As both a written volume and a dramatic performance, the *Rabinal Achi* is a living text that continues to express the relation of Rabinal to its ancestral past and its surrounding world.

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WENDY AYRES-BENNETT, *Sociolinguistic variation in seventeenth-century French: Methodology and case studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xii, 267. Hb $95.00

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Wendy Ayres-Bennett (WAB hereafter) is a British French-language scholar, well known to philologists and historical grammarians. She is an authority on 17th-century language matters, in particular on Vaugelas and the *remarqueurs* (authors of observations on *le bon usage*, destined for those wishing to speak good French at a time when it was the mother tongue of a minority living in France). In this most recent contribution, she departs from preconceived ideas and typical disciplinary boundaries by using sociolinguistics to look at the history of the language in a project that brings to mind the work of Milroy 1992 on English and Lodge 1993, 2004 on French.

The book has several objectives. First, in the face of the distorted image given by literary texts alone, which equates standardization with the elimination of variation, it sets out to inform on the diversity of usage in this period with data concerning variation. WAB considers that ordinary and nonstandard usages in the 17th century can shed light on the perception of literary texts, leading to better understanding of genres through the status of the variants. The second objective concerns the methodological consequences of the study of the sources from a sociohistorical perspective. When the only documents at our disposal are written, where is the best place to look for traces of ordinary language use? How should we go about interpreting nonstandard forms without precise knowledge of the demographic and social attributes of speakers and information concerning the context of use? How should we distinguish between *populaire*, *familier*, *vulgaire*, and simply *oral*? With the changing semantic and pragmatic values of forms, judgments run the risk of being anachronistic. The third objective is to confront variation and change. Variation in the past allows us to consider continuity and discontinuity, and to see how new forms enter the norm, as well as how variants disappear. Broadening the sources used has the result that certain features considered to be recent are found in the historical texts, challenging the apparently innovative nature of contemporary spoken French.

The reconstitution of the history of ordinary language use is a question that historical accounts of language have often overlooked, preferring to concentrate on literary texts or the language of recognised figures. The study of the 17th century in France gives rise to certain important questions on the use of documents, given the particular richness of metalinguistic sources (observations and *remarques*, grammars, dictionaries, commentaries). WAB makes extensive use of Frantext, a large corpus of literary texts. Her project links up with the reflection by Ernst 1985, who looked at six types of sources in investigating the history of ordinary oral language: metalinguistic texts, historical transcriptions of authentic speech (such as the accounts of Héroard, the tutor of the Dauphin and future Louis XIII), model dialogues in didactic texts, direct speech in plays, direct speech in other genres (especially narratives); and finally comparative reconstruction, beginning with what was the French spoken in the 17th and 18th centuries, bearing in mind what it has become today as a mother tongue in different parts of the francophone world and in different creoles. These different sources have to be assessed before deciding what importance should be attributed to them.

The work comprises six chapters. Besides a methodology-based introduction and a usefully synthetic, albeit brief conclusion, the four main chapters are arranged according to given "pre-verbal" parameters of variation: speech vs. writing (chapter 2), social and stylistic variation (chapter 3), gender differences (aspects of women's language, chapter 4), and variation and change according to age (chapter 5).

Each chapter contains a large portion of "case studies," which serve to apply the general reflection to specific phonological, morphological, syntactic and lexical phenomena. More than half of the case studies are concerned with morphology and syntax, which is worthy of note given the degree of neglect from which these aspects typically suffer in the study of nonstandard language, where pronunciation and lexis are generally favored. For example, 22 of the 42 pages comprising chapter 2 are devoted to case studies concerning pronoun usage (in particular *on*), verb morphology (tense usage and verbal periphrases like *être après* + infinitive to express durative aspect), and interrogatives (*est-ce que* vs. intonation). These forms, often regarded as characteristics of contemporary spoken French, can be used to test hypotheses on the evolution of the language: To what extent is contemporary spoken French innovative? Throughout the different chapters, such aspects as style labels in dictionaries (in particular, terms given the label *bas* 'low'), pronunciation features such as the evolution of [we] to [wa], spelling, neologisms, elliptical constructions said to impede clarity in expression, agreement, word order for clitic forms, and negation are dealt with. For each question, the evidence from different types of sources is assessed, with the objective being, in the words of Milroy 1992 to "make the best of bad data." Through the constant mixing of historical and contemporary facts, the author's reflection avoids treating the history of language as though it were the sole con-

cern of diachronic linguists. In the case studies, WAB shows the extent of her remarkable cultural knowledge and critical rigor, analyzing details with prudence, precision, and finesse.

