

The Latinate Structure of French Grammars in Nineteenth-Century Britain

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Abstract

For much of the nineteenth century, modern foreign language (MFL) pupils laboured under the Latinate, or classical, system. That system appeared to offer the correct, best, and most appropriate pedagogic model for language learning, starting as it did with the foundations and moving upwards to complete the whole edifice: the “architectural” metaphor. Consequently, MFL teaching began with the letters (Orthography), then proceeded to the words (Etymology/morphology), and finally to complete sentences (Syntax). A data set of the major French grammars of the nineteenth century gives at least a partial picture of how MFL teaching was usually conducted. Further, the Latinate approach is seen as coping tolerably well with the social and pedagogic realities of the era, and therefore was not as indefensible as some accounts of “grammar-translation” would suggest. One conclusion of the paper is that for MFLs the Reform Movement was slower to take effect than is generally imagined.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct in some detail the practices of the traditional, Latinate language teaching model, which up to about 1870 was rarely questioned within the school context. The texts that form the database for this paper — approximately one per decade — were written for the teaching of French to English-speaking pupils in England. French may here be regarded as symbolic of the way all modern foreign languages were taught, particularly German, Spanish and occasionally Italian. Following

an overview of the general structure of these texts, the three "classic" divisions of Orthography, Etymology and Syntax will be described and examined separately. The concluding remarks will draw attention to the paper's major thesis: that despite the well-known advances in nineteenth-century linguistics, the day-to-day language-learning experiences in English classrooms did not improve substantially between 1800 and 1900; further, that these experiences for the most part consisted of considerable amounts of rote learning, grammatical manipulation, and translation, activities which are usually conflated into the term "grammar-translation".

In the year 1800 modern foreign language (MFL) teaching was a faithful replica of the Latin model, except that its status was far lower and its application lacked all credibility:

Whether through planning, inertia or improvisation, the practice of modelling instruction in French on the ritual method applied to the 'dead' languages proved distressingly futile. In many schools, French lessons became an additional chore for form masters; there was no coordination of the teaching syllabus, each master adopting whatever manuals or texts he pleased. Marks were often discounted in assessing form 'orders', so that French was inevitably devalued for the pupils. Lessons were generally relegated to early morning or late afternoon sessions, the weekly time allocated was only one sixth of that assigned to Latin, yet French was also treated 'as a corpse to be dissected' — a subject almost any university man could 'teach' by checking the words beforehand. (Radford, 1985: 209)

By the 1880s there was more acceptance of the position of MFLs in the curriculum, but they "were still taught very much by the grammar-translation method, oral French being despised as 'nursery,' 'tea-party,' 'courier,' or 'bagman' French" (Gilbert, 1953: 4). Despite increasing professionalism and coordination, even by 1900 Viëtor's appeal for language teaching to

start afresh, and the advances in phonetics made by Passy, Sweet and others, had still not achieved the hoped-for revolution in the classrooms. The innovative recommendations of people such as Jacotot, Marcel, Gouin, Prendergast, Widgery, and others had barely begun to enter everyday classrooms in 1900, and indeed many did not reach fulfillment until the Communicative Approach of the 1980s. The slow passage of reform, as this paper will attempt to show, is attributable to the ubiquity and longevity of the deeply rooted Latinate approach to language pedagogy, an approach most clearly seen in the structure of the grammars in use at the time.

2. The Latinate Structure of Grammar Books

1. The General Framework

Michael (1987: *passim*) has set out the guiding ideas regarding the Latin influence in L1 English grammars. In summary form these are:

1. Layout: Generally OESP format.
2. Definitions: Generally given.
3. Etymology (i): Parts of speech given (8, 9, or 10, etc.).
4. Etymology (ii): Verbs given in paradigms.
5. Syntax (i): declensions given (Nom., Acc., etc.)
6. Syntax (ii): a concentration on concord and government.
7. Terminology: What names? (e.g., "Nom." or "Subject").
8. Pedagogy (i): Pupils required to learn rules by heart.
9. Pedagogy (ii): Pupils required to do parsing.

