity of

its speakers.

II. Latin

Latin, like millions of other languages in the course of history, has become

an extinct language. No one has spoken Latin as a first language since its

heyday in the time of the Roman Empire. What, therefore, is its significance to

our understanding of language today? The fact is that just as with people, traces

of the parent live on in the offspring long after death. In spite of the fact that Latin

is no longer spoken by everyday people or used to communicate or write

literature, it is still very much alive in the group of languages which descended

from it: the Romance languages, such as Spanish, Italian, Portuguese,

Romanian, and, of course, French. In order to understand the history of the

French language, one must understand the language that gave rise to it.

It is no accident that so much of Europe took its linguistic cues from

Rome. Having established a firm grip on the Italian Peninsula, the Roman legions

sought out new territories to conquer. By the middle of the first century AD, the

Roman Empire encompassed the vast majority of the continent, planting the

seeds of its culture all along the way.

During the time of the Roman occupation, the area that is now France

made up a part of the region known to the Romans as Gaul. The people of Gaul

(Gauls, or *les gaulois*) spoke a language that was in fact a member of the Celtic

group, called Gaulish, which is now extinct. Some Celtic languages are still in

use today, including Welsh, Irish Gaelic, Scots-Gaelic, and Breton. Historical

evidence suggests that the Gauls willingly accepted Roman culture with its

superior advances in technology, such as roads, aqueducts, medicine, and

architecture. (Pope)

It is worth noting here that the Gaulish Celts of the European continent

had a great deal in common with the Celts of the British Isles, both ethnically and

linguistically, before the Romans arrived. Because the Gauls submitted to

Romanization, their language gave way to a form of Latin, which gave way to

French. Conversely, the British Celts actively resisted Roman military advances,

and thus the Latin language did not establish a foothold there until the Catholic

Church introduced it centuries later. It is for this reason that, despite their

geographic proximity and ethnic similarities, the language of the Gauls became a

Romantic language, whereas that of the Britons did not.

Julius Caesar completed the Roman conquest of Gaul in 51 BC. Because

Roman culture had been introduced by degrees during the preceding century,

formal Romanization quickly swept the newly added province. The blend of Celtic

and Roman culture is referred to as Gallo-Roman. It was not long before the Gallo-Roman society much more closely resembled that of Rome than of Gaul. (Pope)

To use the word "Latin" to describe the official language of the Empire during this period is deceptively non-specific. In fact, the Classical Latin used in government of the city of Rome and by the classical poets and playwrights had very little to do with the languages spoken in far-flung corners of the Empire. Classical Latin was considered the purest form of the language, and what linguists call a prestige dialect. It was the form of the language associated with societal status and power, and jealously guarded from outside influence.

The dialects of Latin used in other parts of the Empire are grouped together under a catchall term: Vulgar Latin. This term encompasses a tremendous amount of linguistic variation, as indigenous cultures contributed to the lexicon, or dictionary, and pronunciation of the language spoken in their respective parts of the Empire. (Rohlfs)

Very few written examples of the Vulgar Latin used in Gaul exist today. By virtue of its being the vernacular tongue, it was necessarily the language of the uneducated masses. "Since primarily a spoken language developed, it is natural that we should have but rare traces of it in the written tradition. Only when a poet (Plautus and Petronius) wants to give a vivid description of a milieu do we find instances of the vulgar tongue." (Rohlfs 21) Indeed, even when a Vulgar Latin text does surface, it takes an expert to be able to decipher its meaning.

Tens of thousands of examples of classical Latin still exist today, from plays to philosophical tracts to poetry. Although none of these give a precise example of Vulgar Latin, examination of the language in action provides a basis for comparison of later French texts.

The following example is an excerpt from book seven of *De Bello Gallico*, Julius Caesar's eyewitness account of the Roman campaign to conquer Gaul. He describes in detail his dealings with the Gaulish resistance, including their commander-in-chief, a man by the name of Vercingetorix. In 52 BC, the Romans won a decisive victory over the Gauls at Alesia. This defeat was the final death-knell of the resistance, and the vanquished Vercingetorix was forced to lay down his weapons at Caesar's feet.

