

# ANGLO-FRENCH INTERACTION IN DICKENS FICTION

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on a selection of texts taken from five novels by Dickens where the Victorian writer portrays his attitude towards the Anglo-French interaction. Our purpose is to clarify the function of the markers of anglicizing the French language.

Dickens was enthusiastic about the French language and French culture. This assertion is supported, among other facts, by the letter he wrote to his friend Emile de la Rue in March 1847:

Well! About Paris! I am charmed with the place, and have a much greater respect for the French people than I had before. The general appreciation of, and respect for, Art, in its broadest and most universal sense, in Paris, is one of the finest national sign I know. They are especially intelligent people... I believe them to be, in many high and great respects, the first people in the universe. Of all the literary men I saw, I liked Victor Hugo best...If you like to hear the French language spoken in its purity, you'd better come to London and enquire for me (1).

The opinions of Dickens expressed above clearly set the tone of affection for everything French. Even his command of French was good, and in February 1848 he wrote to Forster in French in order to express his enthusiasm for the newly proclaimed Republic:

MON AMI, je trouve que j'aime tant la République, qu'il me faut renoncer ma langue et écrire seulement le langage de la République de France -langage des Dieux et des Anges- langage, et un mot, des Français! (2)

This paper focuses on a selection of texts taken from five novels by Dickens where the Victorian writer portrays his attitude towards the Anglo-French interaction. Our purpose is to clarify the function of the markers of anglicizing the French language and in so doing the method will be a chronological approach to Dickensian fiction. In *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) Nicholas thinks French a pretty language, and as it has a name for everything, he presumes it is a sensible one. This seems to have been the author's own opinion

(Mrs Kenwigs)"What sort of language do you consider French, sir?"

"How do you mean?" asked Nicholas.

“Do you consider it a good language, sir?” said the collector; “a pretty language, a sensible language?”

“A pretty language, certainly”, replied Nicholas; “and as it has a name for everything, and admits of elegant conversation about everything, I presume it is a sensible one” (chap.16).(3)

In a sort of counterpoint to the previous opinion, *Nicholas Nickleby* is the first novel in which Dickens set about making fun of the insularity shown by Englishmen when confronted by a foreign language. Mr Lillyvick believes French to be a dismal language because he had heard it used by prisoners of the last war and shaking his head mournfully breaks silence by asking Nicholas:

What’s the water in French, sir

“L`Eau”, replied Nicholas.

“Ah!” said Mr. Lillyvick, shaking his head mournfully, “I thought as much. Lo, eh? I don’t think anything of that language - nothing at all”(chap.16).

Charles Dickens has turned Mr Lillyvick into an archetype exhibiting the average Englishman’s contempt for the French language.

Throughout *Bleak House* (1853) the “Frenchness” is embodied by Hortense, a Frenchwoman who, driven by character and circumstances, has become a criminal. Her nationality is directly connected with her crime and Dickens has grafted into her an unwomanly taste for violence which he connects with the French Revolution. From a linguistic perspective, the reported speech and dialogue of Hortense is conveyed by her imperfect command and pronunciation of English and her use of literal English translations of French words and expressions. In this sense it is worth noting some of the Gallicisms she utters: “Is it not?” (echoing *n’est ce pas?*), “all the world (*tout le monde*) knows that,” “Quitted” (for “left”), “domestic” (for “servant”), “more than you figure to yourself” (from *vous figurer*, “more than you imagine”). In addition, there are the usual markers of Frenchness as “Mademoiselle”, “adieu”, etc.

Chapter 54 abounds with emblematic instances of Gallicisms. Hortense showing her dominant trait of a general quickness of speech and temper, utters a Gallicism in the use of the strong uvular trill and the peculiar tense form:

“Why, I r-r-ruin my character by remaining with a Ladyship so infame!” (4). It is pretty obvious that “infame” is the French for “infamous”. Similarly, Hortense repeats a very common Gallicism:

“I come from arriving at this so detestable house with your wife” (*je viens d’arriver*; I have just arrived).

Furthermore in this chapter we find an instance that illustrates the process of Anglicizing the peculiarities of French pronunciation. Mr. Bucket uses the French word “parler”:

“Lie!” cries Mademoiselle. “I ref-use his money alltogether”.

“If you will Parlay, you know”, says Mr. Bucktet, parenthetically, “you must take the consequences.

In *Little Dorrit* (1857), a novel with linguistic local colour, identical attitude of fun towards foreigners and their attempts to speak English, as in *Nicholas Nickleby*, is portrayed in the description of the difficulties experienced by John Baptist Cavaletto in the Bleeding Heart Yard. This behaviour is exemplified by people speaking to Baptist “in very loud voices as if he were stone deaf. They construct sentences, by way of teaching him the language in its purity” (chap. 25).(5)

The French-speaking character is Rigaud-Lagnier-Blandois, as his name indicates. This character is primarily a criminal who, for the sake of convenience is French. His assignment in the novel is to embody evil. Although Blandois speaks excellent English (presumably thanks to his part-English mother), his speech is used by Dickens in two contrasting ways to render the inherent villainy of the man. On the one hand, French provides terms of abuse which are sufficiently vigorous to be convincing yet remain within the bounds of propriety. Blandois is given a series of oaths and interjections which come literally from French: “Holy Blue!”, “My cabbage”, “Little pig”, “My faith” sounds conveniently irreligious. On the other hand, transposed a useful instrument for stressing that general falsity in manners and morals which is the target for Dickens’s satire throughout.

