

French pretensions

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Should we now include the French nasal vowel /ɔ̃/ in descriptions of English?

The ‘English’ have an ambiguous relationship with the language of their nearest neighbour, France. There is a history, ‘1066 and all that’. Christmas Day 2016 saw the 950th anniversary of the crowning at Westminster Abbey of the French Duke William of Normandy as King of England (not, please note, of ‘Britain’); William having defeated King Harold – and so the very last ‘English’ monarch – at the battle of Hastings. (The other ‘nations’ of these European off-shore islands have different trajectories.) Sooner or later the English at least would have to come to terms with French.

The Norman Conquest of 1066 was recorded, in the ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ in late Old English, by monks at Peterborough Cathedral some 50 years after the event. These extracts include words from Latin:

sancte (saint), *mæsse* (mass), *castel* (castle), *porte* (port) ...

but, as yet, nothing from French:

On þissum geare ... Ðā cōm Willelm eorl of Normandige in tō Pefenes ēa on sancte Michaelles -æfen; and sōna þæs hīe fēre wæron, worhton castel æt Hastinga porte. Þis wearð Haroldde cyninge gecydd, and hē gaderode þā micelne here, and cōm him tōgēanes æt þære hāran apuldran ... Ðær wearð ofslagen Harold cyning ... and fela gōdra manna þā Frenciscan āhton wælstōwe gewæld, eall swā him God ūde for folces synnum ...

Ðā on midwintres dæg hine hālgode tō cyninge Eladred arcebiscep on Westmynstre; and hē sealde him on hand mid Crīstes bēc, and ēac swōr, ær þām þe hē wolde þā corona him on hēafde settan, þæt hē wolde þisne þeodscipe swā wel healdan swā ænig cyning ætforan betst dyde, gif hīe him holde bēon woldon.¹

Old English comprised mixed West-Germanic dialects, akin to Low German, that developed in these European islands, with some subsequent North-Germanic additions from Scandinavian

incursions. And ‘French’ itself comprised distinct Norman and Parisian varieties, evident in such differentiated French doublets subsequently imported into English as *guarantee/warranty*, *guardian/warden* ... (Norman <w> /w/ marginal in standard French). Initially the two languages kept largely apart: the very small numbers of the new ruling elite speaking French; the conquered English continuing to speak their own language. But interaction required some kind of accommodation. What ensued was the slow transition in which English by the end of the 14th century was to replace French as the language of rule. It involved a process of assimilation not merely of ‘loan words’ but of substantial French additions to the lexicon of Middle English, as in the poetry of the late 14th century English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (note the French name). His characterisation of the Prioress in ‘The General Prologue’ to *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1387) marks the transition:

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frenssh of Paris was to hire unknowe.

(from Robinson, 1957)

French was relegated to the status of the prime ‘foreign’ language taught in English schools, and that now in decline.



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But the English are still trying to cope with French: when citing French names and titles in English speech; and still with what was originally French vocabulary now embedded in the language (how do you pronounce ‘garage’, ‘restaurant’, ‘Renaissance’/‘Renesance’ ... ?) A particular difficulty is how to deal in English with original French nasal vowels. French is rare among European languages in having nasal vowels, that is vowels partially produced through the nasal cavity as well as through the oral cavity though not closed by /m/ or /n/:

Les quatre voyelles ... sont appelées des voyelles nasales parce que, pour les articuler, une partie de l’air passe par le nez. Le français, à cet égard, fait un peu figure d’exception parmi les autres langues d’Europe puisque, avec lui, seuls le portugais et le polonais connaissent aussi des voyelles nasales distinctes des voyelles orales (appelées ainsi parce que tout l’air passe par la bouche).²

The four vowels are happily illustrated in ‘un/œ/ bon/ɔ̃/ vin/ɛ̃/ blanc’/ɑ̃/ (‘a nice white wine’), or perhaps less happily in ‘un/œ/ embonpoint’/ɑ̃/ɔ̃/ɛ̃/ (‘a certain stoutness’). These are generally represented in the writing system by a vowel letter, <a>, <e> ... plus a single nasal consonant letter, either <m> or <n>. But, in metropolitan French at least, there is little phonetic difference in the articulation of /œ/ and /ɛ̃/, which can be treated as the single phoneme /ɛ̃/ with only a handful of contrastive items:

