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Zazie@60: Some Linguistic Considerations

ABSTRACT

This article considers the colloquial language used in *Zazie dans le métro* from a sociolinguistic viewpoint. To the extent that a fictional work can be said to provide evidence of linguistic variation, *Zazie* offers glimpses into the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of French at the time it was written, as well as confirmation of other sources regarding social variation, notably working-class speech and the style dimension, partly in relation to regional variation, or rather its absence. For this reason, the novel remains a valuable point of reference for contemporary linguists. The novel, in conjunction with other works by Queneau, prompts further questions to do with the level of cognition at work when linguistic variation takes place.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans une optique sociolinguistique, cet article s'interroge sur le langage familier utilisé dans *Zazie dans le métro*. Dans la mesure où on peut dire qu'une œuvre de fiction est susceptible de fournir des données relatives à la variation linguistique, *Zazie* offre des aperçus de la prononciation, grammaire et vocabulaire du français à l'époque de sa composition, aussi bien que des corroborations en provenance d'autres sources regardant la variation sociale, notamment le français populaire et la dimension stylistique, ceci en rapport à la variation régionale, ou plutôt son absence. Le livre reste ainsi un point de repère précieux pour les linguistes contemporains. Le roman, allié à certains autres ouvrages de Queneau, soulève également des problématiques ayant trait au niveau de cognition à l'œuvre lors de l'opération de la variation linguistique.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; French language; language change

Introduction

Zazie dans le métro (*Zazie* hereafter) has the distinction of belonging to the select group of novels with a famous first line, along with *Moby-Dick*, *Swann's Way* and a few others. 'Doukipudonktan' seems to proclaim right from the outset Queneau's commitment to the exploration, perhaps the celebration of non-standard French, the latter a problematic term that merits discussion. This commitment is shown in the frequent use of a quasi-phonetic

system of spelling, and his tendency to write phrases solid – there are no gaps between words in the sense groups of connected speech, and it is easy to lose sight of the conventional nature of the gaps in writing. One psychological element that tends to be overlooked in the consideration of variable language, understandably so in view of its recalcitrance to rigorous study, is the level of consciousness at which it operates. It seems likely that linguistic variation and change work in a quasi-conscious way, and although Queneau was not an academic linguist, he is sometimes cited in the sociolinguistic literature of French and is clearly one of those few who are acutely aware of variation. This fact raises thorny questions to do with the cognitive status of variable language.

A notable feature of *Zazie* is therefore its importation into the narrative of some non-standard features of spoken French, which are moreover found throughout, both in the dialogue and narrative of the novel. Queneau was by no means the first to use this device – it can be found in Céline, Zola, and even earlier writers. His reproduction in the dialogue of *Zazie* of phonetic approximations to demotic speech, using the resources of French spelling, does however seem to make Queneau the innovator of this literary practice, to some extent imitated by later writers like Rochefort. In contrast, Céline was orthodox in using apostrophes and other spelling conventions to show the common elisions that he represented. Zola confined his use of non-standard language to vocabulary.

The principal theme of this article is then the nature of sociolinguistic variation in French, as evoked quite accurately by Queneau in *Zazie* (and his other novels). French is sometimes called a ‘quasi-diglossic’ language (Armstrong 2013): one from which regional dialect features are largely absent, but where the stylistic varieties (those felt to be suitable to formal and informal situations) are the most noticeable, each separated by a larger divide than is usual in standardised languages. If accurately so described, the French situation is distinctive, and this article explores Queneau’s intuitive yet highly developed understanding of it. Consideration of this strand in *Zazie* raises the question, a foundational one in sociolinguistics, of the meaning of the term used above, ‘non-standard’.

Some preliminaries

Discussing a novel that is full of insights into language but written by a non-linguist raises the question of the cognitive nature of language variation, compared to other kinds of

social behaviour that are capable of variation and change. By this is meant here the degree and kind of awareness that speakers have of language variation. Sociolinguistics is in some of its aspects a way of doing sociology, and it is of interest that the sociologists Adonis and Pollard (1997, 242–3) categorise variable language along with other elements of what they term ‘lifestyle’. The term implies conscious choice as well as a certain superficiality, and an obvious difference between variable language and other types of variable behaviour like fashions in dress or music is that we are all ‘producers’ as well as ‘consumers’ of language. The fact that we produce language seemingly without much awareness of the procedures that govern its production gives rise to some curious attitudes, as we shall see.

We examine here variation on three of the ‘levels of analysis’ distinguished in linguistics: phonology (pronunciation), morpho-syntax (word inflections and grammar), and lexis (vocabulary). These can to a large extent be studied independently of one another, reflecting the fact they have types of organisation that respond to different linguistic constraints. In variable language the three levels can also respond to the influence of different social constraints; phonological variation and change proceed in the context of face-to-face interaction, such that, for example, UK English shows little sign of adopting US pronunciation features despite the considerable exposure of its speakers to these. This is in obvious contrast to the adoption of other US cultural artefacts, including innovative vocabulary. Change in pronunciation is only possible through the accommodation associated with direct interaction, if then. One implication is that the high processing cost of often subtle phonological adjustments is offset by the social advantage gained by alignment to the desired reference group. Accommodation takes place where social advantage is perceived as being gained thereby. This is in contrast to the ‘imitation’ of other accents, of which most speakers are capable over short sequences. In contrast, grammatical variation sees in most varieties of English a polarised social-class distribution, as table 1 shows:

Table 1: Percentage of 3rd-person verbs without –s in Norwich and Detroit (Romaine 1984, 86)

Social Class	Norwich	Social Class	Detroit
MMC	0	UMC	1
LMC	2	LMC	10
UWC	70	UWC	57
MWC	87	—	—
LWC	97	LWC	71

It appears that the typical English variable grammatical pattern has a near-complementary distribution, such that some speaker groups show almost total avoidance of the non-standard variant, while others almost categorically avoid the standard. Table 1 shows this sharp or near-qualitative pattern in the use of non-standard verb agreement (as in ‘she don’t know’). There is a dramatic contrast between lower middle-class and upper working-class use of the variable feature; and this is true of two very widely separated speech communities, although the UK pattern is more sharply polarised. Other English grammatical variables showing the same pattern as that in Table 1 are multiple negation (‘I don’t want none’) and variable copula deletion (‘you (are) crazy!’) (Chambers 1995, 117–18).

