

Un-Teaching French in Ontario

Method of Instruction Necessitated in Schools by University Matriculation Requirements is Best Way to Prevent Pupils Ever Learning It

By STEPHEN LEACOCK.

It requires no little hardihood in these days to lift up one's voice in criticism of the sinless Province of Ontario. The reputation which it has long since achieved is itself a bulwark against the babble of noxious tongues. It requires no proof to show that in the Province of Ontario the human race has probably reached a higher stage of morality than has yet been achieved since Adam and Eve lived in Mesopotamia. Anyone who has been privileged to spend a Sunday afternoon in Toronto will bear ready testimony to the fact.

Nor is the present article directed in any way towards injuring a reputation so well established. It has no other purpose than to discuss why it is that the people in Ontario cannot talk French. In other words, this essay is purely a technical, educational discussion such as a University professor ought to be privileged to write. It is intended to be of interest only to those who have been brought into contact with the peculiar problem which it discusses. But even these people are probably very numerous.

The essential aspect of the problems is this. In Ontario most educated people have tried to learn French. None of them have succeeded. There are in the Province some 150 high schools and collegiate institutes all busily engaged in teaching French. Not a single pupil in any of them, learns a single word of it—in any real sense. The University of Toronto examined at its last matriculation some 1,000 students in what was called an examination in French and declared that they had passed the examination. In reality not a single one of these matriculants knew anything about French whatever—in the real sense. The matriculant could, that is to say, if one gave him time, mechanically translate with a pen and ink some written English words into some written French words. But this has but little connection with knowing French. On the contrary—it is a first-class way and method of making certain never to know it.

It is to be noticed that what has just been said has been said in absolute and superlative terms admitting of no exception. It is meant exactly so. The only apparent exception that can be made is in the case of young people who have come from France or from Quebec knowing French, or some French, already. Even these exceptions are apparent rather than real. All the young persons concerned would be badly damaged by their contact with the French instruction in Ontario, and if they persisted in studying long enough would be in danger of losing their previous real knowledge of French altogether.

No criticism is here offered against the efficiency and the industry of the many hundred people who teach French in the schools of Ontario. They do what they are compelled to do to meet the strange and disastrous kind of test applied to their pupils. They have to prepare their pupils to pass the matriculation examination of the universities; and they do so. Some of their pupils even pass with distinction; others carry away what is called honors, and are so badly damaged thereby for learning French that a residence of ten years in Paris would hardly effect a complete recovery of their native faculties.

And the most amazing thing about the situation is that if Anatole France and Monsieur Poincaré were sent up to write of an Ontario matriculation examination in French there is not

the slightest chance that either of them would head the list: they would be beaten right and left by girls from Seaforth High School who never saw the red wings of the Moulin Rouge, and by boys from the Hamilton Collegiate Institute who wouldn't know enough real French to buy a cup of tea in the Café de la Paix. Indeed it is doubtful if Anatole France and Poincaré would pass at all. The whole examination being a test in English, they would probably be ploughed and have to be put under the care of an Ontario special teacher for six months.

The point that I am endeavouring to make and reinforce with all the emphasis of which I am capable is this: The ability to translate into English in writing is not a knowledge of French. More than this, it is the very opposite of it. It involves, if exercised persistently and industriously, a complete inability ever to have a knowledge of French. The English gets in the way. The French words are for ever prevented from acquiring a real meaning in connection with the objects and actions indicated because the mind has been trained always and forever and hopelessly to associate them with English words instead of with things. The process is fatal. And the whole system is not only worthless, but it is a fraud and an imposition practised upon all those who learn French in the schools of the Province of Ontario.

For the proof of it I appeal to the candid confession of all those who were trained in this machine. If any of them happen to read this article (and the growing popularity of the *Bookman* renders it likely that a great many of them will read it) then I appeal to such people for corroboration of what I say. All that they learned was directed towards nailing the English word so tight to the French one that nothing can ever pry them apart.

