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Metalinguistic Strategies in Early Modern Language Controversies

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All over early modern Europe, philologists and grammarians expressed patriotic pride in their native vernaculars and traced impressive derivations from prestigious ancient languages. While Hebrew generally held pride of place, claims of the greatest antiquity and prestige were also made for the Celtic and Germanic languages, and elaborate theories constructed to justify them. In all of this, rhetorical strategies were employed: heavily loaded language was used when writing about languages themselves, to weaponise them as instruments of national prestige and sneer at inferior rivals. After discussing the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century theorists, this article focuses on the claims made for the unique, unchangeable superiority of French, before concluding with an extended consideration of the work of Gilles Ménage, the most distinguished linguistic scholar of the age, who is unique in eschewing such emotive terms.

KEYWORDS metalinguistics, linguistic evolution, Académie française, Dominique Bouhours, Gilles Ménage

I.

In studying the debates about the nature and status of the French language in the early modern period, it is impossible to focus exclusively on France; rather, it is essential to situate the French linguistic debates within the wider international context of more than a century of intense theorising and controversy. All over early modern Europe, philologists and grammarians expressed patriotic pride in their native vernaculars, a strikingly widespread development from the previous universal privileging of Latin, and one which, like so much else, had its origins in Italy.

This article considers the two most ubiquitous features of early modern metalinguistic discourse, and the widely different ways in which they were treated, frequently for polemical purposes.¹ The first is the way that distinctive prestige could be claimed for a language – and hence for those who spoke it – on the basis of its antiquity, or its close relationship to the most revered languages of the past. The second aspect to consider is the metaphorical terminology with which such discourse was generally conducted, which will naturally follow on from the first.

The search for antiquity and prestige frequently led to the most extravagant competing claims. Hebrew, of course, generally held pride of place; it was stated by several of the early Church fathers to have been the original tongue of humanity before the Tower of Babel, indeed the language spoken by God. This was the accepted view among divines of all persuasions, and it was for this reason that the phenomenally gifted Anna Maria van Schurman (1607–78), who knew an intimidating number of ancient and modern languages, loved Hebrew above all, writing poetry and occasionally corresponding in the language.

However, this admiration was not universally shared. Patriotic philologists had no qualms about diminishing the pretensions of Hebrew, to advance the claims of their own favoured tongues. They might claim that their own language pre-dated the Tower of Babel, or even the Flood, and could go so far as to maintain that it influenced the formation of Hebrew, rather than the other way round. These claims were supported by etymological speculations, often of extreme fragility. Thus Guillaume Postel (1510–81) could advance in his *Apologie de la Gaule* (1552) that the Gaulois are the direct descendants of Noah, because the Hebrew *Gallim* means ‘hommes sauvés des eaux’.²

The most remarkable of such claims was that made by the Antwerpian polymath Johannes Goropius Becanus (1519–73). Goropius, a considerable scholar, developed a theory that the age of a language could be deduced from the length of its words: the older a language, the shorter its words. So, in his *Origines Antwerpianae* of 1569, he could prove that the original tongue of humanity must have been the Antwerpian Brabantic dialect. This variety of Flemish had a higher proportion of short words than any other known language, so must be the original, spoken in the Garden of Eden. The descendants of Noah who founded Antwerp spoke this primal tongue (for the tribe of Japheth’s son Gomer, which Goropius identifies with the Teutonic Cimmerians, had spread to Europe after the Flood, but before

¹ In the discussion which follows, I am not including one important strand of early modern linguistic theory, the so-called ‘Scythian theory’, associated particularly with the Leiden scholars Johannes Elichmann (1601/1602–39), Claude Saumaise (1588–1653), and above all Marcus Zuerius van Boxhorn (1612–53). These scholars noted the similarities between many European languages, Persian, and several Asian languages, and developed a hypothesis which has subsequently evolved into the acceptance of the concept of an Indo-European family of languages. They were not, however, concerned with the patriotic glorification of individual European vernaculars, which is the subject of this article.

² Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *Celtes et Gaulois au XVIe siècle : le développement littéraire d’un mythe nationaliste* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin 1972), p. 65. The whole range of Postel’s works has been extensively studied, most recently in the collection of essays: *Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) : écrits et influence*, ed. by Paul-Victor Desarbres, Émilie Le Borgne, Frank Lestringant and Tristan Vigliano (Paris: Sorbonne Université Presses, 2022).

the Tower of Babel); it was thus proto-Flemish, rather than Postel's Gaulish, which had the greatest antiquity of all. In the course of more than a thousand pages, Goropius devised elaborate philological proofs to show that Hebrew, like all other languages, derived from Brabantic, while also retailing local curiosities and charting the migrations of peoples.³

Goropius may be something of an outlier, but his uncompromising extremism made his work well known and, possibly, influential.⁴ Modifying Goropius's claims, Adriaan van Schrieck (1560–1621) admitted the primacy of Hebrew, but also claimed that the Germanic languages came second, with Dutch supreme among them;⁵ however, at just the same time, the Leiden scholar Philippus Cluverius (1580–1623) built on Postel and Goropius in rejecting the idea of the primacy of Hebrew. In his *Germania antiqua* (1616) he followed earlier scholars in maintaining that the Celts, from the tribe of Gomer, once peopled the whole of Europe, but insisted that their true descendants were the modern Germans and their language.⁶ Meanwhile, in a work which has been described as the first 'to glorify the Saxons above all other English peoples', Richard Verstegan also claimed Germanic and Saxon as the most ancient languages, and, from there, the primal antiquity of English.⁷

