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Book Reviews

Ayres-Bennett, Wendy and Jones, Mari C. (eds), *The French Language and Questions of Identity* (Studies in Linguistics 4), London: Legenda, an imprint of the Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2007, 244 pp. 978 1 904350 68 2
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This is an exciting book because it looks at various sociolinguistic problems from an unusual angle: instead of explaining them in terms of social and demographic factors, the aim is to study the attitudes they evoke. Variation is therefore no longer seen in terms of the inherent stable qualities of the individual but as a means of establishing (often shifting) boundaries with others. This more psychological and anthropological approach has led to new discoveries. In some cases the research is complete, while in other cases it is a work in progress, without this detracting from its merits since the aim was to open new horizons. Similarly some chapters deal with topics which may appear more important than others, but again this does not matter since 'small' may be both interesting and indicative.

The book starts from the premise that 'identity' implies identification with a norm, hence the first three sections on institutional, regional and social norms, while the problem of competing identities is addressed in the fourth. Each section tends to start with a fairly broad or theoretical approach to the topic, while those which follow tend to illustrate certain related points, both from – and this is relatively rare – a diachronic and synchronic point of view. Since a detailed critique of each chapter would be too lengthy, I shall simply point to the areas covered as a 'taster'.

In the first section, G. Souffiot's examination of the emergence of 17th century norms points to a far more fluid picture than is usually presumed to be the case. Nonetheless, C. Wionet's and N. Bouverot's studies of dictionary markers indicative of register show that there were – and still are – norms that must be followed in order to gain membership of the French language community. This community eventually became symbolic of the French nation, but without the story stopping there since, as J. E. Joseph shows through a study of Alsatian, language is now also seen as a human right. This new concept is, however, in competition with the abstract concept of an Hexagonal French norm, still very much in evidence (see E. Esch's study of language perception in a *lycée* in Senegal).

The second section deals with the forms of identity linked with Picard, now considered to be a 'language' but previously known as a dialect or *patois*. It is used in an area which does not correspond exactly to the administrative area of the same name, which leads to complex problems of identification (see J. Landrecies). Picard is also spoken in the Nord-Pas-de-Calais, but there it is referred to less seriously as *ch'ti* or *ch'timi*. D. Hornsby studies its use as a means of expressing identity among 'dialect semi-speakers', who are seen as mirroring a transition phase from the mining society which once spoke *ch'ti* to a more open one, while T. Pooley's analysis of *ch'ti* in its Lille heartland leads him to conclude that attributing to such a form of speech the image-enhancing label 'language' can also be alienating, particularly if the label itself refers to a different region.

The third section deals with language as a sign of social identity. The *Tu/Vous* distinction is re-examined in terms of personal and social identity and affiliations (P. Gardner-Chloros). The concept of forms of address is broadened in the next two chapters to include insults since they too act as social regulators (D. Lagorgette's approach is mainly theoretical and diachronic, while R. Baines' is purely synchronic). This is followed by K. Beeching's study of the increased use of the stigmatized post-rhematic *quoi* which points to a levelling of social hierarchies in the late 20th century. The last chapter examines the emblematic use of *septante* and *nonante* by French speakers living in Switzerland.

The fourth section deals with competing identities. D. Cowling highlights both the difficulty in distinguishing between code switching and borrowing in relation to Italian in 16th century France, and how a lack of purism came to be seen as unpatriotic. B. Von Gemmingen, in a similarly historical vein, gives an account of the preservation of French by Huguenots in Berlin, and its eventual decline as a symbol of identity. With D. Marley, the reader is back to the present with a study of the communities with which French nationals of Maghrebian origin tend to identify. (A side issue to emerge is the often unintentionally offensive nature of *'beur'* when used by other French nationals.) In the final chapter A. Valdman examines the complex problems faced by those trying to revitalise French in Louisiana.

Finally, F. Gadet's '*Envoi*', a kind of post-face, is excellent in highlighting the theory underlying the study of identity as expressed through language usage. Altogether a delightful book, full of fascinating information and new insights, presented in a highly readable form.

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