Perhaps the most obvious inference that can be drawn from this pattern has to do with the greater purchase, as it were, that standardisation has on grammar in some literate societies; related to the fact that grammatical variation may be perceived as being in some way less arbitrary or unmotivated than phonological variation. There appears to be an association in the popular (that is, linguistically uninstructed) mind between non-standard grammar and cognitive deficit, whereby the use of multiple negation, for instance, is held to indicate illogicality. Certain examples like multiple negation are clearly susceptible to criticism using arithmetical arguments inapplicable to language (‘two negatives make a positive’) but the use of all non-standard grammatical constructions is popularly associated (in Anglophone countries at least) with lack of education at best; from this, it is only a short step to perceived deficient cognition. Table 1 shows at the same time that

standardisation weighs less heavily on societies that are more egalitarian, however superficial this equality may be.

The famous first lines

The aim of the preceding paragraphs is to throw into relief the French situation by contrast with what the UK or US reader is familiar with. Let us turn now to the first two sentences of *Zazie*. Page references are given as in the following stretch of dialogue.

Doukipudonktan, se demanda Gabriel excédé. Pas possible, ils se nettoient jamais.
(*Zazie*, p. 9)

Doukipudonktan seems in conventional spelling to mean *D'où qu'il(s) pue(nt) donc tant?* (Gabriel is standing in an apparently unwashed crowd), translatable as 'Why do they stink so much?' and we can imagine a translation that would replace the non-standard syntax of *d'où que* with English non-standard lexis, perhaps something like either: 'Why do they smell so bloody awful?' or 'Where's that bloody awful hum coming from?', depending on the interpretation of *Doukipudonktan*. Wright's (2000) translation renders these sentences as:

Howcanaystinksotho, wondered Gabriel, exasperated. Ts incredible, they never clean themselves (Queneau / Wright 2000, 3)

We are not directly concerned here with translation, but it is clear that the translator has resorted to phonological reduction to achieve an approximation to the effects aimed at in the French: 'they' reduces to 'ay', 'it's to 'ts', and quite ingeniously for the time, 'though' to 'tho', using what was then informal spelling to suggest working-class speech. The non-standard syntax of *d'où que* has no equivalent in English grammar, and 'compensation' (in the translation jargon) is provided through the means just mentioned. Perhaps the closest English non-standard correspondence in non-standardness is 'how come?'. Clearly, this is far from being a literal rendering of the French 'from where that' as an equivalent to 'why'. The interest of considering the matter from a word-for-word viewpoint is to enable one to look at the sequences afresh. Just as 'how come' may attract criticism from an English-speaking purist on pseudo-linguistic grounds (its pleonasm in requiring two words, for example), so a French prescriptivist could easily enough find objections to *d'où que*, focussing perhaps on its lack of transparency and suggesting it

should be expanded to *d'où vient-il que*. These arguments are of course specious; as mentioned above, double or multiple negation attracts opprobrium wherever English is spoken, while very neatly for our argument, double negation is standard in French and it is omission of the semantically redundant negator *ne* that is condemned.

It is of course in reality social differentiation expressed through variable language that is in question here, and indeed a purist may well come out into the open and object to 'how come' as American, lower-class, 'ignorant', etc. What is of interest for our present discussion is that social judgements vary across both linguistic levels and speech communities, this latter term understood here in the large sense of a nation. Thus to resume the example of *d'où que* used in its pristine sense of 'where from', the sequence can be used in one of the several ways of asking in French where someone is from, the most common being listed below. Here we are discussing so-called WH questions, those introduced by an interrogative word like English what, which, who, etc.

- (1) *d'où es-tu?*
- (2) *d'où est-ce que tu es?*
- (3) *tu es d'où?*
- (4) *d'où tu es?*
- (5) *d'où que tu es?*

These forms are listed more or less in descending order of formality, or of socio-stylistic value, to use a jargonistic but more accurate term. The list is not exhaustive; as Gadet (1997b, 7–8) shows, French speakers potentially have available a considerable array of WH question forms, although not all speakers use all of the variants available (Gadet lists 14 possible variants of the syntactically comparable sequence *quand venez-vous?*).

The results shown in Table 2 are adapted from Valdman (1982, 225), and provide a rough basis of comparison when considered alongside those in Table 1. WH forms in the left-hand column correspond to the examples listed above. Valdman's figures are in turn adapted from a quantification of variable WH interrogatives carried out by Behnstedt (1973). For clarity, not all of the forms studied by Behnstedt are shown in the table. For this reason, it will be seen that the total of the figures in each of the three remaining columns in Table 2, which show percentage use of each variant, is not 100. These results need to be treated with caution, since although the total number of occurrences or 'tokens' is considerable, especially for 'français soutenu', the distribution of numbers token

numbers is not transparent (token numbers have been excluded for ease of interpretation). Thus for instance, 21 speakers are represented in the ‘français familier’ data, giving in principle some 28 tokens per speaker, but in practice it is unknown how numbers of tokens are distributed across the variants, as the original figures are not recoverable.

Social class / style	‘français populaire’ (WC)	‘français familier’ (MC)	‘français soutenu’ (MC)
WH form	% use	% use	% use
(1) d’où es-tu?	0	3	47
(2) d’où est-ce que tu es?	8	12	3
(3) tu es d’où?	12	33	25
(4) d’où tu es?	36	46	10
(5) d’où que tu es?	26	0	0

Table 2: Variable WH questions: Behnstedt’s results (adapted from Valdman 1982, 225)

Behnstedt’s choice of terms to designate the three varieties of speech studied is rather unfortunate, as they evoke speech styles as well as varieties: ‘français populaire’ refers here to working-class (WC) speech which was collected when the researcher was working as co-driver of a lorry; ‘français familier’ refers to colloquial middle-class (MC) speech; and ‘français soutenu’ was recorded from radio interviews and discussions: it is therefore both formal and middle class (Behnstedt’s term is *Rundfunksprache* or ‘radio speech’). The social status of the participants in these radio discussions was presumably not known with certainty, although it seems defensible to assume that they would be highly educated MC speakers in view of the exclusive character of formal radio discussions.

