

Chapter 3 ~

THE DAWN OF PURISM

IN THE SUMMER OF 2004 we headed out on a three-week road trip down the Mississippi River basin to study the history of French colonialism in the area. On our way back from Louisiana, we stopped in Atlanta, Georgia, to attend a convention of the International Federation of Teachers of French. It was a big event, with 1,300 delegates from 115 countries, including government representatives from France, Canada, Quebec and Belgium. To top it all off, the opening lecture of the conference was given by no less than the *secrétaire perpétuel* (permanent secretary) of the French Academy, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse.

In a Chanel-style skirt suit, with a professorial air, Madame Carrère d'Encausse spoke at great length about the continuing urgency of upholding language standards in France. She discussed the Academy's effort to rid the French of *mots mal faits* (poorly made words) and explained recent attempts to reform spelling in France. At least three-quarters of the conference participants came to hear her—a huge turnout—and she flattered her international public by calling them “pioneers of the French language.”

The *secrétaire perpétuel* had her detractors, though. She staunchly opposes feminizing titles, a stance that many in the (largely female) audience found hard to swallow. In French there is no neutral gender, and titles are generally masculine. Carrère d'Encausse herself pointedly insists on being called Madame *LE secrétaire perpétuel* rather than *LA secrétaire perpétuelle*.

Still, the furrowed brows in the audience didn't discourage the barrage of praise she received after her speech. When she stepped down from the podium, dozens of teachers—people from as far away as Korea, central Asia and Africa—flocked to have their pictures taken in Carrère d'Encausse's presence. Her star status had nothing to do with her long career, illustrious though it was (she is a specialist of Russian, not French). People were simply thrilled to be in the presence of the French Academy.

This admiration for the French Academy is very old. The seven hundred or so members the Academy has elected over the past four centuries are still referred to as “immortals,” even after they are dead. In France the election of a new member of the French Academy—two per year, on average—is covered on the evening news. France has four other academies, for sciences, fine arts, history and humanities, but only the language academy provokes this lasting fascination, both inside and outside France.

Francophones are not the only ones who cherish their language, but among international languages their attitude is unique (except maybe for the case of classical Arabic, to which many Muslims attribute a sacred value). French speakers not only accept the idea that their language should adhere to grammar and spelling standards, but many francophones even refer to their language as a “monument” or a “work of art.” Debates about grammar rules and acceptable vocabulary are part of the intellectual landscape and a regular topic of small talk among francophones of all classes and origins—a bit like movies in Anglo-American culture. The French language does evolve, but it's always against the background of this deeply entrenched idea that some French is good and some is not. “*C'est une faute*” (“It's a mistake”) and “*Dit-on ceci ou cela?*” (“Should we say this or that?”) are such common remarks that few really stop to think of this attitude towards language as a peculiar cultural

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63 -

trait. It all boils down to norms, or, as francophones say, the *norme*. In the back of any francophone's mind is the idea that an ideal, pure French exists somewhere. And that somewhere is, at least symbolically, the French Academy.

Most people assume that the French Academy created language purism, but it was actually the other way around. The term *puriste* first appeared in French in 1586, decades before the Academy's creation. It referred essentially to morals and was a synonym for puritan. Those writers who chose French in the sixteenth century were free spirits who used the language creatively. But all this had started to change by 1625, when the French tongue was being curbed and *puriste* became associated with language correction. The French Academy was created a couple of years later.

The earliest champion of language purism was a poet whose work very few francophones actually read: François de Malherbe (1555–1628). While there are many cases of literary geniuses whose writing shaped entire cultures—Shakespeare, Victor Hugo, Goethe, Cervantes, Dante, to name a few—there are very few instances of a single person influencing the way an entire people think about their language the way Malherbe did. Almost single-handedly he created a conception of language that fifteen generations of authors and readers, teachers and students, writers and speakers, francophones and francophiles have adhered to and wrestled with.

Malherbe was already a middle-aged lawyer when he gained notice on the French literary scene in the early 1600s. He became famous for his mastery of the alexandrine, the twelve-foot verse that was the standard of French poetry and theatre until the Romantic era. “*Et Rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les Roses, / l'espace d'un matin*” (“And Rose, she lived as live the roses, / the space of a morning”) is his most famous line of verse—and a favourite at funeral homes.