As these examples indicate, it was the myths about Celtic origins which are particularly prominent in early modern linguistic treatises. As a modern scholar puts it:

Although there was widespread agreement that the Celts were one of the first peoples to inhabit Europe, early modern scholars [...] fought over which modern nation, region or

³ The scope of the work can be judged from its full title: *Origines Antwerpianae, sive Cimmericorum Becceslana novem libros complexa: Atvatica, I. Gigantomachia, II. Niloscopium, III. Cronia, IV. Indoscythica, V. Saxonica, VI. Gotodanica, VII. Amazonica, VIII. Venetica & Hyperborea, IX* (Antwerp: Christophe Plantin, 1569). A recent full study of Goropius is: Eddy Frederickx and Toon van Hal, *Johannes Goropius Becanus (1519–1573): Brabants arts en taalfanaat* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2015); see the detailed account by Kees Dekker in *History of Humanities*, 2.1 (2017), 279–82.

⁴ Goropius has been claimed as a direct influence on William Camden's *Britania* (1586): David Weil Baker, 'Etymology, Antiquarianism, and Unchanging Languages in Johannes Goropius Becanus's *Origines Antwerpianae* and William Camden's *Britannia*,' *Renaissance Quarterly*, 72.4 (2019), 1326–361. However, this is perhaps more a case of parallel arguments, both influenced by Jean Bodin's *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem* (1566). On Camden and Bodin, see Angus Vine, 'Etymology, Names, and the Search for Origins: Deriving the Past in Early Modern England,' *The Seventeenth Century*, 21.1 (2006), 1–21, and especially Vine, *In Defiance of Time: Antiquarian Writing in Early Modern England* (Oxford: OUP, 2010).

⁵ Schrieck's arguments are well summarised in the titles of his linguistic works: *Van t'Beghin der eerster Volcken van Europen, in sonderheynt van den oorspronck ende Saecken der Neder-Landren* (Ypres: François Bellet, 1614); *Monitorium secundorum libri V. : quibus originum rerumque Celticarum et Belgicarum opus suum nuper editum, altius et auctius è fontibus Hebraicis, ipsaque rerum origine deducit, probat, firmitque : ad Teutones, Belgas, Gallos, Italos, Iberos, Britannos, Danos, et Aquilonares : admirandae Celtarum antiquitatis et hactenus inauditae et animadversae observationis de vera et falsa origine monumentum sive Europa rediviva* (Ypres: François Bellet, 1615); *Adversariorum libri IIII : his argumentis : linguam hebraicam esse divinam et primogeniam : linguam teutonicam esse secundam, et dialecto tantum ab hebraea distare : apologia pro divo Hieronymo : metrum hebraicum, post d. Hieronymum ignoratum, nunc repertum : de vulgaribus hebraizantium, historicorum, geographorum, et criticorum, circa origines, erroribus* (Ypres: François Bellet, 1620).

⁶ *Germaniae antiquae libri tres* (Leiden: Elsevier, 1616). On the seminal importance of this work, see Toon Van Hal, 'One Continent, One Language? *Europa Celtica* and its Language in Philippus Cluverius' *Germania antiqua* (1616) and beyond,' *European Review of History/Revue européenne d'histoire*, 21.6 (2014), 889–907.

dynasty had the most rightful claim to the purest Celtic descent [...]. Part of this pan-European prestige grab were attempts to link the language of one's own nation to the ancient language of the Celts, which was posited as the oldest European language and perhaps even the original sacred language.⁸

In their search for prestigious antiquity, scholars related Irish, Welsh, Cornish, and Breton to the ancient Phoenician language.⁹ Samuel Bochart made the claim for Breton and other related languages in his greatly (and justly) admired *Geographia sacra*;¹⁰ William Camden had claimed the greatest antiquity for Welsh in his *Britannia* (London: Radulph Newbery, 1586), and the case was argued most enthusiastically by the eccentric Aylett Sammes in *Britannia antiqua illustrata, or, The antiquities of ancient Britain, derived from the Phoenicians* (London: Thomas Roycroft, 1676), while the claims for Cornish derive essentially from interpretations of Diodorus Siculus's account of the tin trade.

Breton, naturally enough, was particularly favoured by French writers. Pierre Borel (c.1620–71), in his *Tresor de recherches et antiquitez gauloises et françoises* of 1655,¹¹ maintained that the French could be more proud than any other nation of the tongue spoken by their ancestors. Modern Hebrew was but a debased descendant of the original language; it was the ancient Gaulish which retained its first purity, and (with echoes of Goropius) could be shown to have influenced Hebrew as an older and purer language. Although unfortunately now lost, it must of course have evolved into Breton; Borel patriotically reversed the generally accepted order of the spread of the Brythonic Celtic language group by stating that it was Breton, and the Bretons, which conquered the island of Britain rather than the other way round.

By the second half of the seventeenth century, though, all these implausible claims fade from the picture, not least because they could be trumped by Chinese. Since the sixteenth century, the Jesuit accounts had been spreading awareness of the troubling Chinese chronologies, and linguistic theoreticians could note their implications. Thus, in 1669, John Webb published *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability That the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language*.