Bearing these limitations in mind, what is striking in this display for our present purposes is the distribution across speaker groups and speech styles of the array of constructions. The distribution is ‘quantitative’ or probabilistic for the use of the variants (2), (3) and (4). That is to say, all speaker groups are participating in what one might call the core elements of this area of variable syntax; ‘core’ in the sense of most frequently used. At the same time the peripheral variants (1) and (5) are not distributed in this way: the high-value or formal variant (1) is used exclusively by MC speakers, overwhelmingly in the most formal style, while the low-value variant (5) is solely the property of WC speakers. In other words, the social distribution of variant (5) is akin to that of the English

variable in Table 1 exemplified by ‘she don’t know’, in being totally avoided by the French MC speakers in the sample.

It is of great theoretical interest that true syntactic variation, in the sense of variable word-order, should have in French what sociolinguists call indexical value, that is be indicative of elements of speakers’ social identity, like age, gender, social class and ethnicity. What is of more immediate value in Table 2 is however the evidence that allows us to connect a fragment of variable language use, demonstrated empirically, with the sequence that Queneau chose as the very first element of *Zazie*. Behnstedt’s term for the variety of language this typifies is *français populaire*, or working-class French. The construction exemplified by *d’où que* occurs more than once in the book, and the remarks made about it by one of Queneau’s commentators (Catonné 1992, 80) are highly significant:

– Pourquoi que spécialement tu nous as dit de venir ce soir ? (*Zazie*, p. 147)

Within the same discussion, Catonné, a literary critic rather than a linguist, calls this stretch of language *relâché*, *négligé* and *familier*. The latter term seems most accurate, as it is a style label describing speech that takes place between intimates. It is of course always uncertain whether an author has used a term like *relâché* or *négligé* in a sense that has been transferred from speaker to speech, since no piece of language which conveys the intended meaning can be ‘sloppy’. Nevertheless, many dialect perception surveys have shown a tendency by respondents to attribute to accents certain personal qualities, like intelligence, honesty and friendliness. This is typically expressed in terms like ‘many respondents judge a Provençal accent to be friendly’. There may be metonymic thinking at work here, since the proposition that ‘a Provençal accent is friendly’ means little unless one accepts it as shorthand for something laborious like ‘a speaker with a Provençal accent embodies for many respondents a stereotype that portrays the inhabitants of Provence as friendly people’. The terms used by Catonné may nevertheless call for another explanation. Expressions like ‘the flat vowels of Yorkshire’, meaningless in phonetic terms, suggest a widespread belief that language has a life of its own. This in turn points to a further element that sets language apart from other types of social behaviour. It is sometimes said that the prejudice against accents is the last remaining to be eradicated; the fact that an accent is embodied in a way that many other social practices are not may go some way to explaining this.

Focussing on pronunciation, for many if not most linguists the term working-class speech evokes dialect, which in turn evokes perhaps most immediately the notion of regionality, although the concept of the social dialect is of course common if perhaps more specialised. Queneau famously used in the novel however one single pronunciation feature readily identifiable as regional, as shown below:

Le type paie et ils s’immergent dans la foule. Zazie se faufile, négligeant les graveurs de plaques de vélo, les souffleurs de verre, les démonstrateurs de noeuds de cravate, les Arabes qui proposent des montres, les manouches qui proposent n’importe quoi. Le type est sur ses talons, il est aussi subtil que Zazie. Pour le moment, elle a pas envie de le semer, mais elle se prévient que ce sera pas commode. Y a pas de doute, c’est un spécialiste.

Elle s’arrête pile devant un achalandage de surplus. Du coup, a boujplu. A boujpludutou. Le type freine sec, juste derrière elle. Le commerçant engage la conversation. (*Zazie*, p. 47)

The chap pays and they immerse themselves in the crowd. Zazie winds in and out, neglecting the engravers of name-plates for bicycles, the glass-blowers, the demonstrators of bow-ties, the Arabs offering watches, the Romanies offering more or less anything. The chap’s at her heels, he’s as artful as anything. For the moment she has no desire to shake him off, but she tells herself in advance that it won’t be so easy. No doubt about it, he’s a specialist.

She stopped dead in front of a display of surplus. What a sight; she doesn’t budge. She doesn’t budget all. The chap sets on his brakes, just behind her. The stallholder initiates the conversation. (Queneau / Wright 2000, 36)

Here the sequence *Du coup, a boujplu. A boujpludutou* in the second paragraph corresponds in standard French to: *Du coup, elle (ne) bouge plus. Elle (ne) bouge plus du tout*. The semi-phonetic spelling seems to have been triggered by the author’s decision to represent *elle* as *a*, an old working-class Parisian feature. To term this a regional feature is perhaps misleading: to use a phrase common in the literature, it is or was localised to Paris. It was described by Carton *et al* as recently as 1983 (p. 87). This does not imply an exclusive distribution; Maupassant quite often uses the feature in his dialogue to portray rustic Norman French. The English rendering shows incidentally the limits of translation

when language and culture are fused. They are structurally inseparable, in that the working-class Parisian form is indicated by the /a/ vowel, while standard French has /ɛ/. It is as if one were attempting to ‘translate’ the Brooklyn stereotype that produces ‘shoit’ for ‘shirt’. In the passage quoted above, Zazie has just seen some blue jeans for sale on the market stall, and she is very eager to acquire a pair. The rendering of *A boujpludutou* by ‘She doesn’t budget all’ produces a very broad effect: what is retained is the rather whimsical humour of the original. All else is inevitably lost.

