Redefining the Culture Wars:
Furetière and the Académie française

by
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France in the late 17th century was marked by cultural struggles of great moment, of which the best known is the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes” (1687–1715). Usually regarded by literary historians as a tiff over whether classical antiquity or the reign of Louis XIV produced better authors, it is recast convincingly by Joan DeJean as an epoch–making struggle between elite absolutism and nascent democratic tendencies in the Republic of Letters. In *Ancients and Moderns: Culture Wars and the Making of a Fin de Siècle* (1997), DeJean argues that the conflict that polarized the Académie française—pitting the traditionalist camp led by misogynist, authoritarian Nicolas Despréaux–Boileau against Charles Perrault and the proponents of critical independence—announced the French Enlightenment. As evidence, she points to a burgeoning public interest in literary matters beginning in the 1670s, a phenomenon she dates several decades earlier than does Habermas in his influential account of the constitution of a public sphere for literature and politics. While DeJean’s scholarship is learned and her response to Habermas compelling and significant, she does omit to cite another polemic which divided the Académie française and captured the interest of the literate public just a few years before the “Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes”: the tumultuous row between Antoine Furetière and the Académie over the right to publish a dictionary. At stake in the “Querelle des dictionnaires” was the authority to adjudicate in linguistic matters: to determine what, i.e. whose, French was official, who should be silenced, and who should make this call. What is more, a consideration of the “Querelle des dictionnaires” brings to light facts which call into question the culturally democratic impulses and practices which DeJean imputes to Perrault and his fellow Moderns of the Académie française. Ultimately, if one wished to quibble with DeJean over who fired the first salvo in the French public sphere, one might instead nominate Furetière’s public prosecution of his case as the harbinger of Enlightened demands for freer circulation of
ideas and texts and the loosening of the exclusive control over cultural production and criticism by Old Regime institutions.

“[N]ettoyer la langue des ordures qu’elle avait contractées” was the mission of the Académie française, created in 1635 by Richelieu (Pellisson 2: 23). To this end, the royal corporation would not only police literature but also produce an officially sanctioned dictionary, whose model for language was “le bon usage,” defined by Vaugelas as “la façon de parler de la plus saine partie de la Cour, conformément à la façon d’écrire de la plus saine partie des auteurs du temps.” Charged with compiling the dictionary, Vaugelas expounded his theories in the best-selling Remarques sur la langue française (1647) Purchased by new nobles anxious not to appear provincial or common as they entered the Court at Paris, by salon–goers desirous of impressing the hostess with their urbanity, and by writers seeking to please audiences in the upper strata of society, the Remarques served as an aid to the reader in his or her quest for distinction. That Vaugelas’s book enjoyed numerous reprints all over the kingdom suggests that the linguistic capital of which it offered shares was a valued commodity.2

Vaugelas’s Remarques also amounted to a manifesto for the Académie. Four lexical varieties were specified as inappropriate for the honnête homme and were consequently to be refused droit de citer in the Dictionnaire de l’Académie française: mots de province – frequenting the Court in Paris, the honnête homme abjured the parlance of the backwaters of the realm; mots vieux – the honnête homme is au courant enough to refrain from using words fallen out of fashion; mots bas, the language of vulgar plebeians; and mots techniques, which smack of work, a pursuit unbecoming of a gentleman. Stridently exclusive, Vaugelas’s text at least has the merit of openly manifesting the classist pretensions that underlay linguistic purism.

One Academician parted company with his colleagues on what constituted good French and who spoke it. “Un architecte parle aussi bon français, en parlant de plinthes, de modules, de stylobates… qu’un courtisan en parlant d’alcôves, d’estrandes et de lustres,” Furetière opined in defense of the registers of language defi-
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ned in his *Dictionnaire universel* (*Factums* 1: 188–9). The latter work had just been banned by the authorities for violating the Académie’s monopoly on the authoring and publication of French dictionaries, approved by Louis XIV in 1672. Work on the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* had proceeded for nearly fifty years at the pace of a snail’s fits and starts until Furetière, a classical linguist exasperated by the ineptness of his fellow Academicians, announced the impending publication of his own dictionary with an excerpt from it entitled, *Essai d’un Dictionnaire universel* (1684). Accusing Furetière of plagiarism and of flouting its monopoly, the Académie excluded Furetière from its ranks and successfully appealed to the Conseil d’Etat, which revoked Furetière’s *privilège* in March 1685.