⁷ Richard Verstegan, *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence in Antiquities Concerning the Most Noble and Renowned English Nation* (Antwerp: R. Bruney, 1605). The quotation is from D. R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England: Erudition, Ideology, and the 'Light of Truth' from the Accession of James I to the Civil War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 202, quoted in: Donna B. Hamilton, 'Richard Verstegan's *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605): A Catholic Antiquarian Replies to John Foxe, Thomas Cooper, and Jean Bodin,' *Prose Studies*, 22.1 (1999), 1–38 (p. 2).

⁸ Ian B. Stewart, 'The Mother Tongue: Historical Study of the Celts and Their Language(s) in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland,' *Past and Present*, 243.1 (2019), 71–107 (p. 72). Stewart's article includes valuable indications for further reading.

⁹ Stewart, 'Mother Tongue,' pp. 77, 86, 89–90.

¹⁰ First published in two volumes: *Geographiæ sacræ pars prior Phaleg seu de dispersione gentium et terrarum / pars altera Chanaan seu de coloniis et sermonæ Phœnicum* / (Caen: Pierre Cardonel, 1646). Later editions in one volume have a combined title page. Bochart's etymological speculations feature in the second part, *Chanaan seu de coloniis et sermon Phœnicum*.

¹¹ *Tresor de recherches et antiquitez gauloises et françoises, reduites en order alphabetique. Et enrichies de beaucoup d'Origines, Epitaphes, & autres choses rares & curieuses, comme aussi de beaucoup de mots de la Langue Thywoie ou Theuthfranque* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1655). This work is discussed in further detail below.

Webb claimed that the language spoken in China had been passed down, unchanged, for 5000 years from the language Adam and Eve spoke in the Garden of Eden:

History informs that China was peopled, whilst the Earth was so of one Language, and before that Conspiracy Scripture teacheth that the Judgement of Confusion of Tongues fell upon those only that were at Babel; History informs that the Chinois being fully settled before, were not there; and moreover the same Language and Characters which long preceding that Confusion they used, are in use with them at this very Day.¹²

Although extravagant claims for individual vernaculars continued to be advanced in the later seventeenth century and into the eighteenth,¹³ the principal focus of debate had decisively shifted away from such preoccupations.

II.

It is in this context of competing claims for linguistic superiority that one must set the pretensions of French and the other Romance languages. In contrast to all the northern vernaculars, the Romance languages could ignore Hebrew, Gomer, and the Garden of Eden. They all claimed direct descent from the purest Latin and praised their own preservation of the linguistic excellence of the Golden Age, while noting the decadent failure of the others.

The case with Italian is rather different from that of the other Romance languages. Italian scholars took the pre-eminence of their own language for granted; the rivalry was not between Italian and other vernaculars, but between the varieties of the language that competed for dominance. The Venetian territories regarded themselves as an entirely separate case, as in a way they still do; the great focus of debate was the rivalry between Florence and Rome. When it came to prestigious antiquity, one would think that Rome should have had the edge, but Florence could claim to be the heir of Etruscan culture, and Roman claims were neatly outflanked by Agnolo Monosini (1568–1626): in his *Floris italicae linguae libri novem* of 1604, he argued that, in fact, the Florentine idiom derived directly from Greek.¹⁴

The way in which Florence emerged triumphant was crucial to seventeenth-century linguistic debate in France. The key to the success of Florence was the establishment of the Accademia della Crusca in 1583, still the greatest centre of authority on the Italian language, and the publication of its first *Vocabulario* in 1612 – all establishing the Florentine dominance, and its dialect as the literary language of

¹² *An Historical Essay Endeavoring a Probability That the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language* (London: Nath. Brook, 1669), sigs A3v–4r; quoted in Jonathan E. Lux, *The Invention of China in Early Modern England: Spelling the Dragon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), p. 49.

¹³ For example, Paul-Yves Pezron (1639–1706) made the most extreme claims for Breton/Gaulois in *Antiquité de la nation, et de la langue des Celtes, autrement appelez Gaulois* (Paris: Jean Boudot, 1703), while Olof Rudbeck (1630–1702), in *Atlant eller Manheim/Atlantica sive Manheim*, 4 vols (Uppsala: H. Curio, 1679–1702), claimed that Swedish was the original language of the Garden of Eden, the ancestor of Hebrew, and, indeed, that Sweden was Atlantis.

¹⁴ *Floris Italicae linguae libri novem* (Venice: Jo. Guerilius), 1604.

Italy. Control the language, and you control the power. The emphasis of La Crusca was on linguistic purity and elegance. The influence of all this was absolutely explicit on Richelieu, on his project for an Académie française in the mid-1630s, and on the direction of its work to establish the new dominance of French.

In this competition for prestige, it might seem as though French was disadvantaged: it was difficult to claim great antiquity for the language, it included a greater percentage of words from Germanic and Celtic languages, and it was apparently further removed from Latin than Spanish or, especially, Italian. Throughout the sixteenth century there does seem to be an underlying sense of inferiority, of protesting too much compared with the influence and confidence of Italian.

