

Linguistics

edited by Bryan Donaldson

BARRET, JULIEN. “*Tu parles bien la France!*” *Essai sur la langue française d’aujourd’hui*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2016. ISBN 978-2-343-09981-1. Pp. 97.

Linguists have long advocated for the Francophone public’s education on variation in French and on its historical development, particularly to help dispel linguistic insecurity. It could be argued, however, that the message has not reached its target—much of the work on the variation within French and on its standardization has been written by linguists for linguists. In this short volume, an essay consisting of sixteen chapters, Barret draws on a multitude of sources, including linguists (e.g., Bernard Cerquiglini, Henriette Walter), *grammariens* (e.g., Richelieu, Boileau), major French authors (e.g., Descartes, Voltaire), dictionaries (e.g., Le Robert), grammars past and present, academic sources, and elements of popular culture to argue that French is not inherently better than any other language. With a *DEA* in linguistics and an established career in journalism, stand-up comedy, and as a published author, Barret aims to give nonspecialists a brief overview of the history and evolution of modern French. Although the organization of the chapters is not readily apparent, Barret’s thesis remains clear: French is to be used and not venerated. He insists that the public’s tendency to regard French as an elite language both prevents the language from evolving and restricts the possibilities of speakers’ expression. In the various chapters, Barret gives brief overview of the codification of Modern French by the seventeenth-century elite, which Barret maintains created a gap between the *savants* and the rest of the population that continues to this day. Barret also describes spelling reforms throughout the history of French and the public’s perception of *l’orthographe*. Additionally, he addresses linguistic purism as related to borrowings from other languages and details how the public’s reverence of *le bon usage* contributes to its linguistic insecurity. To help combat this insecurity, Barret presents historical evidence that familiar registers like *argot* and *verlan* are hardly new linguistic developments and not limited to the speech of youth. In the same vein, Barret discusses how abstraction and obfuscation are valued in certain professional registers of French, which leads to further linguistic insecurity among nonspecialists. In conclusion, he examines polemical debates regarding innovations in French, underscoring the irony that the so-called grammar police often overlook errors in their own texts. Paradoxically, while Barret writes against linguistic pedantry, at times his style includes *tournures de phrase* which are themselves from a higher register. Also of note: Barret focuses his analysis on Metropolitan French, only briefly mentioning other Francophone regions. His argument would have been even stronger had he mentioned the linguistic insecurity that *le bon usage* fosters among Francophones worldwide. Still, Barret’s style is engaging, and his message is vital: “*La langue est là pour nous servir, pas pour nous asservir*” (96).

Although his arguments and message are not new to experts, the volume would be especially useful to nonlinguists, whether colleagues, family members, or friends, to stimulate conversations on the future of the French language. It could also serve as an ancillary text for an upper-division undergraduate course on French linguistics.

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