

Un-Teaching French in Ontario

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pupil is not only taught to translate the ordinary common words that he would really need if he were ever, poor soul, actually going to use French, but he is taught right at the outset of his instruction a string of words, or rather the translation of a string of words, that he is never conceivably going to use at all. Just because these words have a peculiar plural they are dragged in at the very opening of the pupil's acquaintance with the language. Most of them he will never see again, except of course on an Ontario examination paper. Bal, carnaval, chacal, nopal, regal, cal, have, so it appears, irregular plurals. Who cares if they have? The way to learn an irregular plural is by happening to want to use the word often enough to learn it. That is the way in which an English child learns that the plural of foot is feet, and a French child that the plural of bal is bals. Similarly the words bail, émail, corail, soupirail, vantage, vitrail, have irregular plurals but what of that? Wait till one wants to use them or runs up against them in the course of speaking or reading French. It is awful, and it is futile, to learn them in a list; and it is still more awful to parade the list on an examination paper as if knowledge of it were a real test of the degree of attainment of a person learning French. But no: the Ontario examination paper solemnly grinds out, "Have you put the callosities of the jackals under the air-holes of the stained glass windows?"

Oh, help! help!

Surely any person a reason and common sense can see that the standard or criterion thus set up is absolutely artificial.

Or take the verbs. The unhappy Ontario pupil learns them in a list. The Montreal cabman learns them by their use. When the Ontario pupil proposes to say "We shall see" in French, he starts off from the English "to see": French *voir*: future *je verrai, tu verras, il verra*—ha! ha!—he's getting near it now—*nous verrons*, we shall see! Triumph! Now the cabman (whether French by birth or English) has learned that group of sounds, "*nous verrons*," in a lump, associated with the idea. Or else he hasn't learned it at all. But if he has, he knows it and uses it in the real true sense of language. The Ontario matriculant, wanting to use it, stands dumb with a perfect fury of rapid conjugation boiling up in his mind till it boils over as *nous verrons*—half a minute too late for use.

Learned thus, language is a mere futility, a gymnastic drill, a waste. It cannot be understood, nor spoken, nor ever, on such terms as these, read with pleasure. All reading is converted into mental translation and merely sets up a sense of weariness in the brain.

Let me repeat that the whole origin and blame of this gigantic failure lies at the door of those who are responsible for the matriculation examination. Change that and all changes with it. Let us see how this could be done. Suppose there were a test in which the English language plays

no part. Imagine that an examiner dictated an ordinary page out of an ordinary French book and made the candidates write it down. I will guarantee that there would be no *nopal, regal* or *cal* in it. This would indicate at once whether the candidate's ear had been trained to understand French sounds. In this test Anatole France and Raymond Poincaré would stand clear ahead of all the girls in the Seaford High School. Then suppose that the examiner dictated a lot of simple questions and had the candidates write down the answers—all in French; or that the examiner asked the candidates (in French) to write out any one of such and such well known stories or events, things so well known that anybody must know some of them. Or suppose finally that the examiner were permitted and paid by the college to talk with each candidate in French for about five minutes. At the end of such tests as these there would be an utter and absolute and complete weeding out of all the pupils who learn their French upon the present plan. They would be nowhere.

Moreover, if French were examined thus it would as an immediate consequence have to be taught in such a way that each little bit acquired was a real and actual acquirement. Complete knowledge and use of two languages is hardly ever attained. The circumstances must be propitious and the effort, continuous. But anybody who knows one French phrase so as to use it of itself knows already something—more in fact than many Ontario pupils after a year of study.—From the January Canadian Bookman.

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