By the end of the seventeenth century, though, this had changed. The ubiquitous assumption that it is natural for languages to decline from some purer linguistic past had been replaced, for French, by a picture of, first, decline and confusion, followed by a rapid ascent to a new and unparalleled perfection. The French of the late seventeenth century was the modern equivalent of the Latin of the Golden Age and destined to become the new universal language. This is explicit in the Préface to the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie* of 1694:

On dira peut-estre qu'on ne peut jamais s'asseurer qu'une Langue vivante soit parvenue à sa dernière perfection ; Mais ce n'a pas esté le sentiment de Cicéron, qui [...] n'a pas fait difficulté d'avancer que de son temps la Langue Latine estoit arrivée à un degré d'excellence où l'on ne pouvoit rien adjouster. Nous voyons qu'il ne s'est pas trompé, & peut-estre n'aura-t-on pas moins de raison de penser la mesme chose en faveur de la Langue Françoisé.¹⁵

Just as French arms had conquered Europe, so also had the French language. What is more, the Académie proclaimed *l'exception française* in language, as in so much else: French was the only language ever to have attained a state of unchanging perfection, and the Académie's mission was (and still is) to keep it that way:

Que si l'on a jamais deu se promettre qu'une Langue vivante peust parvenir à estre fixée, & à ne dépendre plus de la caprice & de la tyrannie de l'Usage, nous avons lieu de croire que la nostre est parvenue de nos jours à ce glorieux point d'immutabilité.¹⁶

Dominique Bouhours had already said exactly the same in 1671, in the chapter 'La langue Françoisé' of *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène*:

Car à la bien considerer dans la perfection où elle est depuis plusieurs années, ne faut-il pas avouër qu'elle a quelque chose de noble & d'auguste, qui l'égalé presque à la langue Latine, & la releve infiniment au-dessus de l'Italienne & de l'Espagnole, les seules langues vivantes qui peuvent raisonnablement entrer en concurrence avec elle.¹⁷

Similarly, despite an extended discussion of the evolution and decline of languages – especially the rival Romance vernaculars of Spanish and Italian, portrayed as now

¹⁵ *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (Paris: veuve de J. B. Coignard & J. B. Coignard, 1694), Préface, sig. [ā4]v.

¹⁶ *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, Epistre, sig. Å3r.

¹⁷ *Les Entretiens d'Ariste et d'Eugène* (Paris: Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1671), p. 40.

being in irreversible decline from their earlier excellence – Bouhours too maintains the singularity of French in avoiding the inevitable fate of lesser languages: ‘la langue Françoise a quelque chose de singulier et d’extraordinaire, qui doit la préserver de la corruption, à laquelle les autres langues sont sujettes’.¹⁸

In the whole of this debate, under the pretence of objective discussion, rhetorical strategies were employed: heavily loaded words were used when writing about languages themselves, to weaponise them as instruments of national prestige and sneer at inferior rivals. A writer’s own vernacular may be termed noble, pure, and elegant (or failing that, for languages such as English and Dutch, manly, honest, vigorous, and plain-spoken), while those spoken by enemies and rivals are decadent, corrupt, debased, and low. This is extremely widespread.

The implications are obvious: the nature of a language holds up a mirror to the character of its speakers, to be interpreted however it may be wished. Features of language that to a Spaniard show gravity, decorum, and strength, to a French critic become haughty arrogance and absurd pomposity; whereas to that favourite creature, the ‘plain-spoken Englishman’, the qualities prized by the French of *graces*, *beautez*, and *charme* (all claimed by Vaugelas)¹⁹ are signs of fatuous triviality.

Bouhours consistently glorifies French by ridiculing other languages in terms that specifically pass judgement on the nature of their speakers:

le langage suit d’ordinaire la disposition des esprits ; & chaque nation a toujours parlé selon son genie. [...] Le langage des Espagnols se sent fort de leur gravité, & et cét air superbe qui est commun à toute la nation. Les Allemans ont une langue rude & grossiere ; les Italiens en ont une molle & effeminée, selon le temperament & les mœurs de leur país.²⁰

Pierre Borel goes even further in his *Tresor de recherches et antiquitez gauloises et françoises*. He anticipates the Préface to the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* in tracing a pattern, unique to French, of decline, before becoming ‘purified’ and ‘ennobled’ into the new perfection of modern French. His language is consistently heavily loaded. As early as the opening lines of his ‘Epistre’, he writes that he is studying ‘ce qui nous reste de plus rude & de plus barbare du langage de nos Ancestres’ (sig. ã2r–v). Languages do not just change, they become corrupted, indeed impure, and all, apart from French, have remained in this state. With an image which, taken literally, evokes unpleasant connotations, he comments that ‘les Langues vives [...] peuvent estre appellées la corruption des Langues mortes dont elles ont tiré leur origine’ (sigs e1v–2r). So, Modern Greek is ‘un Grec abastardy’ (sig. [e4]v); Latin ‘est degeneré en Italien’ (sig.f3v); German, Dutch, Swedish,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 125. On the continuing ideal of French linguistic perfection, concerns about decline, and the response by Antoine Arnauld that was published in 1707, see the valuable contribution by Elizaveta Al-Faradzhi, ‘Contre Vaugelas: Antoine Arnauld on Good Usage, Reason and the Perfection of French,’ *Early Modern French Studies*, 45.1 (2023), 63–71.

¹⁹ Claude Favre de Vaugelas (1585–1650), *Remarques sur la langue françoise* (Paris: veuve Jean Camusat & Pierre Le Petit, 1647), sig. *3v. By the end of the work, Vaugelas has added the qualities of ‘pureté’ and ‘netteté’ (p. 567).

