

3. *Le Vernaculaire*: A Brief Lexical History in French

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This chapter proposes to trace French early modern understandings of the word *vernacular* in order to see what kinds of conceptual possibilities lie in the very history of the word. The investigation takes its cue from what could be identified as a quest for the moment of emergence of literatures within recent theories of world literature, a search in which the notion of the vernacular has come to play a crucial role. Alexander Beecroft argues that “a language is a dialect with a literature” and that the process of language emerging through and with the creation of literature is best described in terms of *vernacularisation*.¹ Following Sheldon Pollock, he suggests that vernacularisation translates into “the historical process of choosing to create a written literature, along with its compliment, a political discourse, in local languages according to models supplied by superordinate, usually cosmopolitan, literary culture”.² Some 15 years earlier Pascale Casanova made a similar case. Taking the European (or more precisely the French) history as her point of departure, she claims that vernacularisation is mainly economically motivated since it occurred at

¹ Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York: Verso, 2015), 6.

² Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature*, 147–48.

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the same time as the invention of print culture.³ Writing in a local language may enable the author to reach a wider audience at a deeper level, thus gaining both financial and cultural capital. At the same time the act of writing “locally” quickly taps into political discourses and into the nationalism that took shape as French became a universal and a highly coded literary language throughout the seventeenth century.

In both Beecroft’s and Casanova’s model, the choice to write in a vernacular language or to create a literature in order to constitute a language, is conceptualised in terms of “revolutions”. Casanova ties this process to the appearance of a particular work, Joachim Du Bellay’s *La Deffence, et illustration de la langue françoise* (1549), and Beecroft singles out “pivotal moments” in the history of languages and literatures,⁴ as if the shaping of (a) literature can be localised to an Event or a Moment and is created through decisions taken by identifiable subjects. Literary history is no doubt filled with power struggles. But we should not forget that languages do not only enter into contact with one another to compete over which language rules the world. By looking at the ways in which the vernacular was used when it first appeared in French in Rabelais’ *Le Quart livre* (1542) and how it has evolved in early modern times, I would here like to problematise the systemic understanding of vernacularisation in terms of localisable moments and constant power struggles and explore other possible interpretations of what the vernacular may mean. French is used as a case in point and I will investigate the etymology and the various understandings of the notion by drawing from a corpus of major dictionaries and encyclopedias from the seventeenth up to the nineteenth centuries.

Etymologically, the word derives from learned Latin *vernaculus*, referring to slaves born in the house, in the country and, in extension, to the domestic, indigenous or national. The vernacular is:

³ Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des Lettres* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999), 90–91. See also Pascale Casanova, *La Langue mondiale* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015), which is briefly discussed in Erik Falk’s chapter in this book.

⁴ Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature*, 153.

“Propre à un pays, à ses habitants. Syn. autochtone, domestique, indigène” (particular to a country, to its habitants. Syn. native, domestic, indigenous).⁵ This is the very first lexical definition of the word given in a French dictionary and it comes from Victoire Boiste *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française: avec le latin et les étymologies* from 1823.⁶ This late first appearance in the dictionaries informs us that the notion of the vernacular was hardly common at the time of the so-called “vernacular revolution”, and even in the nineteenth century it is rare. It does not, for example, merit an entry in Émile Littré’s *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1872–77). The dictionaries that do give the vernacular an entry, like the already mentioned Boiste or Pierre Larousse’s *Grand dictionnaire universel du XIX^e siècle* (1866–77), all point toward the implicit power dimension in the etymology of the word. It is conceived as the opposite in regard to the ruling elite, suggesting that the elite also possesses another, supposedly cosmopolitan or vehicular language that is not limited to a country or a restricted group of speakers. This does not mean that the vernacular is automatically less valued, rather its value depends on the political and aesthetic context. In fact, the association with slaves and oppressed might explain why scholars like Beecroft and Casanova enhance its revolutionary potential: even when used by a local elite, the vernacular is the linguistic articulation of resistance to power. But history shows that as soon as a vernacular is affirmed, replacing the elite language it originally contested (this is what happened to *la langue françoise* in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries), other vernaculars surface and challenge the current linguistic order, in a perpetual dialectics of languages.

Even if the vernacular might etymologically possess a subversive power, the fact remains that it has no entry in ancient French dictionaries. Frédéric Godefroy’s *Dictionnaire de l’ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes*, covering the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, includes the masculine noun *vernicle*,

⁵ All translations from French dictionaries and encyclopedias are mine.

