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## A STORM IN A TEACUP? THE *ACADÉMIE* *FRANÇAISE*, LANGUAGE POLICY AND NORMATIVITY\*

When the *Académie française's* position on spelling was misconstrued in early 2016, a public debate arose about spelling and language. This paper explains the *Académie's* views on spelling, which are in fact descriptive, before detailing the *Académie's* other roles, notably the creation of its own normative dictionary and its involvement in the development of French technical vocabulary. This paper thus contrasts the different roles the *Académie* plays and describes the different attitudes the *Académie* is thus able to adopt.

### Introduction

In early 2016 in France, the French Academy (*Académie française*), spelling, and popular opinion were the subject of debate. This is certainly not the first time such a debate arose, but this particular circumstance resulted from a relatively simple change of some spellings in textbooks. Questions of spelling reform, dumbing down of the language and the school curriculum, and the abandonment of France's linguistic heritage as well as linguistic norms, language policy and role and relevance of the *Académie* stayed in the headlines for weeks and even penetrated the English language press (e.g. Lidgett 2016, Bowman 2016, Reilly 2016, Hopquin 2016).

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\* Rad je prilog s međunarodnoga znanstvenog skupa CLARC (Rijeka, 3. – 5. lipnja 2016.)

The *Académie française* is a prestigious learned society charged with being the ultimate authority on questions pertaining to the French language. Although it has no governmental or legislative purview, its illustrious past and former members, including many of France's greatest literary figures, confer great esteem on this institution, even if few can actually say what it actually does.

As French is a living language, part of its evolution derives from the fact that children go to school and learn how to spell, which requires reference to the correct spelling, and it seems inherently logical that only one spelling is correct – but which? This question arose in 1989.

## 1. CSLF and the *Académie*

In October 1989, the Prime Minister charged the High Council for the French Language (*Conseil supérieur de la langue française*, *CSLF*) with developing a proposal to re-examine irregularities in French spelling, notably where pronunciation and spelling diverged (CSLF 1990: 8). The *CSLF* established two guidelines for this re-examination: avoiding authoritarian imposition of spelling norms, and allowing usage to be the final arbiter of what is correct. The *Académie* unanimously approved these principles on 3 May 1990, but did not examine the 18-page text (Académie française 2016a). However, when the *Rectifications* were published in the *Journal officiel de la République française* (*JORF*), on the second page, there was a speech delivered by Maurice Druon, extolling the idea of rectifying the irregularities in French spelling (CSLF 1990: 3). The problem comes from the fact that Druon was the Perpetual Secretary of the *Académie française* in 1990, and seeing his speech alongside the newly proposed spellings certainly gives the impression that the rectified spellings had the *Académie's* approval. However, upon closer reading of statements by the current Perpetual Secretary Hélène Carrère d'Encausse and Druon's speech, it can be clearly seen that the *Académie* indeed approved only the *principles guiding the text*, not the text itself, and these principles are enounced on one page, included in the 1990 publication, followed by the rectifications and a series of analyses, which the *Académie* did not examine or approve (CSLF 1990: 9). These nuances seem to be what led the Minister of Education to be shocked that the *Académie* did not support the rectified spellings (Dargent 2016b, Laurent 2016).

### 1.2. The rectified spellings

The rectified spellings are justified by a logic of removing irregularities in French, and we will focus on the change that perhaps caused the most grief: the use of the circumflex.