I, myself, speak of what I know. When I was a little boy in England I learned to use a few small phrases in French, such as "Bonjour, Monsieur" and "Au revoir," in the proper and real way; not connecting them with any link to English words but letting them spring out of the occasion. Anybody who understands the matter will understand what I mean. An Ontario pedant will not. Later on I learned French in Ontario and entered, traversed, and left the Provincial University with all sorts of distinction in it. Part of the teaching, like parts of the curate's egg in the bishop's table, was excellent no doubt; but the base of it was worthless; and it had all been undermined and spoiled and for ever rendered futile by the unspeakable matriculation examination which preceded it and which was a necessary preliminary to entrance to the French classes. I mean it literally and absolutely when I say that I knew more French in the real sense of knowing it when I was a child of six years in England than when I was given first-class honors at graduation by the University of Toronto. In the first case I knew a little: in the second case I knew not a single word. All the energy and industry and determination that I had put into my college work; all the interest and fascination that I felt for the language: all the pride that I could have felt in really knowing and using it—was dashed to pieces against the stone wall of the barrier erected in my path. When I graduated I could not use a single word of French without thinking of English. I had to begin painfully and wearily all over again at the very bottom. Some-

how I had stumbled upon the secret of a true beginning, and I began to try to collate in my mind the French words and the objects and ideas and to exclude the English. But it was hard work. Toronto has left its fatal mark deep stamped upon my brain. But now at last, twenty-nine years after my graduation, thank Heaven, I am beginning to forget. The light is breaking. If I can forget a little more I shall soon be able to speak French as well as a Montreal cabman talks English. More than that I do not ask. But for my training at Toronto I might have spoken French with the easy fluency with which the girls behind the notion counters of the Montreal department stores rip off their alternate languages. But for such higher competence I can only have a despairing admiration. It is not for me. Yet let me speak as the cabman and the car conductor speak and I am content to depart in peace. For I shall know that if a French angel (such is the kind I should prefer) opens the gate to me and says "D'où venez-vous?" I shall answer "Je viens de Montréal," without first framing the thought in English.

Let us consider a little further the matter under discussion. The whole of the teaching of French in Ontario is directed towards passing the matriculation examination at the colleges. This examination is conducted on paper in English. It has therefore absolutely no connection with the use of the ear as a means of hearing language. In fact, language in Ontario is regarded as a thing seen but not heard. I am told that people from Ontario when they land at Calais or Dieppe are often seen to grasp their ears at the first tingling of the new sensation of hearing a language spoken. Moreover, the examination in question consists entirely, or almost so, of writing out English translations of French words and of translating written English words into French ones. I have just looked through several annual volumes of the paper inflicted at the matriculation of the University of Toronto and I see no other test than this. Even if a few other forms of exercise were introduced it would make no difference. The overwhelming preponderance of the translation test would vitiate every other.

The typical form of matriculation test is to hand out to the candidate a rapid fire series of silly looking little grammatical difficulties involving a queer sequence of pronouns or something of the sort. Some such exercise as this is given:

Translate into French. Speak to us of it. Do not speak of it to them with me. Let him have some of it for them. Lend it to us, but do not lend it to them. Etc., etc., etc.

I should like to put Anatole France and a Montreal cabman down in front of this and see what utter hash they would make of it. The truth is that ability to do this kind of translation-gymnastics, this leaping in and out in a kind of egg-shell dance among the pronouns, can only be accomplished at a dreadful expense of damage in other directions. The wretched literalism involved is absolutely fatal. I do not say that a person who really knew French and knew English could not translate these stupid things. He might, but the prospect would make him tired. And probably in about half a page of this sort of stuff he would make a slip or two in whichever language was not his mother tongue. But notice. The highly trained girl from Seaforth High School (or is it a collegiate institute?) who has never seen the sails of the Moulin Rouge will make no slip at all. She will translate with absolute accuracy every last one of these rotten-looking sentences. Yet if the examiner said to her in French, "My dear child, you have answered admirably, come and have lunch with me at the Café Americain," she would blush the ruby red of detected ignorance.

But this juggling with pronouns and idioms is only a part of the idiocy of the Ontario translation system. There is plenty more to it. The

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