Furetière acknowledged having furtively composed his own dictionary while simultaneously collaborating on the Académie’s, and even admitted to having obtained the *privilège* by hosting a delegate of the Académie for a dinner at which wine flowed amply, such that the latter was inebriated when he furnished a signature approving Furetière’s project. But he insisted that his work in no way plagiarized the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* nor contravened the Académie’s exclusive copyright. In a most cogent defense against the accusation of violating the monopoly on French dictionaries held by the Académie, Furetière ventilated a radically novel political economy of language. The latter he defined as a resource from which all may draw but none establish a monopoly, a cultural good which by rights belongs in the public domain, rather than the prerogative of an elite institution vested with infallible regulatory authority over it, as the Académie française was wont to portray itself. In response to the charge of plagiarism, Furetière remarked that the two works differed greatly in their goals as well as in their contents. Indeed, their respective missions were not only distinct, but at odds. For whereas the Académie’s concerned itself with “politesse” (deriving from “polir,” to make an object shine – the notion of “distinction” is again apposite), by contrast his *Dictionnaire universel* sought to represent language in all its “abondance.” As further proof, he pointed out that the Académie banished from his pages all technical terms, the very cornerstone of his dictionary, as we saw in the quote about the architect’s jargon,
above. Furthermore, his own dictionary contained some forty thousand words to the Académie’s seven or eight thousand. The full title of his work advertised the richness of its nomenclature and a cornucopia of registers:

Essai d’un Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tous les mots français, tant vieux que modernes, et les Termes de toutes les sciences et des arts, sçavoir: La Philosophie, Logique, et Physique; la Médecine, ou Anatomie, Pathologie, Thérapeutique, Chirurgie, Pharmacopée, Chimie, Botanique, ou l’Histoire naturelle des Plantes, et celle des Animaux, Minéraux, métaux et pierreries, et les noms des drogues artificielles; la Jurisprudence Civile et Canonique, Féodale et Municipale, et surtout celle des Ordonnances; Les Mathématiques, la Géométrie, l’Arithmétique, et l’Algèbre; la Trigonométrie, Géodésie, ou l’Arpentage, et les Sections coniques; l’Astronomie, l’Astrologie, la Gnomonique, la Géographie; la Musique, tant en théorie qu’en pratique, les Instruments à vent et à cordes; l’Optique, Catoptrique, Dioptrique, et Perspective; l’Architecture civile et militaire, la Pyrotechnie, Tactique et Statique; Les Arts, la Rhétorique, la Poésie, la Grammaire, la Peinture, Sculpture, etc. la Marine, le Manège, l’Art de faire des armes, le Blason, la Vénirrie, Fauconnerie, la Pêche, l’Agriculture ou Maison Rustique, et la plupart des Arts mécaniques; Plusieurs termes de Relations d’Orient et d’Occident, la qualité des Poids, Mesures et Monnoyes; les Étymologies des mots, l’invention des choses, et l’Origine de plusieurs Proverbes, et leur relation à ceux des autres Langues; Et enfin les noms des Auteurs qui ont traité des matières qui regardent les mots, expliqués avec quelques Histoires, Curiosités naturelles, et Sentences morales, qui seront rapportées pour donner des exemples de phrases et de constructions.
More interested in its practical applications than in its aesthetic ones, Furetière clearly conceived of language in utilitarian fashion: as a tool of science, learning and commerce (in its formerly dominant sense of communication, as well of economic exchange), a means to an end; for the Académie, focused on rules of poetic discourse and the speech of nobles at court, the beauty and purity of French were the unique ends. In addition, Furetière’s “universal” approach announced the Encyclopédie’s concern with representing knowledge. It also entailed a more pluralistic bent, evinced by Furetière admission of lexical items and phrases from popular speech. In this way, harboring editorial proclivities toward inclusion rather than exclusion, the Dictionnaire universel was less normative than the Dictionnaire de l’Académie: “Il ne décide rien sur la langue; sa beauté consistera particulièrement à voir le même mot promené par tous les arts et sciences en ses différentes significations, qui montreront... la richesse de la langue française....” In other words, this richness was semantic as well as lexical, in contradistinction to the Académie’s commission to stabilize loose and ambiguous language, per Statute 23 of its charter.