Although it represents classical Latin and not the precise variant that the Gauls would later develop, this document is highly significant with regard to the development of French civilization. It gives us an eyewitness account of an event that changed the course of history. It also gives us a snapshot of the parent language of French. Of the sixty-two words in the excerpt, twenty-four have led directly to Modern French words. These words, which account for nearly forty percent of the total, are bolded below. Given this figure, the link between these two languages in undeniable.

> Postero die Vercingetorix **concilio convocato** id
> bellum suscepisse se non suarum **necessitatum**, sed
> **communis libertatis causa demonstrat**, et quoniam
> sit **Fortunae cedendum**, ad utramque rem se **illis**

> **offerre**, seu **morte sua Romanis satisfacere** seu
>
> **vivum** tradere velint. Mittuntur de his rebus ad
>
> Caesarem **legati**. Iubet **arma** tradi, **principes**
>
> **produci**. Ipse in **munitione** pro castris **consedit**; eo
>
> duces **producuntur**. Vercingetorix **deditur**, arma
>
> proiciuntur. (Caesar 277)[1]

Considering his crushing defeat at the hands of the Romans over two thousand years ago, Vercingetorix looms surprisingly large in the French cultural imagination. A larger than life statue of him stands in modern day Alise-Sainte-Reine, the supposed site of the Gaulish defeat in 52 BC, and a metro station in southern Paris bears the name Alésia. Vercingetorix has taken on an air of mythic heroism, particularly since the period of intense nationalism in France during the nineteenth century. He represents the spirit of resistance at the defense of *la patrie*, or the fatherland. (Steele, etc.)

To continue the examination of the language, Latin is the direct antecedent of many of the languages of modern Europe, but it is infamously difficult to master. The primary reason for this is the fiendishly complex grammatical system. Students of the Romance and Germanic languages are

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[1] Next day Vercingetorix called a council. He pointed out that he had undertaken the war not for any personal reasons, but for the freedom of Gaul. Since he must now yield to fortune, he was putting his fate in their hands. They must decide whether they wanted to kill him, and so make amends to the Romans, or hand him over to them alive. Envoys were sent to me to discuss this. I ordered that their weapons should be surrendered and their tribal chiefs brought before me. I took my place on the fortifications in front of the camp and the chiefs were brought to me there. Vercingetorix was surrendered, and the weapons were laid down before me. (Wiseman and Wiseman 176)

familiar with the concept of conjugation. That is, the placement of an ending on a verb according to the perspective and number of persons or things which perform the action. For example, in French, one says *je parle* to mean, "I am speaking", "I speak", or "I do speak" and *nous parlons* to mean, "we are speaking", "we speak", or "we do speak". The verb ending also changes to denote whether the action has already happened (*j'ai parlé*), is happening now (*je parle*), or will happen in the future (*je parlerai*). This system of conjugation with its multiple endings for each verb and multiple sets of endings that apply to different verbs is a distant descendant of the Latin system of verb conjugation.

Mastery of every verb tense and ending in modern Romance languages, though laborious, is child's play compared to Latin. In the intervening centuries, the various Romance grammars have evolved out much of the difficulty, for the Romans took it a step further. Latin applies the concept of changing word endings not only to verbs, but also to nouns. Every noun in Latin takes a specific ending based upon its role in the sentence, called cases, and each noun belongs to one of five groups, called declensions, which determine the set of endings that apply to it. Each declension contains endings for the five cases in singular and plural form: nominative (the subject), accusative (the object), dative (the indirect object), genitive (the qualifier noun), and ablative (nouns that follow prepositions). (Janson) The regimented order of the Latin language reflected the rigidity and strictness of Roman society. This cultural value contributed to Roman civilization's military might, enabling it to conquer much of the continent.