French has several accents and diacritics: the grave accent (*â, è, ù*); the acute accent (*é*), the diaeresis (*ä, ë, î, ö, ü, ÿ*) the cedilla, (*ç*) and finally, the circumflex which appears in *â, ê, î, ô, û*. The circumflex can:

1. Indicate a deleted etymological letter – usually *s*, but sometimes a vowel
  - a. *bastir* → *batîr* ‘to build’
  - b. *reconnaistre* → *reconnaître* ‘to recognize’
  - c. *deu* → *dû* (past participle of ‘to have to’)
2. Indicate different meanings and different pronunciations:
  - a. *Votre* = [vɔ̃tʁ] = 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural possessive adjective
  - b. *Vôtre* = [votʁ] 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural possessive pronoun
3. Indicate different meanings and identical pronunciations:
  - a. *sur/sûr*, ‘on’ or ‘certain’
  - b. *jeûne/jeune* ‘fast’ (v) or ‘young’

The change was that circumflex became optional on the letters *i* and *u*, but only in cases where no ambiguity would be introduced, that is, only where the circumflex represents a letter left by the etymological wayside. Thus, one can write the verb *to recognise* as either *reconnaitre* or *reconnaître*. However, the past participle of the verb *to have to* ‘devoir’ cannot be written as *du*, as this renders it indistinguishable from the contraction that results when the preposition *de* is immediately followed by the masculine definite article. Because this would increase the ambiguity of an utterance, *dû* must retain its circumflex. That the circumflex became optional on only two letters only in situations where no ambiguity would be created was poorly understood. Reactions in defense of the circumflex abounded, notably on social media, where the circumflex was seen as being decreed out of existence to leave no distinction between the logical *un homme mûr* ‘a mature man’ and the nonsensical *un homme mur* ‘a man-wall’.<sup>1</sup>

### 1.3. The Announcement

This comparatively minor matter was blown out of proportion when, in early 2016, school textbook publishers announced that from September 2016, they would all use the *rectified* spellings (Dargent 2016a). This decision was taken because in 2015, the Minister of Education decided that the rectified spellings would serve as the reference from September 2016, with it being left unsaid that *both* spellings should be seen as correct by teachers, which conforms with

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1 The hashtag #ReformeOrthographe combines many similar misconceptions.

the *Académie's* views (ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche 2015: 23, 114, 236).

The problems are two. Firstly, in the classroom, the question of which form is correct can easily arise if different editions of textbooks and dictionaries contain different spellings, as well as if these do not reflect the teacher's linguistic performance, and secondly, the *Académie's* position was misconstrued.

#### 1.4. Reactions

Once the publishers had announced this reform and that the changes in question were approved by the *Académie*, the current Perpetual Secretary retorted that „The *Académie* has never supported any imposed reform of spelling, only a limited rectification, with usage the ultimate arbiter of its implantation”(Aissaoui and Corty: 2016).<sup>2</sup> The crux of the matter was that the *Académie* saw the rectified spellings as being imposed, despite having been almost entirely ignored for 25 years.<sup>3</sup> Combined with the presentation of the speech given by the former Perpetual Secretary alongside the rectifications proposed by the *CSLF*, the Minister of Education's astonishment at the fact the *Académie* did not wholeheartedly support the changes can be more easily understood (Dargent 2016b).

It certainly seems that when it comes to the matter of spelling, the *Académie* adopts a descriptivist position: it advocates neither imposing nor abandoning the rectified spellings. However, this is only one of the roles the *Académie* plays; the others relate to general and specialised language.

## 2. The Dictionary

According to its statutes, the *Académie's* „Principal mission shall be to work with all possible care and diligence to give certain rules to our language and to render it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and sciences”(Académie française 1635 : Article XXIV),<sup>4</sup> a mission that is Rivarol's famous *that which*

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<sup>2</sup> „La position de l'Académie française n'a jamais varié sur ce point: une opposition à toute réforme de l'orthographe, mais un accord conditionnel sur un nombre réduit de simplifications, qui ne soient pas imposées par voie autoritaire et qui soient soumises à l'épreuve du temps.” All translations from French to English herein are our own.

<sup>3</sup> Académie française (2016a) : „Un projet vieux d'un quart de siècle et qui, à quelques exceptions près, n'a pas reçu la sanction de l'usage.”

<sup>4</sup> „La principale fonction de l'Académie sera de travailler avec tout le soin et toutes la diligence possibles à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre pure, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences.”