These nine points also provide a focus for the discussion of nineteenth-century MFL grammar texts. Of particular relevance was the OESP format (No. 1 above), since more than anything else it characterised the Latinate form of organisation. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, of the four elements of classical grammar — Orthography, Etymology, Syntax, and Prosody — only three were of interest to school grammarians: Prosody

was seen as expendable and rarely appeared. The shorthand OES(P) will therefore be used in this paper to identify the typical MFL format.

Even by 1800 Orthography had been reduced to a relatively formulaic display of the sounds of a foreign language, occupying just a few pages at the beginning of most grammars (see Table 1). Samuel Johnson and others had given up on it (see Michael, 1987: 58), and MFL grammarians also viewed the task of representing the sounds of their languages as difficult or even impossible. However, as certain minimal elements of this traditional section had to be made available to teachers and students, orthography con-

Table 1. Major Sections in Selected Nineteenth-century French Grammars

	Total Pages	Orthog.	Etym.	Syntax	Other
Duclos (1804)	379	11 (3%)	134 (35%)	234 (61%)	0
Chambaud (1750/1816)	463	94 (20%)	104 (23%)	177 (38%)	80
Wanostrocht (1780/1820)	452	4 (0.8%)	[combined = 415 (92%)]		43
Hamel (1796/1824)	334	22 (7%)	106 (32%)	119 (36%)	83
Rowbotham (1826)	332	9 (3%)	162 (49%)	146 (44%)	12
Noël & Chapsal (1823/1828)	214	15 (7%)	66 (31%)	96 (45%)	37
De Lévizac (1797/1840)	545	32 (6%)	197 (36%)	205 (38%)	111
Hamel (1796/1844)	438	30 (7%)	176 (40%)	190 (43%)	42
DeLille (1844)	444	34 (8%)	196 (44%)	108 (24%)	106
De Fivas (1840/1845)	302	6 (2%)	175 (58%)	119 (39%)	2
De Charente (1857)	836	43 (5%)	163 (20%)	372 (45%)	258
Eve & Baudiss (1873)	246	3 (1%)	78 (32%)	122 (50%)	40
Armitage (1876)	351	—	62 (18%)	255 (73%)	34
Bourdache (1884)	191	11 (6%)	140 (73%)	36 (19%)	4
Barriball (1899)	230	12 (5%)	142 (62%)	—	76

Note: This data set was compiled with the intention of showing one text per decade. As can be seen, this was not always possible: the 1820s and the 1840s each produced a number of popular works, but the 1860s produced only G. W. Kitchin's translation of Auguste Brachet's *A Historical Grammar of the French Tongue* (Oxford, 1869), which is a philological rather than pedagogic work. Popularity has been used as the criterion of success and, as described in the text, most of these works went through many editions. For example, De Fivas went through 50 editions between 1840 and 1890.

tinued as a mandatory, but generally limited, part of almost all French grammars throughout the nineteenth century.

This left Etymology and Syntax as the main components of nineteenth-century grammars, and indeed these sections increased in size and elaboration with the arrival of MFL examinations, from about the middle of the century, which focused primarily on these areas. The pattern that became established was for grammars to consist of a brief Orthography followed by extended sections on Etymology (parts of speech) and Syntax. Table 1 shows the major sections in popular French grammars of the century.

Table 1 shows, among other things, the large number of eighteenth-century grammars that were still popular up to about 1850. Those of Hamel (1796), Chambaud (1750), Wanostrocht (1780), and de Lévizac (1797) were reprinted and re-edited many times, with Chambaud still being reprinted in 1846, almost a century after first being published. One example will suffice to show how this process worked: Hamel's *Universal Grammar of the French Language* (1796) re-appeared as the *New Universal French Grammar* in 1824 (see Table 1), was reprinted in 1835, and then again in 1844 edited by Lambert (also in Table 1). It was finally reprinted — “with exercises” — as *The New Hamel* edited by Duprat Mérigon in 1855. This reprinting or re-editing of grammars was extremely common in the nineteenth century, and many of the best-selling French grammars of the period were really updated eighteenth-century works.