⁶ Pierre Claude Victoire Boiste, *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française: avec le latin et les étymologies* (Paris, 1823).

defined as “esclave né dans la maison” (slave born in the house).⁷ It seems like the only one using the notion *vernacular* in the era in which Casanova localises the “vernacular revolution” is – of course – François Rabelais. The term appears once in *Pantagruel* (1542), in the context of a conversation between Pantagruel and a student from Limoges in Paris. The student is the one using the word, giving it a comic rather than a radical connotation:

Signor Missaye, mon genie n'est poinct apte nate à ce que dict ce flagitisse nébulon pour escorier la culticule de nostre vernacule Gallicque; mais viceversant je gnave opera, et par veles et vames je me en ite de le locupleter de la redundance latinicome.

Par Dieu (dist Pantagruel) je vous apprendray à parler! [...]

(“My worshipful lord, my genie is not apt nate to that which this flagitious nebulon saith, to excoriate the cut[ic]le of our vernacular Gallic, but viceversally I gnave opera, and by veles and rames enite to locuplete it with the Latinicome redundance.”

“By G–!,” said Pantagruel, “I will teach you to speak.” [...])⁸

In the student’s jargon, vernacular means the language spoken by everyone, or the “langage usité”, as Rabelais says, as opposed to written Latin.⁹ Coined in the context of corrupt Latin spoken by a student from Limoges who wants to sound like a Parisian,¹⁰ “vernacule Gallicque” exposes the emptiness of learned language: it appears as bad disguise, detached from the reference that it seeks

⁷ Frédéric Godefroy, *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes* (Paris: Émile Bouillon, 1895).

⁸ François Rabelais, *Pantagruel, roy des dipsodes, restitué à son naturel; plus Les merveilleuses navigations du disciple de Pantagruel, dict Panurge*, (Lyon: E. Dolet, 1542), 39. *The Whole Works of F. Rabelais*, trans. Sir Thomas Urquhart, K^t & Bar of Cromarty and Peter Motteux (London and New York: G P Putman's Sons, 1905), 144.

⁹ Pierre Rigolot, *Les Langages de Rabelais* (Geneva: Droz, 1972), 33.

¹⁰ This can be compared to young Jean Racine travelling to Aix-en-Provence in 1661. In a letter to Madame de la Fontaine sent from Uzès, he writes that he is in as much need for an interpreter as a Muscovite in Paris would have been. Racine, a self-made man, exaggerates his linguistic alienation in order to pose himself as someone who belongs to the Parisian salons. Jean Racine, *Œuvres*, tome VII, (London, 1768), 23.

to designate; it has no connection to the world, which makes it ridiculous. Pantagruel's response is also part of the comic effect. Pantagruel, the common man, offers to teach his learned interlocutor how to speak properly, placing himself as the master and the "vernacule Gallicque" as the proper language and thereby reversing the hierarchy of power relations.

After this exceptional appearance in Rabelais "vernacular" seems to disappear from French, at least judging by the dictionaries, much like another strangely related term: *exotique*.¹¹ Curiously, the vernacular, like the exotic, resurfaces not in a linguistic dictionary but in Diderot's and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* in 1756:

Vernaculaire: Maladies; est un mot qui s'applique à tout ce qui est particulier à quelque pays. Voyez local, &c. C'est pour cela que les maladies qui regnent beaucoup dans quelque pays, province ou canton, sont quelque fois appellées maladies vernaculaires, mais plus communément maladies endémiques.¹²

(Vernacular: Maladies; is a word that can be applied to everything which is particular to a country. See local, &c. This is why the maladies that reign a lot in some country, province or canton, are sometimes called vernacular maladies, but more commonly endemic maladies.)

The vernacular has drifted from applying to spoken language used by everyone to referring to diseases, signifying endemic and local. As the word orbits, the spatial connotations, implied in the word endemic (i.e. native or restricted to a certain place), take over the more social connotations (i.e. slaves, domestics). Moreover, we are no longer in the domain of literature. Here, the vernacular

¹¹ Speaking of merchandise from a fictive island, Pantagruel describes the objects as "exotiques et peregrines". The word has no entrance in the dictionaries until the eighteenth century. See Vincenette Maigne, "Exotisme: Évolution en diachronie du mot et de son champ sémantique," in *Exotisme et création. Actes du Colloque International (Lyon 1983)*, ed. Roland Antonioli (Lyon: L'Hèrmes, 1985), 7–16.

¹² Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris: Pellet, 1777). See <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>, accessed 26 January 2017.

is not a dialect in the language continuum seeking to form a literature; rather, it participates in the discursive configuration of knowledge.