*is not clear is not French* in 17<sup>th</sup> century guise (Rivarol (1797)[1785]: 32).<sup>5</sup> Established in 1635, the *Académie* set about writing its Dictionary (*Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*, DAF), and by the time the 8<sup>th</sup> edition was published in 1935, the *DAF* was described as presenting the current state of the best French (B. Quemada 1997b: 123).<sup>6</sup>

While it may be descriptive when it comes to spelling, the dictionary is however normative when it comes to the words it admits. Since the first edition, it has been noted for its contents: „It is the manner of speaking of the finest members of the Court, conforming with the manner of writing of the finest authors” („Académie française” in *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*).<sup>7</sup>

While the 9<sup>th</sup> edition of the DAF certainly does contain traces of the way the world has evolved since the 8<sup>th</sup> edition – words coined during the 20<sup>th</sup> century such as *astronaute* ‘astronaut’ and *porte-avions* ‘aircraft carrier’ are present in the 9<sup>th</sup> edition – other words that have equally clearly become part of modern French, such as *Internet*, *email*, and *blog* are conspicuously absent. Words coined to replace such English borrowings, such as *logiciel* and *dopage* (replacing *software* and *doping*) are sometimes present, along with notes that the English words they replace are „no longer to be used.”<sup>8</sup> The *DAF* is thus normative, incorporating only what it considers to be the best of French.

## 2.1. Spelling in the DAF

We noted earlier that the *Académie* opposes authoritarian imposition of spelling reform, but that it supports the idea of a limited rectification of the irregularities in French spelling, and this matter comes to the forefront in the *DAF*. Work on the 9<sup>th</sup> Edition was commenced almost as soon as the 8<sup>th</sup> Edition was published in 1935, long before the appearance of the troublesome document of 1990 (G. Quemada 1992: 455–456). The *Académie* shows itself to be less purist than may be expected, as its dictionary contains both the „traditional” spelling and the „rectified” spelling as well as a diamond symbol to highlight such variation. For example, the verb ‘to appear’ can thus be either *apparaître* (traditional) or *apparaitre* (rectified). This descriptivist approach is further reinforced by the variants of each word modified being listed at the start of each fascicule and volume, along with the note that neither spelling can be held

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<sup>5</sup> „Ce qui n’est pas clair n’est pas français.”

<sup>6</sup> „Presenter l’état actual de la meilleure langue française.”

<sup>7</sup> „C’est la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour, conformément à la façon d’écrire de la plus saine partie des auteurs.”

<sup>8</sup> „N’est plus à être employé.”

to be inaccurate (Druon in Académie française 1990: XIV; Académie française 2016b: III). The *Académie* practices what it preaches by letting usage act as the ultimate arbiter of what is correct.

### 3. The Académie and French language policy

The *Académie* is also involved in implementing the French government's language policy, which seeks to support the use and development of French, notably in scientific and technical domains, where English terms abound (Article 1, Decree of 3 July 1996 modified by Decree of 25 March 2016).<sup>9</sup> Since the 1970s, a series of Commissions, now known as *Colleges* or *Groups of Experts*, has been established to implement this linguistic policy by carrying out terminological work, focusing on the components of specialized vocabulary, and recommending (rather than imposing) the use of French technical terms. The Groups support and develop the French language where the influence of English is most prevalent by ensuring French-speakers can read and write about scientific concepts and advancements in their own language.

While the bulk of the terms recommended are destined to specialist communities of scientists and technicians, developments in modern society have meant that some technological innovations have become part of everyday language. Consequently, some terms that were once of interest to only a select few, such as *téléchargement* 'download' or *diffusion en flux* 'streaming', have become part of mainstream vocabulary, blurring the line between general and specialized language. The vocabulary in question nonetheless serves the goal of allowing French speakers to deal with these concepts in their own language.