While the basic plan for the book, being based on extralinguistic categories of variation, appears to be quite simple, it comes up against certain difficulties. Some of these, inherent to all variationist undertakings using extralinguistic features as a structuring principle, are discussed by WAB. Such is the case, for example, with the question of multiple identities: Given that external parameters are not mutually exclusive, the classification can vary when we ask what is typical of what (Do we classify the Dauphin as child or noble?). Other problems arise in connection with the design itself of a sociolinguistic project based on apparent parallels between external categories: It is only in the early conceptions of variationist sociolinguistics that style, social class, sex, and age are all treated as parallel categories. Another issue is the dissimilar nature of the different chapters: chapter 4 is not concerned with the variable "sex" but rather with the position of women, their ignorance or sensibility, *préciosité* and *bon goût* in conversation; and chapter 5 is an evaluation, of obvious methodological worth, of the confrontation between "change in real time" and "change in apparent time."

Thus, the objectives of WAB are remarkably well fulfilled with regard to historical aspects and grammatical description, with rigorous and intellectually sound linguistic argumentation (when the data are lacking or when no obvious conclusions can be made, the author states as much); with regard to the terminological precision (e.g. uses of *oral*, *parlé*, *discours*, *conversation*, *entretien*); and last, concerning the data, with regard to the role attributed to the convergence/divergence of the different evidence. This impressive undertaking, which carefully draws together data from different sources, brings to mind the remark by Lodge concerning the many unexploited resources, more abundant for French than for English, many of which remain uncatalogued or even unknown.

As for actual variation, there are many interesting reflections: warnings on the risks of considering as nonstandard all those features that appear in a text classified as nonstandard; discussion of the application of the variationist model to syntax where, behind a reflection on the variable, we see emerging the role attributed to different levels of variability and the possibility of semantic equivalence; questioning the validity of statistical measures, over which detailed consideration of the functions and meanings of the forms is preferred. However, we do not learn much about variation itself. It is true that WAB's approach conforms to the most external aspects of sociolinguistics (although it is not certain that it would be possible to do otherwise with historical sources). Thus, while WAB paints good social portraits (e.g., of the salons, in chapter 4), she does not get to the heart of sociolinguistic reflection.

Interest is being renewed in the 17th century, a period traditionally considered to be the most standardizing and the most purist in the history of French, and a key moment in defining the ideology of modern linguistics. From this

work by WAB, we get a more complex view of this period, which, while characterized by the installation of language prescriptivism, ideology of the standard, and the desire for stability, is not insensitive to variation. This work by WAB is also an occasion to note the contribution of sociolinguistics (understanding what speakers do with language), a discipline that offers a specific viewpoint within a general linguistic reflection, challenging homogeneity in language use through the study of speakers, registers, and contexts, whatever the given period.

On this score, this work is most welcome, with particular qualities in the areas of linguistic argumentation and reflection on the consideration of data. This detailed specialist book, at times dense, with rather unequal chapters, will certainly be a reference for the history of French in the domain of methodology (consideration of different data) and in terms of its general linguistic reflection.

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SCHNEIDER, EDGAR W., KATE BURRIDGE, BERND KORTMANN, RAJEND MESTHRIE, & CLIVE UPTON (eds.), *A handbook of varieties of English: A multimedia reference tool*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2004. Vol. 1, xvii, 1168 pp.; vol. 2, xvii, 1226 pp. Hb/CD-ROM $720.

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These two volumes and CD-ROM form an impressive and informative survey of all major English varieties currently spoken. The aim, in the words of the editors, is "documenting and mapping the structural variation among (spontaneously spoken) non-standard varieties of English." Various standard Englishes, such as Received Pronunciation (RP), are also described, although it is not clear how the editors distinguished a national standard from a national variety. These standard varieties are used as "implicit standard[s] of comparison" for most varieties. Although this perspective might seem surprising in a descriptive work, upon further thought this explicit acknowledgment is refreshing. In many studies, the use of a standard variety for comparison usually remains implicit, rather than being acknowledged at the outset.