²⁰ *Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugene*, p. 62.

Danish, Spanish, and Italian all had similar ‘corruptions’; and, in a typically revealing phrase, ‘ce mal a esté si general’ that even Native American languages have changed since they have been known by Europeans (sig. [g4]v).

In the same way, in the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* the French language is described in terms drawn from social hierarchy and civil order. Privileged above all in French is ‘tout ce qui peut server à la Noblesse & à l’Elegance du discours’ (sig. [ã4]v), but as for the language of proverbs, ‘il y en a qui se sont avilis dans la bouche du menu Peuple’.

III.

The one outstanding exception to this pattern is Gilles Ménage (1613–92). I would like to conclude this consideration of early modern metalinguistic discourse with some discussion of Ménage’s unique position.

Ménage has been accurately termed ‘the most distinguished etymologist of the age’;²¹ indeed, in a linguistic context, ‘le plus grand savant du siècle’.²² In order to understand his unique position in the history of linguistics, it is essential to have a sense of the full complexity of this extraordinary man: that is, to situate his work on languages within the wider context of his intellectual and social life, and his own unusual personality.

As well as his linguistic works, Ménage produced important scholarly publications on an astonishing diversity of topics: profound erudition in Latin and Greek; legal scholarship; history, and biography; and he maintained a major learned correspondence with scholars all over Europe, from Scandinavia to Italy. He was a substantial figure on the contemporary literary scene, publishing highly regarded editions of modern authors in both French and Italian, and writing successful, if often derivative, poetry, frequently amorous, in four languages (French, Italian, Latin, and Greek). He entertained close relations with many of the leading literary figures. Unusually for a celebrated early modern scholar, he was personable and socially in demand, and could hold his own with the salon wits; famously, he enjoyed particularly close affectionate friendships with two young women who went on to become, in the eyes of posterity, the two most gifted women writers of the century, Mme de La Fayette and Mme de Sévigné. He had close contacts not only in the most elite learned circles, but also in the worlds of the church, the law courts, and the salons, and had many well-placed friends at the Court. Yet he was also independent minded to the point of imprudence, had a high opinion of himself, and could be vigorously controversial. He had devoted friends among his most distinguished contemporaries, and yet, it is no wonder that some people found him insufferable.²³

²¹ Peter Rickard, *The French Language in the Seventeenth Century: Contemporary Opinion in France* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 111.

²² Louis Kukenheim, *Esquisse historique de la linguistique française et de ses rapports avec la linguistique générale*, 2nd edn (Leiden: Universitaire Pers, 1966), p. 34.

²³ Their numbers include Tallemant des Réaux, the source of many disobliging anecdotes, often demonstrably inaccurate.

Ménage's study of the origins and nature of languages extended for a period of more than 50 years, from at least the late 1630s, when he was in his twenties, to his death in 1692, coming up to his eightieth year; he died when he was correcting his final work on the topic, which came out posthumously in 1694. He published outstanding works on French²⁴ and Italian²⁵ and also worked extensively on Spanish,²⁶ Latin,²⁷ and Greek.²⁸

Ménage's most sustained linguistic discussion can be found, as one might expect, at the start of his first major book on the subject, in the 'Epistre' (to Pierre Du Puy) of *Les Origines de la langue françoise* of 1650. The framework of metaphorical language which he uses in this discussion – highly restrained, but nevertheless indicative – was to remain broadly similar through all his subsequent writing. It forms a striking contrast, in every way, to such works as Pierre Borel's closely contemporary *Trésor de recherches et antiquités gauloises et françoises*, where, as we

²⁴ Ménage's principal works on the French language are: (1) *La Requête des dictionnaires*, a brilliantly witty satire of the early 1640s in which he ridiculed the pretensions of the recently founded Académie française. This circulated in manuscript among his close friends and was first published, to the author's horror, in 1649 in a pirated version under the title of *Le Parnasse alarmé* (Paris: [sans nom d'imprimeur]). (2) *Les Origines de la langue françoise* (Paris: Augustin Courbé, 1650), a massive quarto of about 900 pages in all, which forms a landmark in the history of linguistic scholarship. (3) *Observations de Monsieur Ménage sur la langue françoise* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1672); *Observations de Monsieur Ménage sur la langue françoise. Seconde édition* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1675); *Observations de Monsieur Ménage sur la langue françoise. Seconde partie* (Paris: Claude Barbin, 1676). On the evolution of this unusual work, and the controversy with Bouhours, see the admirable modern edition by Marc Bonhomme: Gilles Ménage, *Observations sur la langue Française*, 2 vols (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022). (4) A greatly expanded final edition of the *Origines*, published posthumously as an immense folio of 740 pages in double columns, and now entitled *Dictionnaire étymologique ou origines de la langue françoise* (Paris: Jean Anisson, 1694). (5) Finally, all through his life Ménage discussed linguistic topics in his extensive correspondence with a wide variety of scholarly friends.

²⁵ (1) The *Origines* of 1650 includes a great deal of material about Italian, with a separate 'Table des mots italiens, dont les Etymologies se trouvent en ce Livre' (sigs [5O4]r–5P3v). (2) *Le Origini della lingua italiana* (Paris: Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1669). (3) A greatly revised and expanded second edition of *Le Origini della lingua italiana* (Geneva: J. A. Choüet, 1685). (4) Extensive correspondence with Italian scholars such as Dati, Magliabecchi, and Redi, and other members of the Accademia della Crusca in Florence. Some of this correspondence was published in Ménage's Italian collection of *Mescolanze* (Paris: Louis Bilaine, 1678) and more in the expanded second edition, *Mescolanze d'Egidio Menagio, Secunda edizione, corretta, ed ampliata* (Rotterdam: R. Leers, 1692).