Although he became the official poet of King Henri IV in 1605, at age fifty, and retained that status under Louis XIII, it was Malherbe's literary criticism, not his poetry, that gained him repute among his contemporaries and turned him into the French language's first real guru. In his criticism Malherbe preached the values of clarity, precision and rigour. He argued that good writing had to be stripped of ornamentation, repetition, archaisms, regionalisms and hyperbole. Malherbe rejected the idea of synonyms; in his view each word should have a definition, and a definition should apply to only one word. Naturally he abhorred the baroque aesthetic of his predecessors, particularly the Pléiade poets Ronsard and Du Bellay. He considered their use of embellishment and flourishes nothing less than absurd. Above all, he detested the idea of creating new words for the sake of it. His famous follower, the grammarian Vaugelas, wrote, “It is not permitted to anyone to make up new words, not even the King!”

As a pastime, Malherbe edited Ronsard's *stop here.* about half the words. His future biographer, F. ↓ once asked him, “Does this mean you approve of the rest.” Malherbe responded by erasing what was left on the page. Most of his ideas about the French language had been penned by 1606, when he wrote his *Commentaires sur Desportes* (*Commentary on Desportes*), a scathing criticism of his contemporary, the poet Philippe Desportes. “Your soup is better than your psalms,” he said to poor Desportes. And to those who defended the poet, Malherbe replied, “Out of your mistakes, I will write books longer than your poetry.”

Malherbe was quite possibly the biggest and most brazen language snob the world has ever seen. Biographers describe him as a fretful fault-finder who spent his life attacking, both verbally and in writing, every mistake—or what he regarded as mistakes—he could find and anyone who made one. He wanted

to banish the word *vent* (wind) because it was a synonym for fart, and *pouls* (pulse) because it sounded like *pou* (louse). He feared no one, and even reproached King Henri's son, the future Louis XIII, for signing his name as "Loys" rather than "Louys," an inconsistency that many courtiers would not have dared point out had they noticed it. Malherbe hated regionalisms to the point that, when asked whether the best word for "spent" was *dépensé* or *dépendu*, he replied that the former was more French, because *pendu* (which also means "hanged") sounded like Gascon, a dialect of southern France. Malherbe once refused to be treated by a certain Doctor Guébeneau because "his name sounded like a dog's name." On his deathbed he was still correcting the language of the woman who was looking after him.

There's no doubt that Malherbe was a tyrant, especially when it came to vocabulary. But where grammar was concerned he was more moderate, seeking a common ground between principles and the reality of how French was being used. It was Malherbe who imposed the idea that the French negative *ne* should be followed by *pas* or *point*. And his ideal of clarity was not just snobbery: Malherbe rejected the hermeticism that Ronsard and his school fostered, on the grounds that poets used a jargon that was accessible only to other poets. He argued that writers should use plain language so they could be more easily understood by a larger number of readers.

Malherbe's doctrine of clarity gained him support from Henri IV. Because of propaganda about Louis XIV (and later, the nineteenth-century French monarchy), people often associate the ideals of clarity, purity and symmetry with the reign of the Sun King. But it was Henri IV, Louis XIV's grandfather, who started the trend. After fifty years of religious wars between Catholics and Protestants, France was exhausted, and

Henri wanted to make a strong break with the reigns of his predecessors. That meant a departure from the baroque aesthetics of Ronsard and the Pléiade poets, and Malherbe's writing seemed to represent a new age.

By 1615 Malherbe was regarded as not only a master of poetry, but also a master of language. He had become so influential that people created their own academies and salons to either refute his ideas or spread them. As a result of his work and that of his disciples, entire segments of French vocabulary—regionalisms, archaisms, synonyms and duplicates—lost currency and virtually disappeared from the mouths of the well-read and the writing of most authors. As historian Ferdinand Brunot put it, before Malherbe it was common to borrow terms from other languages; because of him, it became a mark of ignorance. That standard would last for the next two centuries, and still remains at the root of the debate over anglicisms.