In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) Dickens attempts to give the flavour and experience of the foreignness of French. The exchange between the Defarges is a sort of mirror reflecting some markers of foreignness or “alienage”:

“Say then, my friend; what did Jacques of the police tell thee?”

“Very little to-night, but all he knows...”

“Eh well!” said Madame Defarge, raising her eyebrows with a cool business air. “It is necessary to register him. How do they call that man?”

“He is English”

“So much the better. His name?” (Book II, chap.16).(6)

Mme. Defarge’s “Eh well!” is the most obvious foreign linguistic item in the whole novel, for it survives as either an unfamiliar apostrophe - “ungrammatical”, in Michael Riffaterre’s sense (7)- or a Gallicism as a literal English translation of the French “eh bien”. In the same way we recognize “my friend” as the word-for-word translation of the French term of endearment “mon ami(e)”; and “So much the better” as direct equivalent of “tant mieux”. In addition, while the action is in France, a servant will be a “domestic”, a lawyer an “advocate”, and a beginning a “commencement”.

Book II, chapter 24, provides us with a revealing letter from Gabelle to “Monsieur heretofore Marquis” as a token of Gallicizing practices. I quote an enlightening example: “I supplicate you, Monsieur heretofore the Marquis, to succor and release”. Needless to say that *Monsieur* is chosen for its familiarity as the French term of

masculine address perhaps most commonly recognized in English. *Marquis* is a title with an English cousin, "marquess". *Supplicate* derives from French "supplier", *succor* from "secourir", and even *release*, which has an entirely native root, can be traced back to "relâcher". The name of *Gabelle* is emblematic, it sounds French and has a Revolutionary resonance, for it designates the infamous salt tax that was one of the *ancien régime's* most resented impositions.

Towards the end of the novel (Book III, chap. 13), in a tense scene, a paroxysm of Gallicisms is reached:

"Behold your papers, Jarvis Lorry, countersigned".

"One can depart, citizen?"

One can depart. Forward, my postilions! A good journey!"

"I salute you, citizens.- And the first danger passed!"

It is worth pointing out that the "French" tongue is definitively separated from the English in Lorry's parting speech by means of the two quite different sentences: "I salute you, citizen" -reflecting his verbal bow to French Revolutionary cant- and "And the first danger passed" unadulterated English, addressed to himself and his companions in escape.

In *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) Mr. Podsnap's behaviour through the dialogue with the French guest puts the emphasis on the defective pronunciation on English by giving many of his words an initial capital. Dickens as one devoted to the stage makes use of the conventions of written English for a precise indication of linguistic form:

"I Was Inquiring", said Mr Podsnap..."Whether You Have Observed in our Streets as We should say, Upon our Pavvy as You would say, any Tokens" The foreign gentleman with patient courtesy entreated pardon; "but what was tokenz?" "Marks", said Mr Podsnap; "Signs, you know, Appearances - Traces". "Ah! of a Orse?" inquired the foreign gentleman. "We call it Horse", said Mr Podsnap, with forbearance. "In England, Angletterre, England, We Aspirate the "H", and We Say "Horse". Only our Lower Classes Say "Orse!" "Pardon", said the foreign gentleman; "I am alwiz wrong!" (chap. XI).(8)

The visual dimension shows a high tension between sound as uttered and sound as interpreted in terms of orthography. In this scene we are faced with a sharp criticism of linguistic pedantry. The main purpose of the satire is Mr Podsnap's patronizing correction of the French gentleman's mistakes.(9)

In conclusion, we can observe that the prevalence of Anglicized French idioms indicates Dickens had a close knowledge of the French language. Beyond this evidence Dickens had a deep knowledge of his society and when a villain or villainess has to appear, and murder is to be committed, it is enough to make him or her of French nationality. In spite of this fact, Dickens himself was never so happy as when in Paris, and possessing a very keen appreciation of the French people and French Art. As consequence, Dickens has a twofold purpose in literary fiction: to make fun of the insularity shown by Englishmen correcting the English spoken by foreigners and to denounce the foreignness or "alienage" by means of phonological features.

- 1.-*The Letters of Charles Dickens*. vol.V. Eds. Graham Storey and K.J. Fielding. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, p. 42.
- 2.-Ibidem, p. 256.
- 3.-Charles Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- 4.-Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- 5.-Charles Dickens, *Little Dorrit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- 6.-Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- 7.-Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* . Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978, p.2ff.
- 8.-Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual friend*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- 9.-See T. and R. Murphy, "Charles Dickens as Professional Reader", *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. XXXIII (1947), p. 305.