Not surprisingly, the Vulgar Latin spoken by conquered peoples tended to evolve in less complicated directions. It is not unreasonable to assume that this was at least in part due to the objective difficulty of learning Latin as a second language. The dialects of Latin spoken by commoners were dramatically different in style from classical Latin. "The vocabulary is picturesque, with many diminutives, hybrids, borrowings from Greek, and slang terms. Pronunciation was varied and affected by local dialect or foreign speech." (Hammond 233) In spite of the Roman government's attempts to preserve the purest form of classical Latin, the language continued to evolve naturally until the two forms were as different as "the English of Shakespeare's plays and contemporary speech—mutually intelligible, but still quite different." (Hammond 233)

Although Rome firmly imprinted its culture on the people it conquered, Gallo-Roman society remained culturally distinct. It never adopted the same rigidity or order that ethnic Romans knew. Gaulish Vulgar Latin, with its informal slang and more loose grammatical structure reflects a society heavily influenced by Rome, but with its own less formal, less rigid character. The people of Gaul took their native language and blended it with the language of the conquerors to create a language that reflected their cultural values and ideas.

The third century saw a rise in provincial autonomy, thanks to increasing numbers of non-ethnic Romans in government and administration. Provincial dialects were granted slightly elevated status, and the iron grip of the upper stratum of Roman society upon the language began to loosen. Even the playwrights and poets began to incorporate neologisms and vulgar speech into

their works. It was this societal transformation that laid the groundwork for the eventual emergence of the various Romance languages around the time of the fall of the Roman Empire.

III. Old French

The end of Roman rule brought about an entirely new phase in the history of French. Tribes of Germanic invaders ousted the Romans in Gaul, bringing their languages with them. Barbarians sacked the city of Rome in 476, and shortly afterward, a Germanic tribe known as the Franks pushed southward from their lands, known as Francia, in modern Belgium, and settled around the Roman city of Lutetia, which became today's Paris. Although many different Germanic peoples settled in Gaul during this period, including the Vikings, Goths, Vandals, and Saxons, the Franks (whose language was called Frankish) had the greatest influence on the language. Interestingly enough, "although the invaders left important traces of their language wherever they settled, they all picked up the local Gallo-Roman dialect. This created a galaxy of different dialects across what would become French territory, all of which shared many words and characteristics." (Nadeau and Barlow 23) The man who is regarded today as the first king of France, Clovis I, was a Frank. The Frankish language contributed about ten percent of the words in modern French, including *guerre* (war), *orgueil* (pride), and *robe* (dress). (Nadeau and Barlow) It is during this period that scholars agree that French emerged as its own language, distinct from Latin and

easily recognizable as the predecessor of Modern French. The Vulgar Latin of the Gallo-Romans evolved into what we know today as Old French.

The study of the linguistic landscape in France during the Middle Ages falls victim to misconceptions. As previously mentioned, the term "Latin" is so vague as to be almost meaningless in terms of describing the myriad of Latin-based languages spoken in the Roman provinces. The same holds true in Old French. Old French is a very broad term used to describe the progressive varieties of French spoken between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the sixteenth century. Because there is no fixed date on which one language evolves into another, the divisions between a language and its descendants are blurred. This section will introduce two examples of Old French texts, composed roughly two centuries apart. It does not take an expert to be able to see the marked differences between them. The first appears very similar to Latin, so why is it considered Old French as opposed to, say, Late Latin? The answer lies in the external history of language. That is, the socio-political landscape at the time it was used. The end of Roman rule and the German invasions completely changed society in Gaul, as well as bringing a tidal wave of new words and linguistic conventions based on Germanic languages. The language of France was no longer Gaulish, nor Roman, but French, chiefly because the people themselves were no longer Gaulish, nor Roman, but French. The new language brought about changes in its speakers, including the gradual development of cultural identity and values, which will be explored further later on in this section.

The difficulty of accurately plotting linguistic shifts on the timeline of the post-Roman world is due in part to the relative scarcity of texts to analyze. The loss of Roman infrastructure brought about soaring illiteracy levels and forced fine arts such as literature and drama into obscurity. Thus, the few surviving examples of written language during the centuries just after the fall of Rome tend to be military and political in nature.