Not all the writers of Malherbe's time agreed with his doctrine. Archaisms were a strong element in Jean de La Fontaine's fables, and regionalisms were an important aspect of Molière's humour. But almost all of the great writers of the time used plain language, making clarity and precision the "ethic" of French. The fables of La Fontaine and the tales of Charles Perrault (the original author of the *Mother Goose Tales*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Bluebeard* and *Cinderella*) were plainly written and accessible. Racine's language is concise almost to the point of being arid. Molière mocked language purism in his famous satire *Les précieuses ridicules*, but his own writing conformed to the new *norme* as Malherbe had articulated it. The power of purism was such that, by 1661, the new expression of French usage was "*un français châtié*" ("a well-punished French expression that is still current in France. *begin...*")

How did Malherbe's ideal of language purism become so influential while nothing of the sort ever happened in England?

One reason was that few people in France actually spoke fluent French—less than fifteen percent of the population, by some estimates, and mostly among the urban elite. In comparison, English belonged to all classes of society, making it more difficult for an elitist doctrine of language to prevail. In a famous anecdote recounted to his friend the *fabuliste* Jean de La Fontaine, Jean Racine tells of his attempts to get by with French while travelling south. By the time he reached Valence, he wrote, nobody understood him at all. At an inn Racine asked for a chamber pot and was given a heater. “You can imagine,” he wrote, “what happens to a sleepy man who uses a heater for his nightly necessities.”

Another factor driving language purism was its “modernity.” Given how language purism became associated with stifling linguistic conservatism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it is easy to forget that it was once considered progressive. Malherbe’s propaganda, with its powerful ethic of clarity and purity, made French the only living language in Europe, besides Italian, that had normative rules comparable to those of the classical languages, Latin and Greek. (The difference was that French was alive, while classical Latin and Greek were dead, and Italian was not nearly as influential as it had been in the previous century.)

The powerful salon culture that would help turn French into a coveted European language was just developing in France at this time. While it would ultimately help spread the language, purism was also an ideal vector for an elitist view of language. Malherbe spawned another lasting trend: the culture of *remarqueurs* or *remarquistes* (commentators). Alone or in groups, the *remarqueurs* made it their life’s cause to assess and comment on the quality of French being used in writing and speaking. The most influential of them, who regarded himself as Malherbe’s intellectual son, was the grammarian Claude

Favre de Vaugelas (1585–1650). For better or for worse, Vaugelas gave Malherbe’s quest for language purity an edge of elitism that has survived the past four centuries virtually intact and remains unique to francophones. Vaugelas’s view was that the language spoken “*par la plus saine partie de la Cour et de la ville*” (“by the best members of the Court and the city”) should become the standard. He coined the term *bon usage* (correct, or good, usage), which would become the credo of the soon-to-be-created French Academy.

The French Academy was both a creature of Malherbe’s purist ideal and the product of a political power struggle going on at the time. The Academy started out as one of dozens of informal clubs in Paris in the early seventeenth century, where small groups of men and women—many of whom were disciples of Malherbe—gathered regularly to discuss language and read their own poetry. The club hosted by Valentin Conrart, a Protestant financier, bookworm and patron of poets, would eventually evolve into the French Academy, but very little is known about its beginnings. The meetings were secret, and no record was kept of them. Conrart’s club of nine friends would probably have faded into obscurity if it hadn’t attracted the eye of Louis XIII’s prime minister, Cardinal Richelieu, in 1634.

Much of the immediate glory of the French Academy is owed to the character of Cardinal Richelieu. Born Armand Jean du Plessis, into a family of high-ranking civil servants, he distinguished himself early by becoming France’s youngest bishop—at twenty-two. By age thirty-nine he was Louis XIII’s right-hand man, and he would go on to become one of the most powerful and notorious statesmen in French history. Obsessed with building a powerful French state, Richelieu showed a determination, a sense of purpose and an energy that stunned his contemporaries. He dedicated much of his considerable

1660s, behind the Academy's back, while attending its dictionary meetings the whole time. Furetière disagreed with the Academy's overall approach for a prescriptive dictionary. In his opinion, the French needed a good general *descriptive* dictionary of French as it was used, not a dictionary of ideal French. But instead of trying to change his colleagues' approach, Furetière went underground. Word got out only because he went to the King to get a monopoly to write a dictionary of scientific and technical terms, with a promise that it would exclude *bon usage*, the Academy's turf. This provoked a rift, especially when it was discovered that Furetière planned to include definitions of *bon usage* after all. The Academy accused him of plagiarism and dragged him into court. Furetière argued, quite sensibly, that he couldn't possibly define technical terms of navigation or chemistry without defining words such as "sea" and "fire," which were part of the vocabulary of *bon usage*. In the end he lost his privilege and the Academy even expelled him, a very rare case. Ostracized and ill, Furetière sold his work to a Dutch publisher; he died in 1688, two years before his dictionary was printed.

Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* was far superior to that of the Academy. It was one of the greatest achievements of seventeenth-century lexicography and one of the most remarkable intellectual accomplishments of its time. Working alone, he produced the world's first encyclopedic dictionary, with forty-five thousand entries—in less than twenty years. (Compare the achievement of Samuel Johnson, who wrote his English dictionary, published in 1755, with the help of seven lexicographers over a period of seven years.) While many spelling variations remained from the previous century—*français* was still spelled *françoys*—the language of Furetière's dictionary was modern. The definitions are clear, objective and rarely judgmental. He defines the sexual organs in graphic terms, and his

definitions of words such as *cul* (ass) and *merde* (shit) have none of the prudishness one would expect from the priest he was. Furetière was interested in all aspects of human activity, including anatomy, medicine, agriculture, the navy and the sciences. His definition of *sucrerie* (sugar mill) distinguishes those of the West Indies from those in Europe. The author even included a novelty: a thematic index that listed words by trade, for readers who were seeking definitions of specific terms used by, say, butchers or shoemakers. But Furetière's reputation was destroyed by the Academy, and no one ever spoke of *Le Furetière* as they did of *Le Richelet* or would later of dictionaries such as *Le Robert* and *Le Larousse*. Furetière's *Dictionnaire universel* did, however, suffer the ultimate tribute of greatness—it was pillaged and imitated, and it ultimately inspired the work of the eighteenth-century Encyclopedists.

Spurred on by the controversy and the looming prospect of ridicule, the Academy finally published *Le dictionnaire de l'Académie française* in 1694, after fifty-five years of work. Even the King could not quite hide his disappointment when it was presented to him. "*Messieurs, voici un ouvrage attendu depuis fort longtemps*" ("Gentlemen, this is a long-awaited work") was all he had to say. The dictionary impressed no one in France. It had only thirteen thousand definitions. Spellings in the Academy dictionary were similar to Furetière's, but definitions were concise to the point of being curt. Man, for instance, was defined as *animal raisonnable* (animal with reason). Woman was "*la femelle de l'homme*" ("the female of man"). The order of entries was generally alphabetical, but many words were classified etymologically, so that *matrice* (women's reproductive organs) came right below *mère* (mother). The Academy's dictionary was sharper on normative comments, including long discussions of usage, such as the proper use of *moy* (me) and *je* (I). It condemned archaic terms with the comment "*Il est vieux*" ("It's

start here

old”) after the definition. But the omissions were glaring—the Academy almost forgot to include the word *académie*, and left out the word *françoys* until the third edition, in 1740.

Some of the Academy’s choices were frankly bizarre. The word *anglais* (English) was missing from every edition, but is expected to appear in the latest edition, slated for the 2010s. This absence is all the more puzzling since *anglais* is the root of accepted terms such as *anglaise* (a dance), *anglican*, *anglicanisme*, *angliciser*, *anglicisme*, *anglomane*, *anglophilie*, *anglophile*, *anglophobe* and *anglophobie*—all present in the 1935 edition. But it could have been worse: The word *allemand* (German) was actually removed from the 1935 edition (after being included in the 1835 and 1878 editions), though *allemande* (a dance) remained. The real purpose of the Academy’s dictionary was to define an ideal French, and even in this it fell short. The purest of the purists regarded it as extremely vulgar because it contained words in bad taste that were used in the marketplace.

In all, the Academy has managed to produce eight editions, with an average of thirty-seven years between them (the ninth edition has been in the works for seventy years now). The only period during which the Academy showed any semblance of real activity was the eighteenth century, when it produced no fewer than four editions. Members of the Academy at that time included Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot and d’Alembert. In the spirit of reform, they set out to remodel the dictionary. The 1718 edition re-established alphabetical order, and the 1760 edition modified the spelling of eight thousand of the eighteen thousand words. But things were still slow to improve. “Woman” wasn’t promoted to the rank of “female and companion of man” until the sixth edition, in 1835.