Certains distinguent effectivement quatre voyelles nasales différentes, celles de un grand pain rond, mais ces personnes se font de plus en plus rares. Il existe en effet depuis plusieurs générations une tendance très générale à confondre, dans une même prononciation, la voyelle de un et celle de pain, confusion qui s’explique en particulier par la faible fréquence de la voyelle de un dans le lexique français.³

The difficulty is marked in the oddity of attempts by English radio and television announcers and presenters to affect French pronunciations when announcing French names and titles, often subsuming this set of nasal vowels into a single default form [ɔ̃], as generally represented by <o> plus <m> or <n> in French. This is strikingly illustrated in announcements about the French President, François Hollande, French /frɑ̃’swa ɔ̃’lɑ̃d/, so often rendered as [’frɔ̃(n)swa (h)ɒ’lɔ̃(n)d] (the brackets enclosing typically intrusive nasal consonants). There is no good reason for substituting [ɔ̃] for /ɑ̃/, except as an affectation, when

English /an/, as in [’franswa ’hɒlənd], is actually closer to the French /ɑ̃/.

This is a classic case of hypercorrection, a solecism substituting the single default form [ɔ̃], erroneously supposed authentic, for any other French nasal vowel in affecting French pronunciations, sometimes with grossly exaggerated French ‘r’s’: /r/, /ʁ/. Why so? Is this an articulatory problem, difficulty in articulating the appropriate French forms, or an auditory problem, difficulty in recognising them in the first place? Is it perhaps down to how French was learned in school? It is particularly noticeable when presenters cite French names and titles on the BBC Radio 3 classical music station, from which the following recent examples are taken. These substitute [ɔ̃] erroneously, with further oddities:

- in ‘lieu’ of /ɑ̃/: <an>, <am>, <en>, ...
 - when English /an/ would be closer to the French in any case
- names: France Musique
 César Franck
 Franck Martin
 Alexandre Tarot
 Jean François
 Suisse Romande
 Saint-Saens – sometimes with an erroneous final [s]
 André Previn – but he’s American!
- titles: ‘Moments musicaux’
 ‘Les Indes Gallantes’
 ‘Danse fantastique’
 ‘Chanson profond’
 ‘Jeux d’enfants’
 ‘légende’
 ‘allemande’
 ‘La Dame blanche’ – compare English ‘blanch’
- in ‘lieu’ of /ɛ̃/: <in>, <ien>, <en>
 - Couperin
 - Les Musiciens du Louvre
 - Poulenc

But default [ɔ̃], in this context at least, is also infecting other well-embedded words in other contexts in English, as variants of pronunciations otherwise lacking vowel nasalisation,

ensemble
encore
genre
 Renaissance
enclave
lingerie

Odder still is an English actor’s rendering of the title of Eliot’s poem ‘La Figlia Che Piange’ in a

reading of T. S. Eliot's *Collected Poems* (BBC Radio 4, 1 January 2017), as if 'piange' were a French word *[pjã̃ʒ], albeit with what would be that erroneous default vowel in any case. It is of course an Italian word /pi'andʒe/, easy enough for any English speaker; Italian, like English, has no nasal vowels, but that's another story.

So an Anglicism, [ɔ̃]: now not just an odd local variant in a very particular register, but becoming a more general feature of 'English' English at least?

Notes

1 'In this year ... Then came William earl [Duke] of Normandy into Pevensey on Saint Michael's Eve; and, as soon as they were ready, built a castle at the port of Hastings. King Harold was informed of this and gathered a great force and advanced towards him at the grey apple tree [the site of the Battle of Hastings] ...

There Harold the King was slain ... and many good men; and the French ruled over the place of slaughter, all as God promised for the people's sin. ... Then on Christmas Day archbishop Ealdred consecrated him king in Westminster; but before he would set the crown on his head he gave a pledge on the Gospels,

and also swore an oath that he would govern this nation according to the best practice of his predecessors if they would be loyal to him.' (Arden, 1951: 11)

2 'The four vowels ... are labelled nasal vowels because, to articulate them, some part of the breath passes through the nose. In this respect French is something of an exception among European languages, since, with French, only Portuguese and Polish feature nasal vowels as distinct from oral vowels (so called because all the breath passes through the mouth).' (Walter, 1988: 174)

3 'Some people still distinguish four different nasal vowels, those of *un grand pain rond* ['a large round loaf'], but such people are increasingly rare. For several generations the general tendency has been to conflate the vowel of *un* with that of *pain*, a confusion which can be explained in particular by the minimal frequency of the vowel of *un* in French vocabulary.' (Walter, 1988: 174)

References

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