²⁶ Ménage intended to write a separate work on the evolution of Spanish; in the dedicatory letter to the *Origini della lingua italiana*, to the Accademia della Crusca, dated 20 February 1669, he stated: 'Avea io già compilate le Origini della Lingua Francese, e meditato lungo tempo sopra quelle della Spagnuola'. Although he never completed it, he did include a great deal of material about the language in his other works. As with Italian, there is a great deal of material on Spanish in the *Origines* of 1650, which can be considered together as a corpus thanks to a separate 'Table des mots espagnols, dont les Etymologies se trouvent en ce Livre' (sigs [5P4]r–5Q2r). Similarly, at the end of the *Origini della lingua italiana* there is a separate table of the Spanish etymologies included in that work ('Etimologie d'alcuni vocaboli spagnoli, riferite nelle precedenti Origini della Lingua Italiana').

²⁷ The *Origines* includes a 'Table des mots latins, dont les Etymologies se trouvent en ce Livre', covering nine quarto pages in double columns (sigs 5N3r–5O3r). Similarly, in the *Origini della lingua italiana* (1685), there is a table of the Latin etymologies that the work contains ('Etimologie d'alcuni vocaboli Latini, riferite nelle precedenti Origini della Lingua Italiana'), which covers eight folio pages in double columns.

²⁸ Ménage worked intensively for more than two decades, from c. 1660 onwards, on two vast *magna opera* on Greek etymology and philology, *Linguae Graecae Dialecti* and, especially, *Linguae Graecae Origines & Idiotismi*. The works remained unfinished and in manuscript.

have seen, the language is consistently heavily loaded; similarly, Ménage's meticulous working methods stand in striking contrast to those of all earlier writers.

For a start, Ménage dismisses all purely speculative or myth-based theories about the origins of language as ridiculous. Of the scholars of antiquity, he writes: 'La pluspart de leurs Etymologies ne sont pas seulement mauvaises, elles sont pitoyables',²⁹ and he deals similarly with their successors such as Isidore of Seville. However, he reserves a special contempt for the nationalistic and patriotically inspired theories of modern scholars. Goropius Becanus is brusquely dismissed: 'Les Origines Flamandes de Goropius Becanus sont des chimeres toutes pures', and equally the Danish scholar Jean-Isaac Pontanus (1571–1639): 'Les Celtiques d'Isaac Pontanus ne sont gueres plus raisonnables'. The same is true of Diego de Covarubias (1512–77) on Spanish, and Agnolo Monosini on Italian. As for French, 'Les [Origines] Françaises de Budée, de Bayf, de Henry Estienne, de Nicod, de Perionius, de Sylvius, de Picard, de Tripault, de Guischarde, de Pasquier, ne sont pas seulement vray-semblables'. And Ménage concludes, with a vigorously destructive metaphor, 'on peut dire avec verité, que les Etymologies jusques icy ont esté l'écueil de tous ceux qui en ont escrit'.³⁰

How, then, Ménage asks, should one proceed to reach any secure conclusions in this treacherous field? It is obviously essential, in order to follow the origins of French, to have 'une parfaite connoissance' of Latin, and especially of 'la basse Latinité', which is now privileged as an authentic form of language rather than dismissed as decadent, corrupt, or unworthy. The scholar must equally have a perfect knowledge of Greek ('de qui la Latine s'est formée, et de qui nous avons emprunté quelques diction' – one notes the non-emotive verbs here, *formée* and *emprunté*), and 'pour remonter jusques à la source', Hebrew and Chaldean ('d'où plusieurs mots Grecs sont descendus').

More than this, though, it is equally essential for the scholar to know Breton and other Celtic languages, and German in all its different dialects ('acause d'un nombre infini de mots Gaulois & Allemans qui sont demeurez en nostre Langue' – '*demeurez*', a completely neutral term); Italian and Spanish, for the same reasons; and Arabic, to understand the nature of Spanish ('l'Arabe qui en fait une partie' – again, a completely neutral phrase) and also because some Arabic words have come directly into French since the Middle Ages. To these languages, in practice, Ménage also adds English, and even an awareness that the language can vary in Scotland.

The scholar must be familiar with the various phases of medieval French, and Ménage goes further: every bit as important is a knowledge of the different French provincial dialects, and the speech of the peasantry: 'Il faudroit sçavoir avec cela tous les divers idiomes de nos Provinces, & le langage des Paysans, parmy lesquels les Langues se conservent plus longuement'. Once again, there is a complete absence of pejorative implications in Ménage's phrase – in contrast, for example, to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, which excluded popular speech,

²⁹ 'Epistre', sig. ā3v.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, sig. [ā4]r–v. Subsequent quotations from the 'Epistre' are all from sigs [ā4]v–e.rr.

dialect words, and technical terms, and referred contemptuously to proverbs which had been ‘*avilis dans la bouche du menu Peuple*’.