It took the Academy 296 years to complete a grammar, which it published in 1935. Meanwhile, the book that would set the standard for French grammar guides was the *Grammaire*

générale et raisonnée, published in 1665 by Antoine Arnauld and Claude Lancelot. Hundreds more would be published before the Academy came out with its own. The plans to produce a rhetoric and a poetic never got off the ground. Even the academicians came to recognize that art and expression evolve in unpredictable ways.

We visited the French Academy to try to understand its role in modern French (more on that in chapters 8 and 17) and how the dictionary project had evolved. The Academy is located in the Institut de France, across the Seine from the Louvre, where it shares its offices with four other academies (of sciences, fine art, history and humanities). The baroque-cum-classical-cum-Italianate building is unmistakable, with its curved façade and oval *coupole* (dome)—*coupole* became the nickname of the Academy’s meeting place. After passing through the front gate we were led through a series of corridors where the staff of the Academy have their offices. The seventeenth-century building was designed before the advent of running water, sewage and electricity; with its peeling wallpaper and threadbare carpets, the overall effect—at least in the office area—is shabby chic, at best.

The two great meeting halls and the library were closer to what we were expecting from this prestigious institution; they were furnished with long polished wood tables and high-backed padded chairs arranged with almost geometric perfection. We were struck by the huge oil painting of Cardinal Richelieu on the back wall of the Red Salon, the hall where Academy members meet to discuss the dictionary. In the portrait (a copy) he is standing in a red robe with his usual ramrod posture and piercing gaze, looking awfully serious for someone who’s watching over a discussion of grammar rules. But of course, grammar is serious business here.

The Academy has about forty employees, most of whom are secretaries, ushers, bailiffs and guards. It manages about sixty literary awards and a number of grants, and more than a dozen properties, including several large castles. We didn't run into any of the Academy's forty "immortals" while we were there, and were told that they are rarely on the premises. If they do come, it's only on Thursday, the day of dictionary meetings, and many, we were told, are chronically absent.

The reputation—or notoriety—of the French Academy is owed to a misconception. Outside of France it is seen as a kind of language police. In reality the Academy has never passed laws on language use; it has no authority to. The French government has official language terminology committees that make rules about what constitutes acceptable French and what doesn't (more on this in chapter 18). These committees then run their choices by the Academy for rubber-stamping.

The French Academy's main job is still to create a dictionary. Most of the work on the dictionary is done by eight lexicographers at the Academy who prepare lists of words and definitions for the academicians. On Thursdays the immortals debate definitions and decide which words to include in the next edition of the dictionary, its ninth. As Laurent Personne, the cabinet director of the permanent secretary, and his chief lexicographer, Jean-Mathieu Pasqualini, explained, the ninth edition, which was begun in 1935, was delayed by the Second World War and then by the disruptions caused by the Algerian war of 1954–62 and the student riots of May 1968. The Academy essentially did nothing after that until the appointment of Maurice Druon as permanent secretary in 1980. Since then, progress has been surprisingly swift (they were at the letter R as of early 2006). The new edition will double the number of words to forty thousand.

Although the French Academy still has great symbolic value, its dictionary is not well respected as a language resource.

It has never been widely used in France, largely because, with an average of thirty-seven years between each edition, it can't keep up with the times and is often already outdated by the time it's published. The early editions had considerably more success outside France (more on this in chapter 5). The only exception was the sixth edition (1835), which was used as the reference when the French government defined official spellings for its civil service examinations.

Today, the Academy's new website gets about two million hits per year, compared to fifty million for Quebec's Terminology Bank. But in a way, the dictionary is not really the point. As Laurent Personne explained, the real role of the Academy is to preside over the French language, rather like a House of Lords for culture. Sometimes the Academy does act, as when it accepted spelling reforms in the early 1990s. At other times its inaction is conspicuous, as in 1997, when it refused to accept the feminization of titles (more on these two issues in chapter 17). Personne described the Academy as a "*magistrature morale*" (moral magistrate). "We are not there to decide on rules or establish law, but to consecrate usage," he said.