As discussed in the preceding section, the fall of the Roman Empire created a cultural vacuum in Europe. Aspects of life that had previously fallen within the administrative purview of the Roman government began to crumble. In the absence of the rigidity of Roman law and order, political and linguistic chaos began to ensue.

The earliest document written in Old French is a transcript of *Les Serments de Strasbourg*, or the Strasbourg Oaths of 842. The oaths are a military treaty between two grandsons of the legendary Frankish emperor, Charlemagne, named Charles the Bald and Louis the German. After the death of their father, Louis the Pious, they swore allegiance to each other in their efforts to supplant their brother, Lothair, who had a rightful claim to the throne. The two men took the oaths in front of their respective armies, first in French, then in German, so that all of the men could understand. The first part of the oath, as sworn by Louis the German, is reproduced here.

The significance of this text is comparable to the significance of the first photograph ever taken of someone. It is a snapshot of the language in its infancy. It is clearly neither Latin, its parent language, nor modern day French,

but glimmers of contemporary French are visible just beneath the surface. It is taken from Rickard's *History of the French Language*, which the author has marked with accents to denote the stressed syllables.

> Pro Déo amúr et pro christián póblo et nóstro
>
> commún salvamént, d'ist di in avánt, in quant Déus
>
> savír et podír me dúnat, si salvarái éo cist méon
>
> frádre Kárlo et in ajúdha et in cadhúna cósa, si cum
>
> om per dreit son frádra salvár dift, in o quid il mi
>
> altresí fázet, et ab Ludhér nul plaid númquam prindrái
>
> qui, méon vol, cist méon frádre Kárle in dámno sit.

The Modern French translation below is taken from Bishop and Rivers's *A Survey of French Literature, Volume 1*.

> Pour l'amour de Dieu et pour le salut commun du
>
> people Chrétien et le nôtre, à partir de ce jour, autant
>
> que Dieu m'en donne le savoir et le pouvoir, je
>
> soutiendrai mon frère Charles de mon aide et en toute
>
> chose, comme on doit justement soutenir son frère, à
>
> condition qu'il m'en fasse autant, et je ne prendrai
>
> jamais aucun arrangement avec Lothaire, qui, à ma
>
> volonté, soit detriment de mon dit frère Charles.[2]

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[2] "For the love of God, and for the salvation of the Christian people and for our common salvation, from this day forward, in so far as God gives me knowledge and power, I will help this my brother Charles both in aid and in every thing, as one ought by right to help one's brother, on condition that he does the same for me, and I will never undertake any agreement with Lothair which, by my consent, might be of harm to this my brother Charles." (Rickard 30)

Despite the similarities between Old French and Modern French, one could hardly claim that they are the same language, or even mutually intelligible. Some words are easily identified as the precursors to Modern French (note the similarity of "Déo" and "Dieu", of "savír" and "savoir", and of "prindrái" and "prendrai"), but ninth century French still had a long way to go before it would become recognizable as the language as we know it today.

The saying among linguists is that French is the most Germanic of the Romantic languages, and that English is the most Romantic of the Germanic languages. It is true that French and English have exchanged a great deal linguistically over the centuries. This is partly due to geographic proximity and a long history of economic and diplomatic ties. However, the event that inextricably linked the two languages together, the Norman Conquest of England, began with the death of an English king.

King Edward the Confessor of England died in 1066, having promised succession to two different men: an English duke named Harold Godwinson and William, duke of Normandy. Upon Edward's death, William sailed to England, quickly defeated Harold's forces, and ascended the English throne, earning him the title of William the Conqueror. His coronation ushered in an entirely new chapter of English history, and knitted together the languages of both countries. Within a very short time, the court of England adopted the language of the new king, and their language was largely forgotten by all except the lower class. The variant of French spoken in England during this period came to be called Anglo-Norman. This language "gave French its first anglicisms, words such as *bateau*

(boat), and the four points of the compass, *nord, sud, est,* and *ouest.* The most famous Romance *chanson de geste*, the *Song of Roland*, was written in Anglo-Norman." (Nadeau and Barlow 31) To illustrate the progression of Old French away from Latin, here is an excerpt from the *Song of Roland*.

