

H-France Review Vol. 18 (July 2018), No. 156

Michael P. Fitzsimmons, *The Place of Words: The Académie Française and its Dictionary during an Age of Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. xv + 259 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$74.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780190644536.

Review by Robert A. Schneider, Indiana University, Bloomington.

If we could imagine the sort of index for *The Place of Words* we don't really expect to find in a scholarly monograph, one of the most populated entries would surely be "frustration; see Dictionary of the Académie française." For if nothing else characterizes attempts to produce successive editions of a dictionary of the French language from the Academy's founding in 1635 to the July Monarchy of Louis Philippe, it is the grindingly slow pace and constant set-backs, the repeated failures, the logistical logjams, the personal and political conflicts, the institutional contretemps all borne out in Michael Fitzsimmons's meticulous account of this history. Somehow, those responsible for commissioning the various editions, and even the compilers themselves, seemed constitutionally unable to recognize the daunting scale of their charge. The first generation of academicians, who in 1639 commenced work on a dictionary that would serve to "perfect" the French language, immediately got bogged down on the letter "a," taking more than another decade to get to "i." For the next two centuries, the pace never really quickened.

Of course, the problem was not simply the inherent difficulty and ambitious reach of the task. It rested in the contradiction between the rapid rhythms of political change and the necessarily slow gestation of any collective linguistic project, a contradiction especially acute during a revolutionary period when the expectations generated by the former guaranteed frustration in producing the latter. In *The Place of Words* this contradiction fashions the very nature of the account.

The book proceeds along two intertwined paths, each illustrating that the travails of this project were as much political as intellectual. One is the fate of the Académie française itself, from its founding in 1635 through the revolutionary period and beyond. This is, then, a case study of a quintessentially ancien régime institution, patronized by the monarchy, confronting a Revolution that ultimately sought to wipe the historical slate clean of everything associated with the old order.

Interestingly, however, the Academy did not immediately suffer the fate of other privileged bodies on the night of 4 August 1789. It survived the comprehensive reforms of the National Assembly, only to be abolished along with the monarchy in 1792. Three years later, however, the leaders of the Directory expressed some regret for the disappearance of the academies.

Consequently, the Institut national, “a monument to the unity of human knowledge,” was created, conceived as an even more ambitious successor to the Académie française (p. 88). Under the Consulate, there were renewed efforts to reestablish the Academy. Some of these efforts were the work of its former members, who resented their exclusion from the Institut, (and aided by the support of Lucien Bonaparte), but others saw in this effort an attempt to restore monarchical institutions. A sort of compromise was reached in the reorganization of the Institut national into three “classes,” with the second responsible for French language and literature, which included the production of a new French dictionary. By 1807, Napoleon was referring to this second class as the Académie française. The restoration of the Bourbon monarchy meant the academy’s formal re-establishment, which, however, was abruptly nullified with Bonaparte’s return to Paris during The Hundred Days. A “Second Restoration” followed in 1816. Unlike previous regime changes, the advent of the July Monarchy in 1830 did not appear to trouble the institutional integrity of the Academy. Throughout, rivalries and resentments between new and expelled members marked this tumultuous history, along with different perspectives on the political status of the French language and the prospects for language reform. And while the academy in its various incarnations managed to preserve for itself the privilege of creating and editing a French dictionary, there were others who strove to assume the task. In 1806, under the Empire, a semi-official body emerged, the Athénée de la langue française, which not only styled itself as a more “popular” version of the Académie française, holding open meetings, but also espoused a more imperialistic vision for the French language.

The more interesting investigative path of this book takes us to the Academy’s main charge, the creation of a French dictionary. Here Fitzsimmons deftly navigates through the various editions, focusing mainly on the fourth, published in 1762, and especially the fifth, which appeared in 1798. Indeed, the controversy over the fifth edition takes up a good part of the book. In short, the problem with this publication, long in the making, was that it virtually ignored the Revolution—literally so. The entry “revolution” never mentioned the one that happened to occur in France, dwelling rather on the upheavals in ancient Rome, seventeenth-century England, and eighteenth-century Sweden. Moreover, this edition was informed by sentiments of men like Jean-François de la Harpe, a former member of the Academy, who were convinced that the “abuse of language had played a role in the bringing about of the Terror” (p. 91). In a telling commentary, La Harpe drew a distinction between the universality of the French language and the particularity of the language of the Revolution, a distinction that strikes at the heart of trying to fix a language in the face of rapid political and cultural change. In his view, the discourse of Revolution created such noxious novelties as “fanaticism,” a world “never heard” before, which only served the “Jacobin distortion and manipulation” of the French language (p. 92). With these sorts of sentiments forming the backdrop of the publication of the fifth edition, it is no wonder that it struck many (in the words of one reviewer) as a “posthumous monument to royalism” (p. 99). Even the hasty addition of a supplement to this edition failed to satisfy critics. As Fitzsimmons notes in a brief statistical breakdown of the added words, these pages contained only a fraction of the new words created by the Revolution (p. 111).

While insufficiently revolutionary or even republican for some, for others, and especially Napoleon, the fifth edition along with its supplement still evoked the “principles of 1789,” and this was why he was eager to see it superseded. By 1805, a commission was at work on a new dictionary which Napoleon compared to the Civil Code: It would be a “literary code,” another feature of his beneficent rule, not only for France but for all of Europe. On another occasion,

however, he expressed a much more caustic view, declaring that the Academy's relationship with politics amounted to "no more than the rules of grammar have with the art of war" (p. 166).

The most interesting aspect of this well-researched, modestly conceived monograph is the account of the failure of the dictionary of 1798 (the fifth edition) to embody the changes in language of the preceding revolutionary decade. Many, to be sure, were happy that words associated with the radical phase of the Revolution were absent in its pages, but others, such as Abbé Grégoire, who after Thermidor no longer espoused a revolutionary language, still wanted to "emancipate [French] from the royal and aristocratic heritage in which they believed it had been held under the Old Regime" (p. 115). The dictionary even failed to include the quite meaningful and widely-acknowledged neologism "ancien régime," emblematic of the historical break created by the Revolution. But Napoleon might have had a point. What was the real impact of these dictionaries in particular and the Académie française in general on the tenor of French public life?

To demonstrate the expectations, differences, and frustrations over a dictionary's capacity either to include or efface revolutionary discourse is interesting, certainly worthy of a monograph of this sort, especially as rendered by an accomplished historian of the Revolution such as Michael Fitzsimmons. But this still begs the question of a dictionary's impact. We might think of this genre of publication in two ways, following Clifford Geertz: it is certainly a "map of," but it is a "map for?" As evidence of the often differing values, interests, and ideological positions of a certain stratum of the elite, the history of the French dictionary reveals a lot. (And some of the most detailed pages of this book argue convincingly that the government's claim to "own" the dictionary, a claim secured in protracted legal contest, was tantamount to its proprietary relationship over the French language.) But that these dictionaries played a role in shaping French as a living language is less clear. Towards the end of *The Place of Words*, Fitzsimmons makes the incontrovertible claim that "more than any single event in French history, the Revolution nationalized the French language within France and spread it to a wider population beyond the borders of France as well" (p. 181). Whether any French dictionary produced by the Académie française played a fundamental role in this process is a somewhat different matter.

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