Table 1 also shows the relative sizes of the sections of each grammar, as a percentage of the whole book. Apart from the Chambaud (1816) grammar, all the others devote less than 10 percent of the space to Orthography, giving it, on average, just six percent. The Etymology sections account for 40 percent, on average, and the Syntax sections take up 43 percent of each book, on average. This roughly 10-40-40 pattern is common, with the

author(s) filling the final 10% with a variety of materials, such as dialogues, useful phrases, how to address people of title, hints and examples concerning letter writing, lists of verbs, lexical distinctions (e.g., *marcher* vs. *se promener*), false friends, "free exercises", literary passages, poems, and so forth.

From Table 1 it is also clear that some of the bulkiest grammars were to be found in the middle of the century, probably because the University of London included French for matriculation from July, 1853, and the University of Cambridge from December, 1858. Any rule that might be tested had to be included. This inclusiveness reached its apogee with the work of Auguste Aigre De Charente in his *New and Complete Course, Theoretical and Practical, of Strictly Graduated Grammatical and Idiomatic Studies* (London, 1857). De Charente wrote this "for the use of the Gentlemen Cadets of the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich", where he taught. This massive grammar not only contains the standard Orthography, Etymology and Syntax sections, but then repeats much of it in French (called "a résumé of the three preceding [sections]"). The whole book has a total of 3,043 rules, the last of which appears on page 836!

2. Orthography

The classical system began by introducing the pupil first to the letters, then to the syllables and finally to the words of the new language. Letters and syllables were described in the Orthography section, and words in the Parts of Speech (Etymology) section which followed. Later, the Syntax section showed the pupil how to put the words together to form sentences. The classics had taught the letter-syllable-word progression, and this, in the early part of the nineteenth century, was adopted as the appropriate way to present an MFL.

Regarding the letters, French and other MFL grammars gave their

names, written forms, and sound values, though as the century became more exam-conscious the sound values were sometimes omitted. The division of sounds into vowels and consonants was found in every grammar, then diphthongs and other combinations, h-mute and h-aspirated being always shown. The degree of detail varied enormously, with some authors showing virtually all possible combinations and exceptions. Many reached back into the classics to make connections that the students — and their teachers, who were often classics masters — could understand: “*Ti* is sounded *ci* in words derived from the Greek or the Latin languages, in all words ending in *tion*, *attention*, *portion*, &c. except *question*, *gestion*, *digestion*, *combustion*, *mixture*” (de Lévizac, Tarver, ed., 1840: 28). Others, later in the century, employed linguistic terminology: “The tonic accent is placed on the *last* syllable; on the *last but one* when the word ends in *e mute*. Ex. *Constitution*, *magnifique*” (Hunt & Wullemin, 1882: 1).

Classical orthography then showed combinations of these letters forming a syllable (long, short, or common), which was the next higher unit of analysis. Within the foreign language context, typical grammars showed long lists of monosyllables (*gros*, *fort*), dissyllables (*fo-rêt*, *ma-ri*) and words of three syllables (*thé-â-tre*, *té-né-breux*) on which the students could practice (de Lévizac, Tarver, ed., 1840: 32–39).

The importance of syllables in the minds of grammar-book writers can be judged from the following tortured example from an Italian grammar of 1863:

An exact knowledge of Italian pronunciation depends entirely on an exact knowledge of the division of syllables. The principle having been laid down, that all the letters must be pronounced distinctly, if a proper division of syllables be observed, a proper pronunciation will be obtained, which depends upon pronouncing all the letters distinctly and in conformity to exact syllabication. (Volpe, 1863: 9).

The circularity of the above argument confirms the notion that many school grammar-book writers were technically incompetent to discuss pronunciation, and simply followed tradition in their presentation of this area.

The teaching method predicated upon this presentation was as follows: "Before the Master shows his scholars the vowels of the first table, he himself must pronounce distinctly to them each vowel one after another, and make them pronounce the same after him" (Chambaud, 1816, Preface: viii). Later in the century C-J. DeLille gave somewhat novel coverage to Orthography in his *New Theoretical and Practical French Grammar* (4th Edn., London 1844). After covering the traditional ground regarding the letters and how they are sounded, and dealing with the letters and their sounds one by one, his grammar offers "general exercises" on pronunciation. These he merged with practical phrases called "Vocabulaire et phrases de la langue usuelle" (25) which included everyday matters such as days of the week, months, and colours, plus themed content areas such as flowers, fruit, around the house, breakfast, and so forth. The intention was for the student to combine pronunciation practice with the acquisition of useful words and phrases. His basic method was set out as:

1st: A short interval or pause must take place between the voices of the Teacher and the Scholars, in order to allow time for the former to make a due impression on the ears of the latter. 2^{ndly}. The Scholars must all repeat, at the same time, or *simultaneously*, the sounds uttered by the Teacher; thus forming with each particular voice, one general sound. 3^{rdly}. The Scholars must not strain their voices in order to speak very loud, as they would thereby injure the pronunciation, fatigue their lungs, and become noisy, which is particularly repugnant to this system of tuition, as it is grounded on extreme attention, regularity, precision and uniformity. Sounds tolerably loud will therefore lead to the best articulation. (DeLille, 1844: 439-440).

This aural-oral method of DeLille's was used, at higher levels, not only to maintain the students' pronunciation and vocabulary skills, but also to introduce them to grammar and translation.

The presentation of Orthography underwent a progressive narrowing during the nineteenth century, but maintained the letter-syllable-word configuration right up to 1900. However, it should be mentioned that the letter-syllable-word approach accorded perfectly with the general nineteenth-century attitude towards instruction. The architectural metaphor was widely accepted across the curriculum: that pupils should begin with the smallest building block and proceed methodically from there. For language the alphabet was the evident starting point, followed by syllables and then words. Literacy studies, for example of the early schools of the British and Foreign Schools Society, show that the pupil's first year was spent on reading and writing the alphabet, and the second, third and fourth on words and syllables of two, three and four letters. It was a process that involved "decomposing the language into what was thought to be its constituent elements" (Vincent, 1989: 76-77). Some advice given to charity school teachers in 1811 reads: "Great Care must be taken from the Beginning, that each Syllable and every word must be pronounced very plainly, distinctly and audibly" (in Vincent, 1989: 80). Although there was very little connection between those acquiring basic literacy and those beginning to study a foreign language, the fact remains that the general principle of methodical mastery was present in both cases.

3. Etymology

"Etymology" in the school context meant morphology, and in practice consisted of a detailed account of nouns, articles, adjectives, pronouns, verbs, prepositions, adverbs, conjunctions and interjections. This system-

atic treatment of the Parts of Speech was modeled on the classical format. Sections typically began with a definition, again following the classical model:

A Substantive is a word which expresses the name of a person, or a thing, material, spiritual, or ideal; such as *homme*, man; *femme*, woman; *cheval*, horse; *maison*, house; *vertu*, virtue, &c. (Hamel, 1824: 27–28)

The Parts of Speech were set out in separate chapters or sections, normally starting with the noun. French grammars tended to give most space to the verb, with particularly elaborate descriptions of *avoir* and *être*. Tables of irregular and impersonal verbs were also given. Many grammars show signs of excessive elaboration in, for example, the listing of exceptions, the giving of full declensions of nouns and all the conjugations, all the types of verbs, and so forth. Wanostrocht (1820) starts with an 11-page list of Irregular Verbs, some of which are marked as “very little used”! Tarver’s de Lévizac (1840) sets out the full paradigms for all four conjugations, in all the tenses and moods, for example *Je me serai repenté, tu te seras repenté, il/elle se sera repenté*, etc. (206). Even in relatively trivial areas such as numbers it became routine to show from one to 100, rather than just give the short form (e.g., 80, 81, 82; then 90, 91, 92) as had been the practice before.

Exceptions were another fully exploited area. Hamel’s original 1796 grammar, for example, aimed to give the student just a basic selection, as in his list of 20 adjectives which “have no plural in the masculine gender” (e.g., *austral, conjugal, diamétral*, etc.: 39). In the 1844 edition this list of exceptions had grown to 35 (with the addition of words like *bénéficial, boréal, canonial*, etc.) as the new editor added fresh items. But the 1855 editor was under self-imposed pressure for space due to his advertised emphasis

on “exercises”, with the result that he eliminated this whole list of exceptions. Such dramatic changes aptly illustrate the redundant nature of such material, but more generally draw attention to the way writers and editors were becoming aware of the market for which MFL grammars were being produced.