This tension between two radically opposed views on language is considered by language historians to be fundamental in the process of standardization: on one hand, selection of norms and their codification, in which the varieties of language associated with a social elite are chosen over other varieties and given credence by grammarians who stigmatize departures from these norms; and on the other hand, elaboration of function, the mechanism by which “new varieties were added to the language through lexical and syntactic expansion and through the development of social and stylistic variation [during] the evolution from a predominantly agrarian society towards a mercantile one” (Lodge 119). In other words, according to the model articulated by the Norwegian linguist E. Haugen and applied to French by R. Anthony Lodge, the Académie’s normative approach laid the groundwork for the homogenization of language necessary for mutual intelligibility, a prerequisite of a unified nation–state; concomitantly, the dynamic tendency of French championed by Furetière assured its capacity to describe new realities and perform new technological tasks. To be sure, inasmuch as the standard has reinforced the power of the nation–
state and facilitated the development and triumph of capitalism, one can argue that both tendencies—the technocratic approach embodied by Furetière as well as the condemnation of linguistic difference exemplified by the Académie—combine forces in order to marginalize people. In any case, the proclivity toward linguistic purism, the feeling that deviation from the standard is condemnable, to this day runs stronger in France than perhaps any other country.

But it was not really concern for the purity and elegance of the French language that drove the Academicians to behave as they did toward Furetière, Furetière alleged. Nor was it fear of economic competition, fear of lost income in sales of their dictionary. Furetière pointed out that the Académie had, in the manner of nobility loathe to dirty their hands by making money, “renoncé à l’intérêt pécuniaire,” agreeing to turn over all profits to the publisher; thus it wasn’t about greed. Instead, he attributed the Académie’s move to have his work banned as a barefaced attempt to shore up its reputation, already subject to derision after fifty years and no dictionary. The Académie wished to prevent a superior work by one man from embarrassing it, and to retain its authority over the Republic of Letters. Appropriating Pierre Bourdieu’s scheme, one might say that symbolic capital, or prestige, mattered more to the Académie than the linguistic or economic varieties. Therefore, sensing this vulnerability, Furetière vigorously tried to cajole the Académie into lift the ban, proffering arguments aimed precisely at the Immortels’ sense of honor:

Pour revenir au vrai intérêt de Messieurs de l’Académie qui est la gloire, seroit–il de leur honneur d’être les premiers à introduire dans l’Empire des Lettres l’usage d’une clause d’une si dangereuse conséquence, qui ôterait cette honnête liberté dont elles ont joui jusqu’à présent? Si la coutume était venue d’obtenir des Privilèges exclusifs pour traiter quelque science ou quelque art particulier, on ne verrait plus une multiplicité de livres sur un même sujet; ils sont pourtant nécessaires, non seulement pour les avoir à meilleur prix, mais aussi pour facili-
Furetière’s invocation of ideals such as the unfettered commerce of texts and ideas and the right of the literary public ultimately to judge them for itself, is entirely consonant with the spirit of the emerging public sphere as DeJean describes it (12). His denunciation of the Académie’s abuse of its royally invested has all the resonance of Enlightenment critiques of the Ancien Régime’s system of titles of nobility, unjust privileges and absolute authority: “Ils font leur compte qu’ils emporteront d’autorité tout ce qu’ils voudront, par le seul crédit que leur donne le nom d’Académie…et prétendent me faire enlever tout mon travail par des Lettres de cachet, jusqu’à me menacer de Bastille si j’ose écrire contre eux.” The essential link between literary debate and political criticism, which Habermas emphasized and whose origins DeJean locates in the 1670s and 1680s, is borne out by Furetière’s declamations (DeJean 24). Tellingly, however, in the passage reproduced above Furetière refers not to a Republic but rather to an “Empire des let-
tres,” a cultural sphere dominated by the Académie française. The latter, pace DeJean, hardly comes off as amenable to relinquish its prerogative over intellectual and artistic production by encouraging the proliferation of competing scholarly discourses.

Yet the same time, Furetière is explicitly envisaging and interpolating the Republic of Letters, a sophisticated and fair-minded readership from whom he expects to receive a fair hearing, all other means of legal redress to regain the privilege to publish having been closed off to him. His defense of the *Dictionnaire universel* appeared in the form of *Factums*, a genre of legal texts of which Beaumarchais’s *Mémoires* are another famous exemplar in French literary history. Circulated widely in Paris, the first *Factum* indeed amounted to a factual defense, but the second and third contained mordant attacks on his enemies, Furetière’s virulence increasing in proportion to his desperation.