Fuzzy as it sounds, the idea of consecration is actually what the Academy is all about. If a word enters the Academy's dictionary, its use is indeed "consecrated." That doesn't necessarily mean that anyone uses the word—that's not the point. Consecration means that the word is recognized as part of the ideal French that every francophone is supposed to have in the back of his or her mind. In other words, the French Academy is a place to store the French language in its ideal form—a kind of museum of ideal French. In fact, some Academy members even describe themselves as curators of the French language.

In its four-hundred-year history, the French Academy has had little impact on how French is actually used. But the ethic of purism that inspired the Academy's creation would have a major impact on how French evolved over the centuries. Since the seventeenth century, French authors and grammarians have had the objective of clarity in mind, not just to produce a language that is precise, but also to make French comprehensible to as wide a public as possible. The fables of La Fontaine and the fairy tales of Perrault are monuments of that century that are still read today because of the genius of authors who wanted to write for all of humankind. In the eighteenth century the doctrine of purism made it possible for French writers to export their work and spread their influence over the entire European continent (the subject of chapter 5). In fact, most French authors remained obsessed with clarity and precision until the twentieth century.

But first and foremost, this purist ethic shaped how francophones put together their dictionaries. The French lexicographic tradition is far more prescriptive than the English. There is no equivalent in French of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. From its inception, the OED was meant to be a vocabulary collection and a great inventory of archaisms and regionalisms—almost half the words on any given page are no longer used. In comparison, French lexicographers do their spring cleaning regularly so that the language doesn't hold on to words it doesn't need. Ever since Malherbe's time, synonyms, neologisms, regionalisms and archaisms have been weeded out on a regular basis and pushed into obsolescence. Sometimes, however, archaic terms are rescued from limbo and repopularized by an author or public figure. Charles de Gaulle is famous for labelling the May 1968 rioters *la chienlit* (shit-a-bed), resurrecting a sixteenth-century insult that hadn't been heard for centuries.

The logic of French purism since Malherbe has been that each word should have a precise definition; no two words are perfectly synonymous. In Webster's English dictionary the word *tolerate* has a definition. But *put up with* is defined merely as "tolerate," without further explanation. No French dictionary would ever do that. A French dictionary of synonyms goes much further than an English thesaurus, which merely lists the synonyms. It will either give precise definitions for each equivalent, categorize the synonyms as literal, analogous or figurative, or differentiate them in some other way.

The French tradition seems to have convinced everyone that there are fewer words in French than English. A popular statistic of comparison is the *Oxford English Dictionary's* six hundred thousand entries as compared to *Le Robert's* hundred thousand. Yet half the vocabulary in the OED is never, or almost never, used. At the time of its creation the OED was meant as an inventory of English words not listed in any other dictionary. In 1987 linguist Henriette Walter disproved the old, false misconception about the paucity of French vocabulary. She simply added 175,000 terms found in literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, plus half a million technical terms, plus a couple of hundred thousand new words created since the 1960s, and came up with a total of 1.2 million different words. And this is a conservative estimate, since it excludes archaic and technical terms that fell out of use before the nineteenth century. Quebec's *Grand dictionnaire terminologique*, created by the Office québécois de la langue française (French Language Commission), lists a million French terms used in two hundred fields of science, industry and technology. According to Sherbrooke University professor Pierre Martel, who is currently working on the first modern dictionary of Quebec French, twenty to thirty thousand new terms are created in French every year "if you consider all regional varieties, all fields of research

and all slangs," although, according to Martel, "Most of these terms are short-lived and used by very few people, sometimes as few as half a dozen." The real difference between English and French dictionaries is one of spirit. Because they exclude things such as technical and scientific vocabularies, French dictionaries have fewer words. On the other hand, the definitions are infinitely more precise. If French dictionaries included all words—the way English dictionaries do—the number of entries would be much larger. But they don't, and that's because of the principle of *bon usage*, according to which only words that are used (or deemed useful) find their way in; the rest are relegated to specialized dictionaries. In other words, if the English dictionary is like an inventory, the French dictionary is like a toolbox, with words divided up into categories, each with specific instructions about how to use it. The mandate? To help users speak pure French.