> Li cuenz Rollanz des soens i veit grant perte,
>
> Son compaignon Olivier en apèlet :
>
> "Sire compaing, por Deu! que vos enhaitet?
>
> Tanz bons vassals vedez gesir par terre,
>
> Plaindre podons France dolce, la bèle,
>
> De tells barons com or remaint deserte.
>
> E! reis amis, que vos ici n'en estes!
>
> Oliviers frédre, com le podrons nos faire?
>
> Confaitement li manderons novèles?"
>
> Dist Oliviers : "Jo nel sai coment querre;
>
> Mielz voeil morir que honte en seit retraite."

The following is a translation into Modern French by L. Clédat.

> Roland le comte des siens y voit grand perte;
>
> Son compagnon Olivier en appèle :
>
> "Beau cher ami, pour Dieu (qu'il vous bénisse!)
>
> Tant de barons voyez gésir par terre,
>
> Plaindre pouvons France douce, la belle,
>
> De tels vassaux qui va demeurer veuve.
>
> Eh! Roi ami, pourquoi ici vous n'êtes?

Olivier frère, comment pourrons-nous faire?

De quelle façon lui manderons nouvelles?"

Dit Olivier : "Point n'en sais le moyen.

Mieux veux mourir que honte nous en vienne."[3]

The significance of this particular excerpt is twofold. In the first place, it illustrates another important snapshot of the language in development. In the two centuries since Louis the German and Charles the Bald swore the Strasbourg Oaths, French took great strides away from Latin. Many more French words are now distinguishable, at least phonetically, in this text than in the previous one. Notice "grant" and "grand", "compaing" and "compaignon", and "novèles" and "nouvelles".

Secondly, this text gives insight into the development of the national character. The *chanson de geste* was one of the most significant literary forms of the Middle Ages. They depict heroic acts and less heroic ones, and are frequently didactic in tone. The *Song of Roland* is a slightly fictionalized retelling of the defeat of Charlemagne's rear guard by the Saracens in 778. It is believed to have been first written down at the end of the eleventh century by a troubadour, or traveling singer and storyteller, named Théroulde. Roland and Olivier are both fictional characters used to advance the story's themes of honor,

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[3] "Roland saw that many of his were lost / He called to his companion, Oliver / 'Dear friend, for God's sake (may he bless you!) / See here so many barons lying on the ground / We may weep that sweet France, the beautiful, should be the widow of such subjects / Oh! Dear king, why are you not here? / Brother Olivier, how will we be able to do it? / By what means will we summon this news to him?' / Said Olivier: 'I do not know how. / It is better to die than to bring shame upon ourselves.'" (Translation mine)

chivalry, and nationalism. Roland leads his army to slaughter because he is too proud to call for aid. The *Song of Roland* is a lesson in nationalism, in making decisions based on the greater good. The beginnings of a French national identity are evident here. Roland invokes "France douce, la belle" or "sweet France, the beautiful." As we will see in the next section of this paper, the French national identity is inextricably bound up with the French language, as evidenced by the creation of the French Academy, the governing body charged with oversight and standardization of the language. In the *Song of Roland*, the French language, as well as the French character, begins to coalesce into its modern form.

The various Germanic influences of the Middle Ages, from the barbarian invasions just after the fall of Rome to the Norman Conquest of England, put French on the fast track away from its Latin roots. The turmoil of the medieval period set the stage for French to become unique amongst its romance cousins as being the most Germanic of the romance languages.