The “Querelle des dictionnaires” became a decidedly public affair. The *Factums* received mention in nearly all of the important new literary journals. The *Nouvelles de la République des lettres*, *Nouvelles extraordinaires*, and *Bibliothèque universelle et historique* all commented on the affair or published letters from the public, which was usually on Furetière’s side. Alongside the *Factums* and journalistic accounts of the controversy, numerous pamphlets appeared, produced by partisans of both factions. Delighting readers between January 1685, date of the first Factum, and May 1688, the “Querelle des dictionnaires” predated the Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes by two years.

However, one journal, the *Mercure Galant*, which DeJean locates at the forefront of the movement to open up participation in cultural criticism to a broader audience, alluded to the affair only once, printing a letter in which the Academician Tallemant the elder calumniated the private life of his erstwhile colleague (Gegou 123). If it were truly the journalistic beacon of an inclusive, communitarian Republic of Letters, why didn’t the *Mercure* editorialize against the expropriation of linguistic authority by a coterie who would repress all other interventions in the field of lexicography? Perhaps not coincidentally, one of the editors of the *Mercure*
was none other than Thomas Corneille, the Academician to whom would soon be awarded the commission to compose a *Dictionnaire des arts et des sciences*, a technical dictionary featuring terms excluded from the main *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, whose lacunae had been rendered patent in comparison with Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel*.

Other details of the “Querelle des dictionnaires” further trouble DeJean’s depiction of the Académie française and its Moderns as champions for the cause of the democratization of culture and the opening up of a public sphere during the late seventeenth century. For example, DeJean cites Charles Perrault for taking a Modern, libratory stance in favor of participation in cultural criticism by previously excluded groups. What she omits to mention is that the victims of exclusion were mostly ignorant Courtiers desirous of literature accessible to them, as Marc Fumaroli notes, aptly describing the Académie as “une institution qui s’était édifiée en quelque sorte contre la république des Lettres savantes, et au service des seules lettres de la cour de France” (57). Another fact which casts aspersions on Perrault’s iconic status as patron saint of the Republic of Letters in DeJean’s account: it was Perrault who was instrumental in securing the Académie’s monopoly on dictionaries in 1674, prohibiting the authoring or publication of any other French dictionary until twenty years after the Académie’s was finished, which was obviously not going to happen soon. One reasonably suspects this move to have been a preventive strike against the eventual publication of Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (Gegou 67).

Alain Rey has characterized Furetière as “le héros d’une bagarre scandaleuse et la victime d’une exclusion qui prend allure d’un impiévable règlement de comptes, et d’où la Compagnie ne sort pas grandie.” Furetière died on May 14, 1688 at the age of 68, convinced that the work would never be published, his appeals for justice exhausted, his health consumed due in large part to his ceaseless combat on behalf of the *Dictionnaire universel*. But the work was championed by Pierre Bayle, the Protestant Huguenot, editor of the *Nouvelles de la Républiques des lettres* who arranged
for its publication (1690) in Holland in order to circumvent the revocation of the privilege in France.

In an uncanny coincidence documented by Racine, the royal historiographer, on August 24, 1694 a delegation arrived at Versailles to present Louis XIV with the first printed copies of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*. That same day, Versailles received the Dutch publisher of the *Dictionnaire universel*, which was also presented to the Monarch. Racine reported that Louis XIV and his entourage visibly preferred the Furetière. “Ceci a paru un assez bizarre contretemps pour le Dictionnaire de l’Académie qui me paraît n’avoir pas tant de Partisans que l’autre,” Racine wrote to Boileau.11

The “Querelle des dictionnaires” should not be overlooked as the first high-profile skirmish of the Culture Wars that marked the opening of an enlightened public sphere. Indeed, lexicography would soon become a vital front for ideological clashes between adherents of the Enlightenment and its Old Regime enemies.12