Ménage really does draw on a phenomenal range of detailed reference. I went through 10 consecutive pages of the *Origines*, starting at random (pp. 756–65 [mis-numbered 775]), and found entries illustrated by words and phrases in the following languages: Latin, classical Greek, modern Greek, Italian, Spanish, German, Low German (distinguished from Dutch), Dutch, English, and Breton; among non-European languages, several instances of Arabic, and also Hebrew, Chaldean, Turkish, and Ethiopian (a lengthy first-hand reference, with page numbers, to the ‘*Liturgie Ethiopienne de l’édition de Rome*’), while among French regional dialects there are words from Anjou, Champagne, Maine, Normandy, and Picardy. Elsewhere, I have also noticed dialect words quoted from the Artois, Auvergne, Béarn, Dauphiné, Gascogne, Languedoc, le Lyonnais, le Nivernais, Périgord, Provence, and Parisian popular speech; and there are undoubtedly other provincial dialects included as well. Ménage collected these himself and was also sent them by friends who knew of his interest; in the ‘*Advertissement*’ to the *Origines* he thanks no fewer than 10 friends for their help,³¹ and this continued in the following decades as he continuously expanded his work for its final edition. Thus, in a letter from Caen of 8 March 1660, Pierre-Daniel Huet sent Ménage no fewer than five completely different terms for the same little lizard, which he had collected ‘*parmy les paÿsans de nos quartiers*’, ‘*au Mayne*’, and in other places (the words being *salamandre*, *pluvine*, *blande*, *mouron*, and *un sourd*).³²

All of this quite clearly gives Ménage a highly distinctive perspective on the nature of French, and of other languages. While it was no novelty to note the wide range of other languages that had contributed to modern French – Pasquier lists quite a number, and Borel adds others – Ménage brings to the subject a completely different level of open-mindedness and meticulous critical rigour, and was able to draw on contributions from deeply learned scholarly friends such as Samuel Bochart and the specialists of the Du Puy circle. When it comes to the two principal concerns of the early modern controversies – relating to where languages come from and how they work; and relating to vocabulary – his answers are clear.

The most important single point is that languages change through a process of natural evolution, whose basic principles can be understood. The principles themselves are not new – the four principles of the change, subtraction, addition, and transposition of letters go back to the Roman scholar Varro in the first century BC (116–27 BC)³³ – but what is important is the role that they played in forming Ménage’s understanding of the nature of language. Thus, he prefaces both the *Origines* and the Italian *Origini* with lengthy sections of ‘*Exemples de la conversion des*

³¹ ‘Monsieur Guyet [...] J’y ay aussi esté beaucoup assisté par M. du Puy, par M. de Valois le jeune, par M. Nublé, par M. Sarasin, par M. Salmonet, par M. Bochart, par M. de Launoy, par M. de Launay, & par M. Doujat’ (sigs e3v–[11]r). As an example, on 16 March 1646 Ménage thanked Nublé, who was in Grenoble, for sending linguistic ‘observations’ for his projected work (Vienna: Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms 7049, fol. 298 (Lettre 159)).

³² Paris, BnF, Rothschild A.XVII.391 (copy: BnF, n.a.f. 1341, pp. 22–3).

³³ Rickard, *The French Language*, p. 11.

lettres', providing a detailed analysis and abundant precise examples, ranging over Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, and French.³⁴ Such changes do not represent a *decline* and *corruption* of language, and neither do they show its *advance* towards a *higher state of perfection*. They are simply natural changes: that is what has always happened with languages, and by implication similar processes always will operate in future. When Queen Christina of Sweden made her famous joke in admiring praise of Ménage – 'Monsieur Ménage sait non seulement d'où les mots viennent, mais encore où ils vont' – she was in fact absolutely right.

The second topic, vocabulary, was equally controversial, and Ménage's views are equally clear. To what extent is it desirable to either 'enrich' a language's vocabulary, or, alternatively, to 'purify' it? With regard to the introduction or creation of new words, is this legitimate at all, and if so, how should it be done?

Ménage consistently argues very strongly that vocabulary should be enriched rather than subjected to any attempted 'purification'.³⁵ The *Origines* seems almost to luxuriate in the richness of dialect vocabulary and the range of other languages that have contributed to French, while later, in his *Observations sur la langue française* of the 1670s, which led to a controversy with Bouhours, he praises the invention of new words, including his own successful neologism of *pro-sateur*. Bouhours had affected to be outraged: 'il n'est pas permis' to do such a thing – very much the view of the Académie at all periods.³⁶

Ménage's own terminology is remarkably consistent over more than 50 years of linguistic scholarship. He avoids all metaphors drawn from class and social rank: 'noble', 'bas', and so on. This is the man, of course, who particularly privileged peasant idiom and regional dialects. Equally, and very strikingly, there are no terms such as 'barbare', or 'rude'; Ménage never insults other languages. Even more strikingly in this context, he avoids metaphors of progress or degeneracy. In Ménage's writing, languages do not advance and progress, and become more pure and more perfect; neither do they decline and degenerate and become contaminated and corrupt. The sort of metaphors that Ménage does employ evoke such concepts as natural change, fashion, and exchange. Richness and poverty are used not as vaguely emotive terms, but in a quantifiable way to describe, for example, wide or restricted lexical resources, while indicating a clear preference for the former.