IV. Modern French

In keeping with the precedent set by the previous two sections of this paper, this portion must begin with something of a clarification. Likewise in accordance with this precedent, the clarification has to do with the name of the variant of French herein dealt with. As mentioned above, the term Modern French applies to the French spoken beginning at the dawn of the sixteenth

century up through present day. As before, this term is quite broad, and covers five centuries of language evolution. To contextualize this, the reader may consider that the language of Shakespeare falls under the heading of Modern English, but the intervening centuries have produced radical changes in the way English is spoken.

As discussed in the previous section, the French language during the Middle Ages was becoming increasingly linked to the blossoming national identity in France. The primary impediment to the concept of a national language at this point was the Catholic Church. In the power vacuum left by the fall of the Roman Empire, the Church had gained considerable influence. It was better organized and wealthier than most kingdoms in Europe, and the Pope held control not only over the bodies of Europeans, but their souls as well. Latin remained the language of scholarship, as well as diplomacy, throughout this period. It transpired that one of France's most popular, charismatic kings was the catalyst for the establishment of French as the language of the elite in France.

François I ascended the French throne in 1515, bringing with him a tidal wave of renaissance ideas. A staunch supporter of the arts, he set out to make France into a cultural refuge synonymous with sophistication and learning. The sixteenth century in France marked the beginning of the renaissance, the period of renewed interest in the arts and in learning, as well as the rise of an entirely new philosophy. Whereas the ethos of the Middle Ages focused on the collective abandonment of worldly pleasures in order to purify the soul, renaissance

philosophy, largely imported from Italy, preached humanism, the elevation of the individual.

> "Ce contact avec l'Italie révéla aux Français le vrai
>
> humanisme; en Italie ils connurent une forme de vie
>
> plus belle, plus humaine. Ils virent ce que peuvent
>
> faire les arts pour ennoblir la vie…Ce fut le contacte
>
> avec l'Italie qui tira la France de son marasme." (Von
>
> Wartburg 131)[4]

One of François I's most important contributions to the French language was in fact politically motivated. In 1539, he introduced the Villers-Cotterets Ordinance. This legislation was essentially a package of judicial reforms, but had a secondary purpose. What he really wanted to accomplish was a unification of the French people, as well as the concentration of control of the State on the king rather than the Church. The ordinance included the stipulation that all civil documents and procedures be recorded and delivered "en langaige maternel François et non autrement." (Von Wartburg 133)[5] François ingeniously used language to his advantage, excluding from government the ecclesiastical tongue in favor of the language of the people. It was an enormous step forward from a humanist perspective, and set France apart from other European nations. "François I was the first French king to link language specifically with the State, a

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[4] "This contact with Italy revealed to the French the true humanism. In Italy, they knew a more beautiful, more human way of life. They saw to what extent the arts could ennoble their lives…It was this contact with Italy which drew France out of stagnation." (Translation mine)

[5] "In the maternal French language and not otherwise." (Translation mine)

relationship that remains one of the most striking features of French to this day. And, perhaps more important, François's cultural policies helped France—and the French language—gradually dispense with Latin once and for all." (Nadeau and Barlow 44) The Villers-Cotterets Ordinance was an enormous leap forward for the legitimacy and prestige of the language. However, the Parisian French espoused by the ordinance was still the language of relatively few. France was still a patchwork of regional dialects such as Norman, Provençal, Picard, Limousin, and many others.

By mid-century, the minority Parisian dialect had become the preferred language not only of government and administration, but of literary expression. A school of poets who called themselves the Pléiade released a manifesto in 1549 entitled *"Défense et illustration de la langue française."* [6] In it, the poets asserted the superiority of the French language by virtue of its capability "to express the highest poetic thought." (Bishop 124) It also called for standardization of poetic principles, which did occur. Any poet who wished to be taken seriously during this period conformed to stringent regulations related to form, especially rhyme scheme, rhythm and meter, and subject matter. The return to classicism in poetry reflected the elevation of the French language to the level of prestige of the previously unmatched classical Greek and Latin.