Alongside this we see reduced forms like *elle a pas envie* and *y a pas de doute* (full form *il n’y a pas de doute*). Here the non-standard or colloquial effect is connected with reduction – the omission of *ne* and of the pronoun *il*. Thus *il n’y a pas de doute* would be transcribed in the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) as [ilnjapadədut], while the reduced sequence is pronounced [japaddut]. The general impression gained by a reading of *Zazie* is therefore that *le français populaire* is characterised, at least in pronunciation, very largely by reductions and other fast-speech processes, and that any localised features, comparable to those which enable the UK inhabitant to identify Cockney, are conspicuously absent. Boughton (2013, 120–21) suggests that much phonological variation in French is of this binary, present/absent type – what she calls ‘non-arbitrary’, i.e. governed by ease-of-articulation constraints. This is in stark contrast to any language that has a regional component in its non-standard varieties. The first stanza of Kingsley Amis’s jocular translation of *L’Albatros* (1978, 302) shows the distinction very clearly:

Qvite horfen, for a lark, coves on a ship
Ketches a uge sea-bird, a helbatrawss,
A hidle sod as mucks in on the trip
By follerin the wessel on its course.

In four lines, Amis is able to exploit half-a-dozen features of Cockney (some of them archaic) which are not ‘non-arbitrary’ in the sense used by Boughton, but which on the contrary show alternation between vowel and consonant pairs like catch / ketch. These cannot be explained by reference to ease of articulation. Their rarity in French is very striking.

Turning to the question of diglossia mentioned earlier, and in the light of the relative lack of regional variation in French, the stretch of language discussed above in

relation to syntax (*Pourquoi que spécialement...*) occurs as the first in a sequence of utterances that suggest Queneau is as it were playing an arpeggio on part of the diapason of variation in French:

- Pourquoi que spécialement tu nous as dit de venir ce soir ?
- Vous qui [...] jetez le voile pudique de l'ostracisme sur la circonscription de vos activités.
- Et qui [...] n'avez jamais voulu que nous vous admirassions dans l'exercice de votre art.
- Oui, [...] nous ne comprenons pas le hic de ce nunc, ni le quid de ce quod. (*Zazie*, 147)

The second utterance uses the straightforward technique of nominalisation to add formality, while the third has what (Catonné 1992, 79) calls a *surjonctif*, jocularly formed by redoubling the *-ass* suffix of the imperfect subjunctive. The fourth sequence (given to Laverdure, the parrot) evokes perhaps an earlier state of diglossia where Latin was the language of the educated and French the vernacular. Queneau seems to have been ahead of his time in thinking of the French situation in terms of the polarity between formal *katharevousa* and informal *demotiki* in Modern Greek, one of the examples generally mentioned in discussions of diglossia (Queneau 1950, 47–49). Many of his effects are due to juxtapositions like these, and it is tempting to suggest that the stylistic dimension is more noticeable in French precisely because the regional element is very largely absent, leaving the social-stylistic axis as a narrower, more concentrated and salient channel of variation; one in which moreover all speakers are involved in principle (since variation particular to a region by definition excludes those outside it). There is perhaps too a greater distance along the vertical style dimension in French than in other comparable (standardised) languages, since standardisation appears to have been initiated earlier and more successfully in France, and indeed the differences between the French of the codification period (the 17th century) and the contemporary formal written variety are remarkably few, as has often been pointed out. The linguistic result is a number of archaisms, like the past historic and imperfect subjunctive, that survive in writing and serve to stretch the distance between formal and informal styles. Queneau exploits this distance in passages like that quoted above.

‘Representing’ *le français populaire*

Gadet, in her work entitled *Le français populaire* (1992, 13), devotes some space to a criticism of the variety as represented in fiction. It is worth quoting at length, as it contains some cogent points to do with sociolinguistic theorising. She remarks that novelistic representations of *le français populaire* ‘[...] exigent toujours d’être passés au crible, parce que leurs auteurs la plupart du temps ne sont pas issus des couches populaires, et parce qu’ils n’ont pas nécessairement pour objectif un effet linguistique réaliste’. She continues:

On ne peut que souligner la fréquente monotonie de la représentation effectuée dans des transcriptions orthographiques approximatives : quelques modifications graphiques pour la phonologie, toujours les mêmes, quelques traits syntaxiques, toujours les mêmes. Mais le plus grave est qu’elles s’imposent à nous : elles nous habituent à une reproduction sommaire des formes populaires, où sont exhibés des phénomènes comme la chute des *ne*, la chute des *e* muets parfois remplacés par des apostrophes, les fautes de liaisons, quelques disparitions de sons, la graphie *y* pour *il*, des interrogations, des relatives, quelques vocables populaires dans les récits ; en fait peu de traits indéfiniment répétés, notés souvent d’une façon fantaisiste par rapport à la réalité orale.

It is undeniable that writers who wish to portray non-standard speech have only the resources of conventional spelling at their disposal, and that this can produce an unintended distortion of what is represented. The alternative would be to use the IPA, which is hardly practical (this objection does not of course apply to grammar and vocabulary). Note that Amis used ‘ketch’ in the example given above to represent the vowel that can still be heard in London speech. The use of *y* for *il*, mentioned by Gadet above, is perhaps the most striking example of this practice in French. Rochefort in her 1961 novel *Les petits enfants du siècle*, has several examples. One occurs in a passage of some interest in the light of Gadet’s strictures (p. 45):

– Alors qu’est-ce que t’as foutu? Le vermicelle quand est-ce qu’y va cuire ?
(Rochefort 1961, 45)

Here we see a line of dialogue in purported *français populaire*. It has the very common elision of the vowel in *tu* which results in *t’as*, and the even commoner elision of the

consonant in *il*. One can argue that it is legitimate to use an apostrophe here to indicate an elision, as this is the method used in French spelling to show ‘standard’ elisions like that in *qu’est-ce que*. We consider this issue more fully below, in relation to the use of mute-e as portrayed in literature. In lexis, non-standard *foutre* is exploited by Rochefort in its frequent use as a synonym for *faire*, while the interrogative has the colloquial ‘doubled’ structure: noun phrase plus repeated co-referential pronoun (represented by *y*), as opposed to *quand est-ce que le vermicelle va cuire*. The standard ideology opposes forms of the type used by Rochefort because of their alleged redundancy.