#### 3.1. The French Language Enrichment Scheme

The process of recommending terms involves the consultation of several parties. The first step takes place at the level of the Groups of Experts, composed of scientists, technicians and experts in their field, who survey the terminological needs in their domains, and record English technical terms for which no satisfactory French term exists, such as *le doping* (unsatisfactory because it contains the borrowed morpheme *-ing*). The Group meets to discuss, develop and define the terms and concepts in question, and is aided by the *Académie's* Dictionary Service. The *Académie's* participation is mandated by the

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<sup>9</sup> „En vue de favoriser l'enrichissement de la langue française, de développer son utilisation, notamment dans la vie économique, les travaux scientifiques et les activités techniques et juridiques.”

decree that established the French Language Enrichment Scheme (*Dispositif d'enrichissement de la langue française*), which requires that the *Académie* approve all terms before they can be officially recommended and published in the government's official publication, the *JORF* (Article 9, Decree of 3 July 1996 modified by the Decree of 25 March 2015).

Whilst bringing their lexicographical expertise to the table, the members of the *Académie's* Dictionary Service (*Service du dictionnaire*) can also be considered as a non-specialist audience that can reveal problems the non-initiated might have when encountering the sometimes complex notions treated in terminologies. Once the terms and definitions are approved by the Group of Experts, the list of terms is sent to the French Language Enrichment Commission (*Commission d'enrichissement de la langue française, CELF*), which examines the terms from the viewpoint of non-specialists, with representation from the *Académie* and the Group of Experts. The CELF ensures agreement between the propositions of the different Groups when concepts are shared between domains. The Commission thus ensures harmony as well as avoiding contradictions between propositions from different groups. Once approved, the list of terms is sent for final approval by the *Académie française*.

The 40 members of the *Académie française* mandate the members of the Dictionary Commission (*Commission du dictionnaire*) to approve terms on their behalf. The members of the Dictionary Commission examine the terms and definitions with a view to their motivation, clarity, respect of French morphology, phonology, syntax and semantics (Souffi 2008: 374). Their reactions can be divided into four groups:

1. adoption without any modification
2. adoption with minor modifications (usually, adding commas or syntactic modification)
3. modification on the grounds of
  - a. removal of superfluous content
  - b. questions (often linked to clarity/relationship to other terms)
  - c. formation
4. unapproved and returned to the Group.

In his 2008 study, Souffi (2008: 374) mentions that out of 680 terms the *Académie française* examined in 2008, only 19 were not approved, some 2.7%. In the domain of Space Sciences and Technology, the *Académie's* deliberations reveal more hesitation than what Souffi found: of 517 terms considered



between 2000 and 2015, more than half the terms proposed – 277 – were accepted without any modification (DGLFLF 2015, 2013, 2012, 2009, 2007, 2005a, b, 2004, 2000). 180 further terms were accepted provided certain minor remarks were taken into account, such as:

for *basculement optimisé* ‘gravity turn’, the notes accompanying the definitions repeated the verb *viser* ‘to aim’. The *Académie* suggested substituting *permettre* ‘to allow’ in order to avoid repetition (DGLFLF 2015: 6).

for *en flottage libre* ‘free floating’, the *Académie* suggested using *dues* ‘due to’ rather than *liées* ‘resulting from’ to emphasise causality (DGLFLF 2015: 12).

These sorts of minor changes, which are usually stylistic, constitute around 35% of the terms considered, (180 of 517 terms), and after the 277 terms approved without modification, only 59 terms (about 11%) remained unapproved by the *Académie*, compared with the 2.7% Souffi noted. The case of *attitude* illustrates some reasons why the *Académie* does not approve some terms.

The concept *attitude* is defined as the „Direction of the axes of a spacecraft with reference to a trihedral reference frame” and this term was recommended in 2000 as the English equivalent of the French *orientation*, accompanied by the note that the *attitude* was present in French usage (CELF 2015: 1).<sup>10</sup> In 2014, the *Académie* received the following terms for examination: (DGLFLF (2015: 1–4).