In the last two or three years of Ménage's life, probably around 1690, he is recorded in the *Ménagiana* as still insisting on the vast range of learning necessary for the accurate study of languages, and at the same time still, most interestingly, expressing the interrelatedness of languages in strictly neutral terms:

Les langues vivantes sont plus difficiles à bien savoir que les langues mortes. Il y a cinquante ans que je travaille sur la nôtre, & je ne la sais pas encore. Pour la bien connoître

³⁴ 'Exemples de la conversion des lettres', *Origines*, pp. i–xxxviii; 'Delle parentele e amistà tra le lettere; e del Mutarsi che fanno d'una in altera,' *Origini*, pp. 1–26.

³⁵ In this, he shares the view of Scipion Dupleix (1569–1661), whose views might have seemed antiquated when he published his *Liberté de la langue françoise dans sa pureté* (Paris: Denys Bechet, 1651); modern edition by Douglas Kibbee and Marcus Keller (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2018).

³⁶ For both Ménage's and Bouhours's positions, see *Observations, seconde édition* (1675), pp. 453ff.

& pour la bien écrire, il faut savoir les langues anciennes encore plus que les modernes.
La plupart des langues sont enchaînées les unes avec les autres.³⁷

There is no hierarchy of purity, virtue, or excellence hinted at in this recorded conversational remark, a revealing indication of how deeply ingrained was Ménage's habitual avoidance of any such terms in his written works.

Indeed, compared with Bouhours and the Académie, who celebrated the French language as having achieved an unparalleled peak of perfection – an uneasy metaphor to anyone who believed in necessary evolution, implying an imminent state of decadence – Ménage is recorded as being sceptical about the whole idea and suggesting a weakening of the language over the century rather than the reverse: 'Je ne trouve pas que depuis Balzac et Vaugelas notre langue ait fait de grands progrès [...] Ceux qui sont venus depuis n'ont fait que l'énerver'.³⁸

Ménage never attempted to become a member of the Académie. He had long been an elected member of the Accademia della Crusca, which then was far more prestigious in Europe as a whole, and was perfectly happy to be independent of its French counterpart. In 1686 his friend Bernard de La Monnoye wrote to an unknown correspondent, in the context of Furetière's acrimonious dispute with the Académie:

Je croi qu'il [Ménage] se console fort presentement de n'estre point de l'Académie [...] Il est bien plus heureux d'avoir affaire à celle de la Crusca qui bien loin de lui faire un procès pour avoir entrepris sur le dessein qu'elle avoit de travailler aux Etimologies italiennes lui en a fait, au contraire un remerciement authentique.³⁹

It became an increasing scandal that so outstandingly distinguished a linguistic scholar was not a member; but when, in 1687, the Académie unanimously voted to offer him a place in the most flattering terms, he turned them down.⁴⁰ He was not hostile to them, unlike the ex-Academician Furetière, and maintained excellent relations with many of them and close friendships with some; but he could never have been a member. In the words of the Académie's founding statutes of 1635 (which are still *en vigueur*), 'La principale mission de l'Académie sera de travailler avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure [...]'.⁴¹ Ménage's most profound convictions about the nature of language were at exactly the opposite pole to what the Académie was committed by its statute to undertake, and with his depth of learning, force of

³⁷ *Ménagiana*, 3rd edn, Bernard de La Monnoye, 4 vols (Paris: Florentin Delaulne, 1715), III, p. 396.

³⁸ *Ménagiana*, edited by Antoine Galland (Paris: Florentin & Pierre Delaulne, 1693 [1st edn]), p. 134.

³⁹ Unpublished MS letter dated Dijon, 15 April 1686 (private collection).

⁴⁰ On the background to this episode, see Richard Maber, 'Colbert and the Scholars: Ménage, Huet, and the royal pensions of 1663,' *Early Modern French Studies*, 7.1 (1989), 109–14 (pp. 111–12), which draws on Huet's letter to Ménage of 1 July 1687 (BnF, MSS Rothschild A. XVII, vol. VII, no. 451), Ménage's reply on 21 July (BnF, Fonds fr. 15,189, fols 67r–68r), and Huet's dismayed reaction on 1 August (BnF, Nouv. acq. fr. 1341, pp. 278–80).

⁴¹ Statuts et règlements | Académie française, <academie-francaise.fr> [accessed 6 September 2023].

personality, and irrepressible *esprit provocateur*, he could never have sat quietly and let them get on with it.⁴²

To return to Ménage's writings: throughout his entire scholarly career, Ménage's position as regards the nature of languages is reflected in his use of metaphorical terminology. The conclusion is self-evident: we are dealing with the most distinguished linguistic scholar of the century, yet when we consider his works in the light of all other writings of the period, we find that a significant part of his message is conveyed precisely by what he does *not* say.

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⁴² On a trip to Normandy in 1661 to see Huet, Ménage visited the prestigious Académie de Caen, and wound up the academicians to such an extent that the next session almost degenerated into fisticuffs between the brawling scholars. Huet was amused by the chaos that his friend had caused and sent him a light-hearted account: 'Vous avez si bien mis tous nos Academiciens en humeur contestative qu'ils n'abordent plus les gens qu'avec un *que si, que non* /Mr. Vicquemant est devenu tout à fait feroce, & M. de Grentemesnil qui prenoit les gens au bras en disputant, les prend à cette heure à la gorge' (letter of 13 October 1663, Paris, BnF, n.a.f. 1341, p. 423 (copy)). This might not have seemed like a good precedent to the Paris Académie.