This is no doubt a ‘reproduction sommaire des formes populaires’ (Gadet 1992, 13), but one can argue that it served its author’s purpose, whatever that might have been – a crucial point we return to below. A glance at any textbook of conversation analysis shows in any event that real dialogue is messy, riddled with hesitations, false starts and repetitions. All fictional dialogue is stylised in not showing these, and indeed the question what constitutes ‘good’ or convincing dialogue in fiction is a thorny one. But it is evident that Gadet’s remarks do not apply only to working-class French, since any language variety is no doubt conveyed in fiction through the use of stereotypes, which are widely known but not necessarily very accurate features, either socially or linguistically.

To what extent does Queneau escape these strictures? Looking again at *Doukipudonktan*, it is apparent that he is quite capable of eschewing the normalisation of elided *il(s)* through the *y* spelling, and this is found throughout the novel. Of perhaps greater interest is his treatment of the elision of mute-e, ‘parfois remplacés par des apostrophes’, as Gadet puts it (13). The non-use of apostrophes where they would be normal, violating as it does the reader’s expectation, suggests perhaps that the elided vowel is usually pronounced when reading and should therefore be present in the spelling, as in the following example found on an early page:

Heureusement vla ltrain qu’entre en gare, ce qui change le paysage. (*Zazie*, 11)

The passage shows Queneau’s intuitive understanding (in common with all French native-speakers) of the so-called *loi des trois consonnes* or three-consonant rule. This dictates, in simplified terms, that in the stream of speech a mute-e between two consonants will be elided, while it will be retained after two preceding and one or more following consonants. It should be emphasised that this is a statistical tendency, not a categorical ‘rule’. Hence the elision shown in *le train*, while the vowel in *change le*

paysage (emboldened) will always be retained. It is worth remarking in passing that the elision in the subject relative *qui*, ruled out of course by the standard language, is nevertheless common enough in speech. The fact that mute-e is the French vowel most subject to elision is recognised in dictionaries like *Le Petit Robert*, which place the vowel in brackets in the citation form of words where elision is judged to be likely, as in *peloton* transcribed [p(ə)lɔtɔ̃]. A glance at some of the empirical data on mute-e elision shows the complexity of the relation between speech and spelling, quite apart from the opacity which has often been pointed out. Queneau remarked, with characteristic wit, that it would be as rational to teach French schoolchildren feudal law, heraldry and falconry as the equally archaic spelling system (Queneau 1950, 78).

Deletion rates of mute-e vary greatly across scripted and non-scripted (spontaneous) speech styles. Armstrong (1993) reported rates of 77.1% and 84.4% in a sample of spontaneous French recorded in 1990 in Dieuze, a country town in Lorraine. The recordings were made in the town's *collège et lycée*, in which all the informants were pupils. The informants were recorded in two styles, designated 'interview' and 'conversation'. In interviews, informants were recorded one-to-one with the researcher. Conversation style was elicited by the use of 'peer interviews', i.e. the recording of two or three informants of the same age and gender, in the absence of the researcher. Interview style was assumed to be the more formal of the two. The comparison was therefore between two spontaneous speech styles. The results suggest that mute-e shows rather limited signs of stylistic patterning between spontaneous (i.e. non-reading) styles. When one compares spontaneous and scripted styles, the picture is dramatically different. Hansen (2000) did this in her study of Parisian speech; the most striking result was 70.1% deletion by a sample of working-class speakers speaking spontaneously, against 12.5% when reading. Normative French teaching methods appear still to inculcate the insertion of mute-e in reading aloud, including the recitation of poetry where the vowel is often needed to satisfy the metre. Exercises like dictation can be assumed to increase awareness of its prescribed presence in reading. The pattern reported by Hansen may hence be a quirk of the methods used in France to teach the language. The sharp disparity between the treatment of the vowel across speech and reading may go some way to explaining the effect produced by 'ltrain', 'tout dmême', 'scon', etc.; a French reader will expect, especially in narrative, to pronounce mute-e most of the time, so that its absence in

spelling, without the compensation of an apostrophe, constitutes as it were an overt violation of an intuitive norm.

The elision in *voilà* in the passage quoted above does not of course concern mute-e, but is one of the (no doubt small) set that affects very frequent words and phrases. Other examples used by Queneau are *vzêtes*, *gzactement*, *asteure*, *ostiné*, *essméfie*, etc. It seems plausible that Queneau used *gzactement* to refer to the half-dozen or so ways in which the <x> grapheme is pronounced in French, and hence the absurdity of the spelling. The forms just listed underline further the point that the pronunciation of *le français populaire* is characterised above all by reduction. Queneau's acute ear led him however to represent the opposite, the use of an 'intrusive' mute-e, in other words one not present in the spelling (p. 17):

– Dis donc, tonton, demande Zazie, quand tu déconnes comme ça, tu le fais esprès
ou c'est sans le vouloir ?

[...]

– T'en fais pas, dit Charles à Zazie, il le fait pas exeuprès. (Queneau 1959, 17)

French is in general rather intolerant of heavy consonant clusters, and *exprès*, containing as it does four – [ɛksprɛ] in the notation – is a prime candidate for reduction through elision of /k/. The other strategy is to insert a mute-e in order to split in half the cluster of four consonants. This is in fact an application of the three-consonant rule, but one not sanctioned by the spelling. Others include *film-euh danois*, which is motivated in the same way. Forms like these attract the opprobrium of prescriptivists, most likely because of their deviation from the orthography. They are in the category of what Gadet (1992, 46) calls 'complexifications', which involve the addition rather than reduction of linguistic material. One example adduced by Gadet is the curious addition of /v/ to *oui*, used a few times in *Zazie*. Judging by the context in which these are found in the novel, this seems to be an emphatic form, as does as the aspirated indefinite article *hun*. The category of *liaisons interdites* is probably better known in this regard; indeed, the use of liaison before *haricots* is a notorious shibboleth. Queneau has *boudin zaricots verts* (132), neatly combing elision of the vowel in *aux* with the non-standard liaison. The issue of reduction as opposed to complexification illustrates as it were the narrow target presented by the standard pronunciation; deviation from it in either direction is liable to sanction.