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NOTES

1 On the publishing history and reception of the *Remarques*, see Ayres–Bennett.
2 In utilizing terms like “distinction” and “cultural capital” to refer to the appropriation of culture for the sake of status, I am indebted to Pierre Bourdieu’s lexical and theoretical apparatus.
3 Alain Rey also cites Furetière as a precursor of the Encyclopedists. Furetière, Rey writes, “inaugure dans un dictionnaire strictement alphabétique les développements factuels, les références textuelles récentes, les discussions sur la valeur des informations scientifiques qui vont renouveler le discours de l’encyclopédie” (*Encyclopédies et Dictionnaires* 91).
4 In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Bourdieu evokes the “dispossession” of all those whose means of expression have been de-legitimized in favor of the linguistic standard which the Académie
and subsequent codifiers of French have always located among the
dominant socioeconomic groups in and around Paris, the seat of
power, thereby reinforcing their domination: “The dominant com-
petence functions as linguistic capital…so that the groups which
possess that competence are able to impose it as the only legitimate
one in the formal markets (the fashionable, educational, political
and administrative markets) and in most of the linguistic interac-
tions in which they are involved” (56).

5 The phrases, “public sphere” and “Republic of Letters” are fairly
synonymous in the accounts of DeJean and also of Dena Good-
man, who has written the definitive cultural history of the Republic
of Letters in France. Goodman does specify that “Republic of Let-
ters” refers less to readers than to the community of intellectual
producers who corresponded with one another beginning as early
as the sixteenth century. “The new public sphere,” she writes,
“though broader than the Republic of Letters, developed from it
and continued to be structured by its institutions of publicity and
sociability. The landscape was urban and discursive; the mode of
discourse was the criticism of the Republic of Letters” (14).

6 See Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital.”

7 Goodman underlines Habermas’s emphasis on the invention of
publicity. Before the advent of a public sphere and institutions
such as the press and the salon, publicity could be nothing but a
“status attribute” of political power, rather than an instrument for
the formation of public opinion (Republic 12–14).

8 A well documented, blow–by–blow account of the polemic is
provided by Gegou (79–129).

9 DeJean portrays the Académie française as a vital player in the
establishment of the literate public sphere or Republic of Letters,
while Fumaroli views them as initially at odds. Dena Goodman
opts for a balanced view, depicting the relationship obtaining be-
tween the various royal French academies and the transnational
Republic of Letters as symbiotic but tenuous (15–23).

10 Rey’s introduction to the 1978 reprint of the Dictionnaire uni-
versel is authoritative, steeped as it is in both his scholarship of
French dictionaries of past centuries and his perspective as co-
director of France’s highly regarded Robert dictionaries. Rey’s explicitly multicultural, non–normative approach establishes him as a heritor of Furetière. See his introduction to the Petit Robert.

11 See Gegou 150–1 and Rey, “Absolutism” 375.

12 A second edition of the Dictionnaire universel appeared in 1701, and more would follow. But another faction soon began devising plans to compete with it—not the Académie française, but rather a group of Jesuits, who announced in their literary journal Mémoires de Trévoux: “On imprime ici [à Trévoux] le Dictionnaire universel, non pas tel qu’on le vient d’imprimer en Hollande, où l’on fait parler Mr. l’abbé Furetière en Ministre Protestant, mais entièrement purgé de tout ce qu’on y a introduit de contraire à la Religion Catholique” (1701). In addition to correcting Protestant heresies which had seeped into the Furetière by virtue of its Dutch connection, the Dictionnaire de Trévoux would also be cheaper, the avis added. Heresies notwithstanding, the first edition of the Dictionnaire universel Français et Latin, vulgairement appelé, Dictionnaire de Trévoux in 1704 plagiarized Furetière’s nearly word–for–word! Subsequent editions in 1727 and 1732 continued and elaborated upon Furetière’s encyclopedism, however, such that the market was ripe for another entrant in the field, as a group of publishers speculated when they signed on Diderot and d’Alembert to direct a new project. In its endeavor to represent knowledge in exhaustive fashion with an emphasis on science and technology, the Encyclopédie, or Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers far surpassed both Furetière and the Jesuits of Trévoux. The Encyclopédie also added reformist militancy to its scholarly project, leaving nothing sacred except the act of rational inquiry into, and liberal critique of, the entities it defined in alphabetical order. The scandal surrounding the Encyclopédie, which triumphed over censorship, its editors threatened with the death penalty, constitutes another chapter in France’s dictionary wars.
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