The dictionary question aside, the purist approach had two hidden traps, and over the centuries French speakers have fallen into both of them. The first was that the plainness they sought led to extreme dryness. That's the term that comes to mind when one reads French poetry from between the 1600s and the arrival of the Romantic movement in France in 1830. Before 1600, French poetry had been praised for its refinement and inventiveness. But the influence of Malherbe led creative people to eschew the very things that help a language develop, such as wordplay and neologisms. In other words, *bon usage* had a castrating effect. "*On a appauvri la langue en voulant la purifier*" ("The language was impoverished in our effort to purify it"), wrote French Academy member Henri Fenelon in 1716. His observation came fifty years too late, and it raised very few echoes in the next century. The damage had been done.

The other trap of purism was to create a gulf between *bon usage* and scientific and technical language. The seeds had

already been planted when Furetière was quarrelling with the Academy. He maintained that "an architect speaks as good French when he uses technical terms like plinths and stylobate . . . as a courtier who speaks of alcoves, stands or lustres." But his view did not prevail. For the next two centuries the Academy put cultural and court language on a pedestal and relegated scientific language to a sort of linguistic ghetto. The problem that promoters of French had with scientific language came mainly from their opposition to jargon and their anti-Latin stance (the influence of Latin was strong in scientific circles). Language promoters also dismissed legal vocabulary as outdated, as much of it had been created along with the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts. French science remained strong throughout that period, but the separation between the idea of *bon usage* and the rest of society meant that the people at the top didn't pay any attention to what was going on below them. So the Academy inadvertently deprived French elites of a major source of linguistic and cognitive renewal.

Yet the prescriptive approach of French dictionaries had one positive outcome: What "pure" French lost in lexical richness, it gained in lexical precision. Because it was defined, French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was regarded as easier to learn. People using *Le Richelet* and *Le Furetière* and the *Grammaire raisonnée* of Lancelot and Arnauld could pick up the basics of the language. For that matter, the Academy's dictionary had much more success outside France than inside, because it allowed people with no access to the French court to get a good idea of the correct usage that was the rule there. Because French was the first European language with a fully developed written system of spelling and grammar, France was also the first country to develop a group of literary stars (later called philosophers or intellectuals), a phenomenon that would help boost the great admiration that Europe developed for the French language.

One effect of this success was that most of the courts of Europe (and overseas) wanted to develop their own clones of the French Academy. Berlin, Vienna, Madrid, Lisbon, St. Petersburg, Stockholm and Philadelphia all created academies modelled on the French Academy. The most successful clone, Spain's Real academia española de la lengua (Royal Spanish Language Academy), became a model of effectiveness, and remains so. Created in 1713, it issued its first Spanish dictionary after thirteen years of work; the twentieth edition was delivered in 1984. Better still, it published eight editions of a Spanish grammar between 1741 and 1815, accomplishing a complete reform and rationalization of the Spanish language. The French Academy never got close to those results. Over the centuries most countries would establish their own form of language institution, whether they called it an academy, an institute, a commission or a committee.

One of the great enigmas of the period is why the English never followed the trend and created an academy—all the more so since many of them viewed the French Academy with envy. The English intelligentsia complained bitterly about the corruption of their language, from about 1660 until publication of Samuel Johnson's dictionary in 1755. People wrote as they spoke; nobody seemed to follow any fixed rules. This was perceived as a great problem by men of science, and the Royal Academy of Science created a committee to tackle it. Many writers joined the movement. Jonathan Swift, the most outspoken promoter of an English academy, wrote: "Some method should be thought for ascertaining and fixing our language for ever." Daniel Defoe went even further, at least rhetorically, writing that it was "criminal to coin words as money."

Yet the project of an English academy never materialized, probably because it went against the grain of society. Unlike the French, the English never felt it necessary to define their language (or their civil law, or even their constitution, for that

matter). After they gained their independence, the Americans toyed with the idea, but rejected it as a royalist institution. Robert McCrum suggests in his book *The Story of English* that plans for an English academy may never have materialized simply because the idea was so obviously French. That explanation is a bit reductive, since most languages have some form of academy, but the concept of a language academy would become a classic illustration of the different spirits of English and French.

In the same century that the French Academy was created, the age-old rivalry between English and French would be carried over land and sea. And it would determine the fate of French on an entire continent.

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