Case was particularly problematic for writers of MFL grammars. Chambaud (1750/1816) dismisses cases altogether: “Therefore there are no such things as cases and declensions in our languages, wherein the several states or relations of the noun are marked by the place which they keep in the sentence, and by prepositions” (111). However, the problems associated with *de* and *à* caused him to introduce three “states” which in his Note he relates to the Latin:

1st & 4th.	le Prince	les Princes
2nd	du Prince	des Princes
3rd	au Prince	aux Princes

¶ N. B. The first state answers to the nominative of the Latins; the 2d, to their genitive and ablative; and the 4th, to their accusative: in French the 4th state of nouns is like the 1st. (112)

Hamel (1796/1824) adopted the same theoretical stance, but was more aware of the way the classical heritage impinged on social and pedagogical issues:

As the French nouns do not change their termination in the same number, many grammarians pretend that there are no cases in our tongue; but I think it is more simple and natural to give the same names, in all languages, to the same relation of things; and the rather because many of those who learn French, learn at the same time Latin or Greek: therefore I admit of six cases, called, *nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative, and ablative*. However, as there can never be any mistake about the *vocative*, for brevity sake, we will decline our nouns with

five cases only. (28)

However, in practice his treatment of cases was minimalist:

N. Ac.	le roi	les rois	
G. Ab.	du roi	des rois	
D.	au roi	aux rois	(1824: 29)

The Etymology section therefore provided the pupil with a detailed account, often with examples and exercises, of the morphology of the target language. It also provided the teacher with a familiar mode of analysis. And, conveniently, from mid-century it provided exam writers with abundant testing material.

4. Syntax

The Syntax section of foreign-language grammars typically re-used the Parts of Speech section as scaffolding for the analysis of syntax. So, for example, the morphology of Nouns having been dealt with in Etymology, the syntax of Nouns would follow in the Syntax section. Under Syntax, an author following the Latinate tradition was expected to deal particularly with concord and government, and its unit of analysis was the complete sentence.

Concord and government, though largely absent from English, maintain in French something of their Latin complexity. This was therefore an area in which English-speaking pupils needed instruction. Consequently, we find in these Latinate grammars accounts of what Chambaud (1816) calls the “absolute agreement of, (I) The Article and Adnoun [adjective] with the Noun”, as in *Les Rois sont hommes comme les autres* (208), and *une table ronde* (221). Similarly, for Concord we find examples such as conjunctions that require to be followed by either the indicative, subjunctive or infinitive

mood of the verb, as in *ainsi que*, *afin que*, and *au lieu de* (376–8).

Pedagogically, the Syntax sections offered the pupil opportunities for revision. For example, Chambaud deals with nouns under Parts of Speech (15 pages, headed “Accidence”) in the following areas: number, gender, and the article’s relationship to the noun. When nouns are examined under Syntax they are analyzed in terms of case (e.g., *Les Gardes du Roi.*), article agreement (e.g., *Un beau Prince, une belle Princesse*), and agreement in the case of different numbers (e.g., *Il avoit les yeux & la bouche ouverte*). Some of this was pure repetition. Although Chambaud gives only two pages to Syntax of the Noun *per se*, the noun’s concord and government relationships with pronouns, prepositions, verbs, and so forth meant that the pupil was constantly revisiting the concept of Noun in different contexts.

By the 1840s, the terms Concord and Government were under some pressure. However, many popular grammars maintained the classical format, such as Tarver’s edition of de Lévizac (1797/1840), which attempted a full classical explanation:

EXPLANATION OF THE TERMS REGIMEN DIRECT, REGIMEN INDIRECT, OR CASES.

In *le père aime ses enfants*, the father loves his children; *le père* is the subject, or governing word, or nominative case: and *enfants* is the governed word, or regimen, or accusative case. *Ses enfants* is also called a direct case, because there is no preposition intervening between it and the verb *aime*.