Queneau as 'linguist'

Specialists of linguistics, however else they may be qualified, have a heightened awareness of the nuances of language that in general pass unnoticed. This is a large and complex subject; it would be absurd to suggest that speakers are wholly unconscious of their linguistic production, as in that case accommodation in the form of stylistic variation would not take place. Production appears to occur in a quasi-conscious way (Trudgill's 1972 results on inaccurate self-reporting throw an oblique light on this), but some individuals have an acute awareness of what is happening, and not all are linguists. For instance, Kingsley Amis in his guide to English usage, whose title *The King's English* consciously echoes that of Fowler's work, remarks in his introduction (Amis 1997, xvii) that: 'My interest in words as parts of language preceded their appeal to me as units of literature of any sort, and I was learning to spell some individual words before I knew what they meant.' This implies an interest in the form of words as much as their meaning, and a writer who devotes half a page to the difference between 'onto' and 'on to' has manifestly a close interest in linguistic minutiae.

Amis in some of his novels shows awareness of consonantal assimilation in English, a common connected-speech process seen in examples like 'tem pence' and 'hambag', where 'n' has in both cases been 'labialised' under the influence of the following bilabial consonant /m/. Phrases used by Amis in dialogue include 'tim peaches', 'corm beef' and 'dime breed', reflecting the fact that so-called place-of-articulation assimilation is the commonest type in English. Often consequent upon elision, assimilation of voice is a frequent feature of connected French speech. This involves a consonant taking on or losing 'voicing' (vocal-cord vibration) from a following one. It is so frequent that one hears French speakers carrying the habit over into English, in forms like 'opserve' or 'wepsite'. This type of assimilation is largely alien to English speech habits, but very common in French. Thus in *je pense*, for example, mute-e will very often drop and bring into contact the /ʒ/ of *je*, in the jargon a voiced postalveolar fricative, and the /p/ of *pense*, an unvoiced bilabial plosive. When /ʒ/ and /p/ come into contact, /ʒ/ becomes devoiced under the influence of the following voiceless consonant. One often now sees this fact described in novels and *bandes dessinées*, where an attempt is made to represent dialogue in informal style; the usual rendering is *ch'pense*. Similar attempts are made with transcriptions such as *ch'crois*, *ch'ais pas*, etc. Surprisingly perhaps, Queneau uses *chsuis* only twice, both times in the dialogue of *Zazie*. The first instance is as follows:

– Chsuis Zazie, jparie que tu es mon tonton. (Queneau 1959, 11)

What appears to have escaped Queneau's notice is that devoicing of /z/ in je before an unvoiced consonant is quite systematic in some speakers, especially perhaps younger ones. Queneau may have wished to suggest that the phenomenon was an attribute of adolescent speech; however that may be, the above sequence would be quite capable of being pronounced *Chsuis Zazie, chparie que tu es mon tonton*. Other frequent phrases like *j' t'invite* undergo the same process, as would *jte lrappelle* (p. 68).

Gadet (1992, 40) remarks of the third type of assimilation, of the manner of articulation, that it is seen as 'relâché' when it is noticed. This type generally results in French in an oral-to-nasal modification. The same principle is at work as with the other two types; an adjacent nasal sound, consonant or vowel, nasalises a preceding sound, usually a consonant. Thus the /b/ in *combien* may nasalise to /m/, giving the effect of *commien*; other frequent words like *maintenant* and *pendant* are similarly affected. These cases may be perceived as elisions, but a phrase like *là-dedans*, where the geminated /d/ (following mute-e elision) can nasalise to /n/, resulting in *là-nnans*, cannot be interpreted in the same way. Queneau does in fact use *là-ddans* (p. 75).

It is profitless to speculate whether Queneau was aware of forms like these, beyond *chsuis*. The general unawareness of connected-speech processes like assimilation is perhaps subject, like many social phenomena, to the so-called S-curve pattern, comprising a slow onset or 'lag phase' followed by a rapid or 'log' phase where the majority of elements are affected, in turn followed by a further gradual phase where the residual elements may or may not fall in line with the majority that have undergone change. The S-curve model was first applied in linguistics by Chen (1972) to account for exceptions to sound change; the motivation behind this model is not wholly clear, but Chen suggests (1972, 474) that 'as the phonological innovation gradually spreads across the lexicon [...] there comes a point where the minor rule gathers momentum and begins to serve as a basis for extrapolation'. The cumulative S-curve is a model applied to other forms of social change such as product adoption and the diffusion of technology, and commonly refers to adopters rather than the objects of adoption. Certainly the notion is intuitive, and awareness of its effects is widespread among laypersons. The model may be applicable to levels of awareness as well as behaviour. It could be that the sheer frequency of the *chsuis* form has caused it to penetrate the general consciousness, and the feedback loop created by its use by popular writers may have raised awareness further.

Zazie@60

To a sociolinguist, the novel still reads remarkably well after 60 years, reflecting of course Queneau's acute ear, but also the fact that not much has changed in the interval, at least in pronunciation. One surprising omission is so-called '/o/-fronting', the pronunciation of the vowel in words like *Maroc* that gives the effect of *Mareuc*. Martinet published a piece on the phenomenon in 1969, but it has a very long attestation; indeed, Vaugelas (1647, 52) has the criticism of *commencer* pronounced *quemencer*. It can be heard in the 1955 film *Rififi*. Queneau's omission is all the more surprising given that it can be easily represented in spelling. Nor does the novel feature *verlan*; the omission is of interest because it too has a long attestation, and appears to have been adopted by some 'mauvais garçons' during World War Two (Calvet, 1994, 59-60). As Calvet remarks: 'il faut toujours distinguer entre l'apparition publique d'un phénomène et sa vie souterraine préalable'. This is an evocation, differently expressed, of the S-curve referred to above. It seems plain then that *verlan* was likely to escape Queneau's attention if its use was confined largely to criminal circles at that time.