A vernacular term translates into a local understanding of reality and appears as a piece in the project of putting together knowledge about the world. This has indeed been the function of vernacular language since the formalisation of the new sciences in the Academies in the seventeenth century, that is, during the same period as French asserts its role as the universal language. So even if the term vernacular is not used in the seventeenth century, the interest in local languages can easily be attested by the appearance of dictionaries in languages from faraway places, established by missionaries in Africa, the Orient and the Americas.¹³ In travel literature and in scientific treatises written in French as well as in Latin, vernacular words are important elements. Terms used by locals, should it be in Breton, Occitan, Arabic or Taino, transmit a new form of knowledge that breaks with a bookish tradition by being connected to experience and empirical observation. The fact that the *Encyclopédie* identifies local knowledge as *vernacular* reflects two competing forms of knowledge. One is based on everyday life, whereas the other is systematised and universal, marking a return to Latin as no longer the scholarly language but the language of new science at the same time as the former vernaculars that have now become national and central languages are the languages through which thought is systematised and the world explained. The vernacular of the other (both the European other, i.e. peasants, and the foreign other) is linked to common practices as opposed to a more technical, scientific language, and the vernacular *name* and noun operate an alternative way to name the world and identify the uses of nature.¹⁴ Even though such *savoir vernaculaire* is quickly trans-

¹³ The openness to local languages is short. By the end of 1600 it is no longer acceptable to include foreign words within travel writing, at least not to a larger extent. See Marie-Christine Pioffet, *La Tentation de l'épopée dans les relations des jésuites* (Sillery: Septentrion, 1997), 497.

¹⁴ See Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales, <http://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/vernaculaire>, accessed 26 January 2017.

lated into systems and ultimately loses its local connection as it enters into the domain of science, its importance within scientific discourse explains why the term “vernacular” is mainly linked to lexicography and onomastics when it finally appears in the dictionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But it also indicates that rather than referring to (a) language, vernacular is associated with *parts* of language, particular referential elements in language and not with a language system. Its meaning is clearly in constant transformation.

In the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, the term commonly used for local languages is *vulgar* (*vulgaire*), which has an entry in Jean Nicot’s 1606 dictionary and shares features with the modern definition of “vernacular”, but they are not complete synonyms. To Nicot “vulgar” means *common* and is directly linked to language: “Paroles vulgaires et communes” (Vulgar and common words).¹⁵ *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* from 1694 gives it a longer entry: “Qui est communément en usage. Il ne se dit guere que des choses morales. Ainsi on appelle *langue vulgaire, langage vulgaire*, Le langage qui est communément usité par toute une nation, par tout un peuple” (That which is commonly used. It is hardly said but about moral things. Thus one calls vulgar language, *vulgar tongue*, the language which is commonly used by an entire nation, by an entire people).¹⁶ Furetière’s dictionary defines “vulgar” as, “commun, trivial, ordinaire, du petit peuple” (common, trivial, ordinary, of the small people) and specifies that vulgar language “is sometimes opposed to ancient and savant”.¹⁷ Vulgar paradoxically seems to denote vernacular forms of Latin, but which have vehicular functions since they are spoken in everyday life and are used by many people. Interestingly, as French asserts its position

¹⁵ Jean Nicot, *Trésor de la langue Françoisyse tant ancienne que moderne* (Paris: David Douceur, 1606), accessed 26 January 2017, <http://portail.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/TLF-NICOT/index.htm>.

¹⁶ *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française t 2* (Paris: Chez la Veuve de Jean Baptiste Coignard, 1694), accessed 22 January 2017, <http://dictionnaires.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/ACADEMIE/>.

¹⁷ Antoine Furetière, *Dictionnaire universel. Contenant tous les mots François tant vieux que modernes, & les Termes de toutes les Sciences et des Arts* (A. et R. Leers: La Haye, 1690).

as political, intellectual and literary *lingua franca*, the notion of the vulgar is increasingly used to denote that which is low, vile and trivial. In the French Academy's dictionary from 1762, as well as in Jean-François Féraud's *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (1787–88), the moral meaning is placed first and vulgar language is understood only in opposition to learned language.¹⁸ This definition remains through the nineteenth century and is preferred over “vernacular”. Émile Littré, who does not give “vernacular” an entry, offers an interesting bridge between the two terms in claiming that vulgar languages are living languages.¹⁹ He also underscores the medical and natural significations of “vulgar”. Nevertheless, vulgar remains linked to the idea of the common not only as in ordinary or lower, but also as something shared: *ce qui est communément en usage*. A vulgar plant is something one comes across everywhere and vulgar medicine is used by everyone and the idea of opposition to the learned is always present. “Qui ne se distingue par rien” (that which lacks distinction) – from the latin *vulgus* meaning popular crowd, troupe or multitude. The key element is *common*, whereas the notion of vernacular is associated with the idea of particularity.