In *les enfants obéissent au père*, the children obey to the father; *les enfants* is the subject, and *au père* is the governed noun or regimen; and the regimen is called indirect because it has a preposition (*à*) before it. It is also called the dative case. (282)

Tarver, adapting de Lévizac’s work for the pupils of Eton, assumed on their part a familiarity with Latinate terminology (“governed”, “regimen”, and

“accusative case”), while other grammarians adopted more modern terms such as “Subject” and “Object”. C.-J. DeLille (1844), already mentioned as a comparative moderniser among the traditional grammarians and one familiar with the writings of DuFief and Jacotot, talked of *l’objet immédiat de l’action de ce verbe* and *sujet du verbe* (441–2).

This ambivalence over terminology appeared to reflect a new awareness of the intended audience, rather than pedagogic rationale. Those grammars aimed at Latin-familiar students in the Public Schools (e.g., Eve & Baudiss, 1873; Armitage, 1876; and Hunt & Wullemin, 1882) favoured a Latinate nomenclature, and those aimed at a more general audience (e.g., Maynard, 1857) preferred “modern” terminology. The Preface to Armitage (1876), for example, indicates his intention to treat French “from the point of view of a Latin scholar” (iii). Such wording may well have operated as a kind of code, since many Public School teachers were in fact classics masters (Storr, 1906).

Armitage (1876) also offered some suggestions on the teaching of Syntax which bring out the close relationship between classics and MFLs. Following a visit to Germany, he became particularly keen on oral translation, and he advocated “reading English into French *at sight*.” He felt that “translating at sight is a valuable exercise in learning any language, and one much neglected in England” (xi). Consequently, for his *Grammar* he chose examples of German and Latin syntax from various grammars, in particular from the *Public School Latin Grammar* (Kennedy, 1866). With this powerful philological backing the student was now ready to begin, though there seems little doubt that “translating at sight” was Armitage’s sop towards the more oral approaches that were being attempted in the 1870s. In most textbooks the Syntax section pointed directly towards translation, and it is in this section of most MFL grammars that longer sen-

tences for translation begin to appear.

3. Conclusion

The Latinate package — Orthography, Etymology, and Syntax — continued as the model for MFL grammars in Britain to the end of the nineteenth century, as late examples such as Bourdache (1884) and Barriball (1899) show. Put the other way round, very few French grammars of the nineteenth century were not in this format. To the many suggested reasons for the longevity of OES(P) grammars — classical domination, untrained teachers, the need to demonstrate mental discipline of MFLs, the architectural metaphor in pedagogy, the arrival of exams, etc. — this study would add that French grammars for Britain were influenced by practices in France. The Latinate *Nouvelle Grammaire Française* by Noël and Chapsal (1823) was still being reprinted into the 1860s, which meant that there was encouragement for the OES(P) format from the very centre of the French educational system. Even into the twentieth century the Latinate texts of Claude Augé still retained this format.

Although by the end of the nineteenth century French grammars began to look different, behind modern words like “lesson” lay the old sections on nouns, adjectives, and syntactic organisation. There were still rules to be learned, nouns to be declined, and so on. The only evident change was the establishment of the “lesson-and-exercise” format. This led grammarians to the idea of “mixed” lessons, in which two or more rules had to be manipulated at the same time. This sometimes led to hilarious juxtapositions, such as the translation exercise “The auburn children of the decayed woman had some new coats”, and “Is it not useless that they may call for lame, hunchback and dumb men?” (Bourdache, 1884: 36 & 134).

Before consigning the Latinate presentation of grammar to history, it

might be wise to see it in its own terms. First, the word-focused approach had a coherence and a logic that the pupil could easily grasp, and which accorded well with the way other subjects on the curriculum were presented. Second, the re-appearance of each of the parts of speech under the heading of their Syntax served as a massive review of everything that had been learned before. There was therefore a comprehensive recycling of material not unlike that recommended in modern curriculums. Third, the Latinate approach also reflected many of the realities of the situation in which MFLs were taught in the nineteenth century, particularly in the areas of staffing and pupil expectations. Teachers had to combat society's chauvinistic attitudes towards foreign countries, which was reflected in schools' snobbish attitudes towards MFLs, and had minimal resources to do it with — for example, the lack of a phonetic alphabet for most of the century. Consequently, the nineteenth-century Latinate approach to MFLs did not seem out of place to most of those involved, a point of irritation to those who wanted full-scale reforms.

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