The seemingly quite recent phenomenon to affect standard French, so-called prepausal schwa, (sometimes 'schwa-tagging') is the pronunciation of word-final mute-e or schwa after a consonant and before a pause, and can occur when a graphic <e> is present, as in *arrête-euh*, or intrusively, as in *bonjour-euh*. As stated above, prepausal schwa has been noticed only fairly recently. Fónagy (1989) lists the retention of schwa in this context as an emerging area of variation in *oil* French, using data from 1970. *Zazie* (p. 28) has the following piece of dialogue:

–Que ça te plaise ou que ça neu teu plaiseu pas, tu entends ? je m'en fous. (*Zazie*, 28)

This fragment illustrates the fact that the range of speech styles available to speakers is much wider than that normally studied by linguists; it is apparent from the context that the speaker (Gabriel) is represented as talking in a style designed to convey what one might call an angry but controlled contempt, using an exaggerated emphasis meant to insult the hearer by reason of recalling baby or foreigner talk. The result is that almost every available schwa (six out of seven) is pronounced in the first sentence. The passage shows the 'availability' to speakers of mute-e in several contexts, despite the very high rates of elision observed in 'normal' speech. Judging by the use of the <eu> grapheme in

this piece of dialogue, Queneau seems to have intuited that mute-e in open syllables is often pronounced as /ɨ/, as in *peu*. Indeed, the term ‘schwa’ is largely a misnomer applied to French.

Contemporary research on Parisian French focuses largely on multi-ethnic varieties spoken in the housing estates on the city’s periphery. Gadet’s edited volume (2017, 15) reports on the recent and ongoing Multicultural Paris French (MPF) project; as she remarks: ‘Depuis l’après-guerre et surtout depuis les années 60, les paysages sonores des grandes villes françaises se sont modifiés, avec l’arrivée de nouvelles populations, venues de tous les coins du monde’. From this viewpoint *Zazie* reads solidly *franchouillard*, but of course Queneau can hardly be blamed for reflecting the social conditions of his time. The few foreign borrowings used are Anglicisms like *bloudjinnzes* (variously spelt). The negative terms of casual or vulgar language have held up well (*con*, *cul*, *merde*, etc.), reflecting no doubt the ‘Pollyanna Principle’ (Leech 1983, 147–48), developed in linguistic pragmatics to explain the supposed predominance of favourable over unfavourable lexical items across languages generally, as well as the unmarked status of favourable terms. The Pollyanna Principle derives from the ‘Pollyanna Hypothesis’ formulated by the psychologists Boucher and Osgood (1969), which proposes that a tendency to regard the good as the normal state of affairs is a basic and universal human characteristic. One consequence of the validity of Pollyanna for lexical innovation may be a greater turnover in the coining of terms used to praise than to blame. This would endorse the suggestion of Opie and Opie (1959, 161) who observed impressionistically that in English negative terms used by schoolchildren are relatively stable, while terms of approval are susceptible to more rapid replacement through coining, borrowing and semantic shift. If true, this may be partly because speakers constantly search for vividness in the description of areas of experience that they see as positive and important.

Thus we see *Zazie* using the outdated *formi* as one of her (rare) terms of approval. What is of some interest is the outmoded nature of idiomatic exclamative expressions like *je veux* and *qu’est-ce qu’il ne faut pas entendre*. This seems to be a cross-linguistic phenomenon; for example, the expression ‘tell me about it!’, expressing heartfelt agreement, has for younger speakers replaced older phrases like: ‘you’re telling me!’; ‘I’ll say!’; ‘you can say that again!’, etc. This may be a further illustration of the Pollyanna Principle; in any event, it seems to merit further investigation.

A comparison of *Zazie* and *Pierrot mon ami* (1942) gives a tantalising hint of the rate of change in vocabulary compared to pronunciation: *Pierrot* has the term *larenqué* (p. 53), an example of the *largonji* type of word-game. Procedures like *largonji* involve displacing letters (or suffixes) and adding additional ones: thus *jargon* gives *largonji* by displacing ‘j’ to the end, substituting ‘l’, then adding ‘i’. These are still highly productive in the formation of French slang, and other terms used by Queneau, like *Préfectance* and *lourdingue*, illustrate a similar principle, which of course also governs the creation of *verlan* at the syllabic level (as illustrated by the example *métro* > *tromé*). A recent article has shown that *louchébem*, or butchers’ slang, is still used in a productive way (Saugera, forthcoming). The word *larenqué* derives from *quarante*, itself elliptical for *quarante sous* or two francs. Cellard and Rey (1980, 469) quote Queneau’s use of the term and remark that ‘avec la disparition des pièces de 2 F (1955), le mot a cessé d’être employé, sinon par de vieilles gens et par des « argotiers » professionnels’. Queneau can no doubt be considered as falling into the second category.

In contrast with *larenqué*, which can now be only of historical interest, we have the following line of dialogue on the previous page of *Pierrot*:

Je fais mon éducaaaation. (Queneau 1942, 52)

Here a young female is depicted as speaking rather pretentiously, and Queneau is able to exploit the linguistic stereotype, admittedly in an impressionistic way, by indicating a very long vowel. The variant in question is in fact in the jargon a ‘back’ vowel, pronounced with the tongue positioned towards the back of the mouth, transcribed [ɑ] in the IPA, although in the *-ation* suffix it will often be lengthened. It probably remains true that most French people are aware that a few older, more conservative speakers retain [ɑ] as a vowel in pairs like *patte* ~ *pâte*, and as a variant in *-ation*; just as the aristocratic ‘orff’ lingers in the public consciousness in the UK. There is a link of some kind between the ‘structural’ nature of pronunciation and its relative durability – there are in principle twelve oral vowels in standard French, but of these, not all are indispensable from a communicative viewpoint. They linger on nevertheless. Gadet (1997a, 65) describes the overall vowel system in French as ‘comportant certaines variantes qui [...] ne sont pas indispensables au fonctionnement’. The elements in the maximal twelve-vowel system which are redundant in this linguistically functional view, continue however to serve a sociolinguistic purpose, as is typical generally of ‘conservative’ elements in a linguistic

system – and indeed in many other types of system. One sociolinguistic purpose (or side-effect) is the ability to convey social stereotypes in convenient shorthand, as shown in the above example.