*capteur d’orientation* ‘attitude sensor’

*commande d’orientation* ‘attitude control’

*centrale d’orientation* ‘attitude control system’

*système de commande d’orientation et d’orbite* ‘attitude and orbit control system’

Each of these terms renders the English element *attitude* as *orientation*, but the *Académie*’s objection centered on the notes which stated that „In professional language, the term *attitude* [...] is also used.”<sup>11</sup> The *Académie* replied: „It is not advisable to include the term *attitude* (a pure calque from English which clearly does not conform with its meaning in general language)” (DGLFLF 2015: 1).<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> „Direction des axes d’un engin spatial par rapport à un trièdre de référence.” Original emphasis.

<sup>11</sup> „On trouve aussi, dans le langage professionnel, le terme [...] attitude.” Original emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> „Il n’est pas souhaitable de faire figurer en note le terme *attitude* (pur calque de l’anglais qui n’est évidemment pas conforme au sens de la langue.”

The Group replied:

*Attitude* is preferable to *orientation* because it is the term that has been used in professional circles for more than fifty years. Further, *orientation* can have two meanings: the heading followed by an object [...or] the fact that an instrument is oriented in a certain direction [...]. *Attitude* is noted as belonging to the domains of aeronautics and space by some standard dictionaries (DGLFLF 2015: 1).<sup>13</sup>

The *Académie* eventually withdrew its objection, and allowed these terms to be published with the notes as originally proposed, and again showing it accepts usage as the ultimate arbiter in linguistic matters.

Other reasons a term may not be approved relate to homogenising terms and definitions. In 2012, the English *blowoff* ‘séparation pyrotechnique’ was not approved because its definition referred to an otherwise undefined ‘explosive bolt’. The Group was thus invited to define both terms in a later list (DGLFLF 2012: 29). Further, in 2004, the term *memorandum of understanding* ‘mémorandum d’entente’ was submitted, it was not approved as the term was not limited to the domain of space sciences, and the input of the Foreign Affairs Group was solicited. Thus, not being approved does not automatically mean a term will never be approved, nor is it necessarily the case approval hinges solely on the normative view of the *Académie*.

#### 4. Conclusion

Even though the same people decide whether a term can be recommended as well as whether it should be included in the DAF, the different natures of lexicography and terminology allow the *Académie* to walk separate lines between the extremes of normativism and descriptivism. The *Académie* shows itself to be as descriptivist as it reasonably can be when it comes to the spelling of both specialised and general vocabulary, even if it seeks to guide usage towards what it considers to be correct.\*

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<sup>13</sup> „*Attitude* est préféré à *orientation* car c’est le terme qui est en usage dans le milieu professionnel depuis plus de cinquante ans. De plus, *orientation* peut avoir deux sens: – le cap suivi par un objet [...] – le fait qu’un instrument soit orienté vers une direction donnée [...]. *Attitude* est attesté dans les domaines de l’aéronautique et du spatial par certains dictionnaires d’usage.” Original emphasis.

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## Mnogo vike nizašto? *Académie française*, jezična politika i normativnost

### Sažetak

Kada je početkom 2016. godine stav Francuske akademije o pravopisu pogrešno protumačen, izazvalo je to javnu debatu o pravopisu i jeziku. Ovaj rad objašnjava deskriptivne stavove Akademije vezane uz pravopis te detaljnije opisuje ostale Akademijine uloge, od kojih su značajne izrada vlastita normativnoga rječnika te uključivanje Akademije u izgradnju francuskoga tehničkoga vokabulara. Rad suprotstavlja različite Akademijine uloge te opisuje različite stavove koje Akademija stoga može prihvatiti.

Ključne riječi: sricanje, francuski jezik, terminologija, jezična politika, normativnost

Keywords: spelling, French language, terminology, language policy, normativity

