

TESTING LINGUISTIC PURITY MYTH WITH FIELD SURVEYS

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For a long time, Oil dialectology has been embarrassed by the heavy weight of Standard French on its “playground”. The goal of dialect specialists was to gather, as far as possible, rare or archaic words, and to avoid Gallicisms, which despite of their efforts appeared nevertheless in field surveys.

In particular, we will question the notion of “good informant” in linguistic geography studies dealing with the dialects spoken in the North of the Oil area (Picard and Walloon dialects, mostly), in order to evaluate the representativeness of the data gathered in linguistic atlases. Did such material ever reflect the real practices of dialect speakers? To which degree has the underlying sociolinguistic ideology affected, over time, the practices of dialect specialists and, as a consequence, the results of their field investigations? To answer such questions, we will have a closer look at the data published in atlases such as ALF, ALW and ALPIC.

As for the “standard French words” that appear in these atlases, we think they can be valuable, even if their presence raises some issues. Thus, as early as 1921, Oscar Bloch recognized in his survey dealing with the penetration of French in the Southern Vosges that it was not easy to evaluate the dialectal value of the data gathered through French questionnaires. He minimized this issue arguing that, due to the large amount of data, one can disregard without much inconvenience the dubious cases (p. 6). Should we then deny any individual value to the data gathered in atlases? We will try to identify the criteria that allow one to operate a partition between the elements belonging to the target-language and the ersatz generated by the questionnaires. Only after such an analysis will it be possible to explain which lessons can be learned from this comparison.

Finally, the study of intertwined connections between French and vernacular varieties naturally brings us to question the notion of language itself. Can the delimitation criteria be only scalar? To which extent is the traditional view of dialect history in the Oil area wrong, or at least too simplistic? It is important to confront fragile linguistic criteria with sociolinguistic data. Following Éloy (1997), we will consider alternative scenarios to incorporate speakers’ representations and linguistic consciousness in dialectal studies.

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