Thus, the comparison with the notion of the vulgar highlights that the vernacular is mainly understood in terms of difference, as an element that distinguishes itself from common language or a language distinct from vehicular language by virtue of it being restricted to a region and its culture. Interpreted as a foreign entity entering another language, marking difference, and in some cases suggesting a direct correspondence with foreign worlds, the vernacular here has another meaning than it has in contemporary theorisation of world literatures. In light of the historical (French) definitions, the vernacular can hence be used as a concept of difference that does not necessarily in itself constitute a literature, because it is not necessarily understood as a common language,

¹⁸ Jean-François Féraud, *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* (Marseille: Moissy, 1787–8), accessed 22 January 2017, <http://artfl.atilf.fr/dictionnaires/FERAUD/>.

¹⁹ Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris: Hachette, 1863–72).

shared by everyone. The vernacular has no *common-place*, nor is it a commonplace, as the vulgar.²⁰

This leads me to conclude that the two terms used to denote other languages hold two different revolutionary potentials. One – the vulgar – can counteract a linguistic and literary order by virtue of its commonality. The other – the vernacular – operates more discretely within the order. In Michail Bachtin’s influential analysis of Rabelais, foreign words introduce a space of nonsense in the text, allowing for the carnivalesque disruption to have its effects.²¹ This is precisely what happens when Rabelais inserts the word *vernacule* in a text written in *la langue françoise* only a few years after Du Bellay’s “vernacular revolution”. Here the word “vernacular” itself appears at once as foreign and creative, carved as it is from a degenerated Latin. It begs for translation into the local idiom in which the narrative is written, thereby both exposing and undermining the hierarchy of languages. This way of conceptualising the vernacular as tied to the cosmopolitan vehicular language but denoting the local can allow for rethinking the notion today, not in terms of what Casanova identifies as the “Herder effect”, i.e. a regional expression competing for a central position in the world literary market,²² or in terms of the constitution of a literature as Beecroft seems to suggest. The study of the shifting meanings of the word shows that the idea of

²⁰ I draw on Édouard Glissant’s idea of the common-place as a shared space and commonplace a kind of poetics of repetition. He writes in *The Poetics of Relation*: “This flood of convergences, publishing itself in the guise of the commonplace. No longer is the latter an accepted generality, suitable and dull – no longer is it deceptively obvious exploiting common sense – it is, rather, all that is relentlessly and endlessly reiterated by these encounters.” Trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 45.

²¹ Guy Demerson discusses this in “Le plurilinguisme chez Rabelais”, in *Bulletin de l’Association d’étude sur l’humanisme, la réforme et la renaissance* 14 (1981): 4–5. See also Bachtin’s essay “Le plurilinguisme dans le roman”, in Mikhaïl Bakhtine, *Esthétique et théorie du roman*, trans. Daria Olivier (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), and his work on Rabelais: *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge Mass: M.I.T. Press, 1968).

²² See Casanova, *La République mondiale des Lettres*, 12–125.

a “vernacular revolution” rests on a contemporary interpretation that is highly dependent on a traditional narrative of literary history as being made up by important works and authors.²³

It is here that the exploration of the historical understandings and uses of the notion of the vernacular has proven useful. While the vernacular may hold a revolutionary potential, it does not necessarily build on a radical rupture with other languages. Rather, vernacularisation can refer to that which emerges within a linguistic continuum but without necessarily taking over. For between the significant moments and publications that stand out in the history of literature, languages and literatures continuously take shape and interrelate with one another in less dramatic ways, and parts of the literary and linguistic condition are being formed beyond the control of speaking subjects or even beyond the control of institutions or centers. In other words, there is another molecular and non-systemic way of using the concept to identify literary and linguistic tensions. Seeing the vernacular as an ongoing production of linguistic and epistemic difference opens for another use of the notion as a potential tool for analysing how language can operate in terms of dynamic relationships to other languages and literatures across time and in an increasingly interconnected world.

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²³ The French tradition prefers vehicular over cosmopolitan when referring to language partly because cosmopolitan has different connotations in French, which there is no space to discuss here. The definition of vehicular is taken from *Le Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales*, accessed 23 January 2017, www.cnrtl.fr.

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