Concluding remarks

Literary criticism is beyond the scope of this piece, but it is perhaps not unfair to suggest that, in *Zazie* at least, Queneau as a novelist was not much interested in the disciplines of plotting and characterisation. Henry James’s exhortation to ‘dramatise’ was or would have been lost on him. This is especially noticeable in *Zazie*’s long speech describing her near-rape (p. 54). It is clearly not an example of characterisation through dialogue, since it is made up of a number of incompatible styles. One phrase has the ‘et + de + infinitive’ construction which is rare in writing, and still more in speech, alongside a stylistically incompatible element:

Et les papouilles zozées de recommencer. (*Zazie*, 54)

It is of course possible to interpret this as characterisation. We would have to accept that *Zazie* is trying, rather ineptly, to match language with subject matter, and inadvertently slipping in and out of formality. Thus the colloquial *papouilles* reads oddly alongside the stilted syntax and over-formal liaison, which also sounds cacophonous. But the interpretation seems rather strained, and indeed the whole exercise is unsatisfactory, resting as it does on the imponderability of whether an adolescent of *Zazie*’s background would be capable of recognising the sequence, let alone of producing it.

This recalls Gadet’s criticism quoted earlier, that authors who represent non-standard language ‘n’ont pas nécessairement pour objectif un effet linguistique réaliste’. The remark raises the thorny issues of intention and realism. The principle known as the ‘intentional fallacy’ tells us that even where authors do have a view of their design or intention, and these views are available, they are unreliable and can, indeed must be ignored for the purposes of analysis, whether linguistic or literary. The term ‘realistic’ is also a difficult one, as the most realistic narrative is in fact highly selective and conventional. This is true of dialogue too, as we have already seen. We are therefore deprived of any direct information on what Queneau was doing in *Zazie* (or thought he was doing), but it would be futile to tax him with falling short in realism. His association with Oulipo, and authorship of *Exercices de style*, allow one to assume that he was

intensely interested in language in its own right. This is of course a rather barren observation, but it does imply, as stated above, a divorce in *Zazie* between the language employed and the usual concerns of a novel. There seems too to be a connection here with Queneau's frivolity, evident for instance in his status as a 'satrap' of Oulipo (and indeed in his co-founding the enterprise). Frivolity is of course a venial sin, but it does seem to be a disqualification for composing modern mainstream 'psychological' novels, the principal subject of which can perhaps be defined as the complexity of human relationships, dramatised in settings that are not too far removed from the experience of most readers. This definition excludes *Zazie*.

Regarding realism, we can no doubt accept Gadet's criticism that *Zazie*, along with most literary treatments of *le français populaire*, is 'sommaire'. Queneau cannot be said to have plumbed the depths of working-class French, if that metaphor is not too normative. By contrast, Gadet (1992, 45–46) has some startling examples of reduction in pronunciation that would be hard to reproduce in ordinary spelling: *avez-vous vu?* reduced to [æeuy]; *c'est vrai que ça va pas* to [sɛʁɛksaapa]; perhaps most spectacularly, *il va falloir que t'attendes* realised as [fa:ʀktatãd] where the colon indicates a long vowel. These would be difficult to transcribe without the IPA. The impact on the reader of examples in syntax is largely subjective, but Gadet's (1992, 126) example of so-called universal *que*, where the subordinator can replace almost any other, perhaps achieves its effect from the presumption that the speaker is a teacher:

j'ai fait un cours qu'on aurait entendu une mouche voler. (Gadet 1997, 126)

More strikingly perhaps, research stemming from the MPF project on so-called *in-situ* interrogatives in 'embedded' or indirect sequences (Gardner-Chloros and Secova 2018) has reported forms like the following:

je sais pas il est où

il savait pas c'était qui

je sais pas c'était combien

In relation to Calvet's remark quoted above, to the effect that linguistic innovation rumbles beneath the surface for some time before emerging into the light, the present author recalls noticing the form exemplified above when recording data in 1989–90. Discussion with colleagues at the time tended to provoke incredulity, or at best scepticism

expressed along the lines that a sequence like *je sais pas c'est qui* is more plausibly interpreted as a direct question: *je sais pas – c'est qui?*, even though the intonation patterns characterising the two forms are quite different. One general point to emerge from this is the immensity of the challenges that still face sociolinguists: to name but two that arise from the examples cited above, one would like to know firstly if any link exists between syntactic forms and the disapproval they attract on account of their conveying propositional meaning (or whether the link is purely social); and secondly what the social mechanisms are that cause a form to emerge from its 'vie souterraine'.

In any event, Queneau's concern with language in *Zazie*, and elsewhere in his work, goes far beyond any supposed attempt to 'represent' non-standard French. Mention should be made of his sheer inventiveness and playfulness, which accounts in large measure for the novel's attraction: his coining of *euréquation*, followed immediately by the helpful *j'ai trouvé*; his laborious transliterations into French spelling of English phrases, like 'by night' and 'happy birthday to you'; the incongruous debate over the conjugation of *dévêtir*; his unashamedly childish delight in punning, as in Aroun Arachide. Queneau, in addition to his other attributes, might perhaps have qualified at least as candidate for a satrapship of sociolinguistics *avant la lettre*; his pedantry, allied with his fascination with variability, would have guaranteed him that title, should he have cared to accept it. This is one of the factors that explain the continuing readability of *Zazie* after 60 years; the other major factor is perhaps that the book remains a valuable reference point, allowing theorising of the sort that has been attempted here.

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