This newfound pride in the national language would set the stage for another feat of linguistic legislation: the creation in 1635 of the French Academy, the governing body charged with the standardization of the language which

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[6] "Defense and Glorification of the French Language"

exists to this day. The Academy came about largely as a result of the political machinations of Cardinal Richelieu. Richelieu was a brilliantly shrewd statesman with a passion for words. The Academy began as little more than a literary salon, of which dozens already existed. The salon, a gathering of writers, artists, theologians, and other intellectuals in the home of a member of the aristocracy, was extremely popular and fashionable during this period. Richelieu sought to render all other salons obsolete by hand-picking each member of the Academy and giving it something that none of the other salons had: the royal seal of approval. Richelieu took a genuine interest in literature and linguistics, and used his political prowess to ensure the protection and status of the French language.

From the start, membership in the Academy represented an auspicious honor. Election to the Academy is a lifetime appointment, and the members are known as "immortals". There are only forty immortals at any given time, and of the roughly seven hundred total members, only six have been women. The first woman to be elected to the Academy, Margueritue Yourcenar, joined in 1980. Perhaps symbolically, the token of membership bestowed upon immortals when they are elected is a sword, except in cases where the elect is a member of the clergy.

Upon its inception, the Academy was commissioned to create a dictionary, a grammar, a rhetoric, and a poetics. The notion of the language as a source of national pride had gained considerable momentum, and those in power wanted all French-speakers to conform to what was thought to be the purest form of the language. In reality, though, the dictionary first issued by the Academy, a full fifty-

five years after it was begun, was pitifully lacking, containing only 13,000 entries. The definitions tended to be short and un-informative, even biased. For example, man was curtly defined as "reasoning animal." To this day, the Academy dictionary is not widely used, even in France. (Nadeau and Barlow)

Furthermore, the English-speaking world may find it strange, even tyrannical, that a governing institution exists to standardize and protect the French language. Many languages have institutions which act in similar capacities (for example, Arabic, Russian, and Swedish, to name a few). It should be said that the Academy has no power to enforce in everyday life the determinations it makes about what it "correct" French and what is not. The Academy is less of a language police than a language museum. Its duty is to preserve the language in its purest form as a reference for French-speakers. Its so called acts of patronage here indicates the bestowment of several different literary prizes and charitable grants. The Academy's capacity for oversight of the language is confined to pedagogical French. French schools adhere to the Academy's decisions regarding *le bon usage*, or correct use, not only in France, but worldwide. According to its website, "l'Académie a travaillé dans le passé à fixer la langue, pour en faire un patrimoine commun à tous les Français et à tous ceux qui pratiquent notre langue."[7] ("L'académie française") The interest here is in uniting the entire French-speaking world by uniting its speech. In this way, the Academy provides another example of the influence that a language has upon

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[7] The Academy has worked in the past to regulate the language, in order to make of it a common heritage for all French people and for all those who speak our language. (Translation mine.)

those who speak it. Academy-approved French entitles the speaker to a share of the cultural heritage.

The purpose of the Academy falls very much under the heading of what is known as linguistic prescriptivism. This means that an organization or government endeavors to tell the speakers of a language how to speak "correctly". The Academy acts as the authority on what is included in the pedagogical French taught in classrooms worldwide. This form of the language is known to linguists as the prestige dialect. It is the dialect associated with elevated social status, power, and education.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the influence and prestige of the French language continued to grow. French was the elite language of diplomacy and education in Europe during this period. The upper classes in Russia considered it in bad taste to speak Russian, all but abandoning it in favor of the very fashionable French. At the beginning of *War and Peace*, Tolstoy writes of Prince Kuragin that "he spoke that elaborately choice French in which our forefathers not only spoke, but thought." (Tolstoy 1) Imperialism also played a significant role in the dissemination of the French language. In the 18th century, France established numerous colonies in such diverse corners of the world as West Africa, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia.

Colonialism had an enormous effect on the French language and on French national identity. Like most other European colonial powers, the French established colonies such as Québec, Algeria, and French Indochina (modern Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand), secure in the belief that it was their duty to

"civilize" the indigenous populations they encountered. French schools began to appear all over the world, but particularly in Africa. Thanks to the French colonial holdings in Algeria, Senegal, and Morocco, to name a few, dozens of Arabic words entered the French language.

