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FRENCH AND PROVENÇAL

FRENCH LANGUAGE

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I. GENERAL

Ch. Bruneau has published his Petite histoire de la langue française, I: Des origines à la Révolution, Colin; this lively survey covers a vast field, and includes extracts from writers from Turolde to Bernardin de Saint-Pierre; it is marred by a high degree of minor inaccuracy (Niçois said to be an Italian dialect, ‘Marseille’ a name of Greek origin; amavisti gives OFr. amais (-ys); St Alexis survives only in a forme rajeunie, etc.), see A. Dauzat, FM, xxiv, 70–2, T. B. W. Reid, FS, x, 373–4.

The most solid contribution to a single period of linguistic history is by M. Deneckere, Histoire de la langue française dans les Flandres (1770–1823), RGand, II–III, occupying 400 pages, utilizing Flemish sources and completely replacing Brunot’s treatment in vols VIII and IX of his Histoire de la langue française. The half-century is divided into an Austrian, a French and a Dutch phase, and in each the use of French in education, publishing, fashion, administration and the theatre is examined.

Bruneau’s vol. XIII, I of the Histoire (on the époque réaliste) is still being reviewed (cf. YWML, xv, i; xvi, 26). G. Charlier, in RBPH, xxxiii, 110–12, is factual; I. Putter, RPh, viii, 230–5, is adverse: the work does not prove the fruitfulness of the method adumbrated by Bruneau in 1951 when he criticized the ‘subjective’ stylistics of Spitzer (YWML, xiii, 18).

The standard reference work of M. Grevisse (‘la meilleure grammaire française’ according to the late André Gide) is now republished in a 6th revd. ed. about 20 pages longer than the 5th
(see YWML, xv, 11), and with a modified title: Le Bon Usage. Grammaire française avec des remarques sur la langue française d’aujourd’hui, Gembloux, Duculot and Paris, Geuthner. The well-known Esthétique de la langue française of Rémy de Gourmont is republished by the Mercure of France, with an agreeable pref. by R.-L. Wagner, ‘Gourmont toujours valable’, and a note by M. Saillet showing how to bring Gourmont’s philology up to date with current reference works.

The event of the day has been the issuing by the Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale of Le français élémentaire, PCNDP, with a pref. by the minister, M. André Marie, dated 6 May, 1954. Though similar in structure to Basic English, this simplified colloquial French serves a different purpose, cf. G. Gougenheim’s article summarized in FM, xxiv, 159–60: it is designed as a first stage in the teaching of an educated spoken usage in the overseas territories of the Union Française. The field-work underlying it, carried out by G. Gougenheim and A. Sauvageot (see the latter’s lively account, ‘L’investigation relative au “français élémentaire”’, CILP, xi, 75–81), is said to be the first word-frequency count based directly on oral data: 163 conversations were electrically recorded and 800 words reaching a frequency of 1/10,000 were retained. It was found that many useful words were infrequent: veston, autobus, timbre, épicer, genou. A selection from these words was added from the results of a questionnaire submitted to schoolchildren and the present publication lists the 1,138 basic items in alphabetic order. According to the recommendations of a grammatical subcommittee presided over by E. Benveniste, the beginner should say plus petit, plus mauvais, du bon pain, c’est mon couteau, ce couteau est à moi for c’est le mien, je ne sais pas, j’ai peur qu’il pleuve, plus grand que j’étais; il faisait mauvais temps, il est parti quand même (to the exclusion of bien que, quoique, malgré, pour­tant, cependant); quand, parce que for lorsque, après que, comme. He need not know soi (-même), nul, aucun, n’importe qui (quoi, quel), tel, second, quelque part, the adverbs premièrement etc., je puis, the past definite and past subjunctive, the agreement of past participles used with avoir, ne...point, causal pour (pour avoir volé), afin de, afin que, car; he must be well acquainted with uses of ça. These recommendations are scarcely comparable