Many of the Arabic loanwords that have come into the language in the last few decades have to do with food, clothing, and other elements of North African culture, and are simply transliterated into French. Although French words of Arabic origin are generally relegated to the realm of slang, there are examples to be found in literature. The following text is an excerpt of a novel called *Kiffe Kiffe Demain*, by a French author born to Algerian parents named Faïza Guène. The novel, published when the author was only nineteen years old, gives an account of life in the *banlieus*, the impoverished suburbs of Paris, through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old girl of Moroccan parentage named Doria. In this excerpt, Doria explains her use of the phrase that gives the book its title.

> C'est vrai, ça. J'avais presque oublié…C'est ce que
>
> je disais tout le temps quand j'allais pas bien et que
>
> Maman et moi on se retrouvait toutes seules: kif-kif
>
> demain. Maintenant, kif-kif demain je l'écrirais
>
> différemment. Ça serait kiffe kiffe demain, du verbe
>
> kiffer. Waouh. C'est de moi. (Guène 188)[8]

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[8] It's true. I'd almost forgotten…That's what I used to say all the time when things were bad and Mama and I were all alone: same thing tomorrow. Now I'd write it differently. Doing okay tomorrow. Wow. That's mine. (Translation mine)

This passage is nearly impossible to translate without losing the effect of the original, but the significance of it is found in the author's use of the Arabic term as a French word. The Arabic word *kif,* meaning pleasure or well-being, is now used as a verb, *kiffer*, meaning to love intensely, as well as a way of saying "it's the same thing," *kif-kif.* Guène plays somewhat fast and loose with the term, secure in the knowledge that her readership understands what she means. This illustrates how far some Arabic terms have pervaded the non-immigrant French culture. Since the end of the colonial period, many North Africans have immigrated to France in search of economic opportunities. In fact, over forty percent of the immigrant population in France hails from the region. The French language, still an expression of the national character, reflects the influx of Arabic-speakers from North Africa, or *le Maghreb*. (Nadeau and Barlow).

English has also contributed a great many words to French, particularly those having to do with technology and leisure activities. French has absorbed words such as *email*, *CD*, and *babysitting*, but only in popular speech. The Academy has not sanctioned any of these words, and continues to push for the resurrection of their purer French counterparts: *couriel, disque audionumérique*, and *garder les enfants*. The everyday use of these English loanwords, or anglicisms, illustrates the effects of globalization, and especially Americanization. As French culture absorbs more and more American technology and pop culture, the French language adopts English words to correspond with them.

In spite of efforts to purify it, the French lexicon has expanded to include words from cultures that have influenced France. French culture is becoming

increasingly international, and the language reflects the blending of many cultures into a distinct national identity.

V. Conclusion

As long as the French language is spoken, it continues to evolve to meet the needs and the attitudes of the people who speak it. The combination of the strictness of Roman rule and the more relaxed, rustic atmosphere of Gaulish society laid the foundation of French. In the intervening fifteen centuries, the language has changed with its speakers to reflect their ways of life and cultural principles.

The line of inquiry concerned in this paper could easily inspire dozens of tangential research endeavors. A continuance of this topic would most likely involve further investigation into the influence of French and English upon one another. The Norman conquest of England during the Middle Ages made the two languages indivisible, with countless examples of crossover in both grammar and lexicon. To that effect, better understanding of the connections between these two cultures and their languages would enable speakers of each language to achieve a deeper understanding of the other.

In the centuries since the Roman occupation, the French language has been borne on the current of societal change, but it has also helped to direct that current. The people who have inhabited the territory within the borders of France, be they Gauls, Romans, Gallo-Romans, Franks, or Frenchman, have

manipulated their language not only as a means of expressing specific ideas and

concepts, but as a medium for conveying their cultural values and identity.

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