

Some Literary Manifestations of Language Contact

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Linguistic approaches to literature have been pursued for a number of years. Studies focusing upon fiction, poetry, or specific literary strategies such as metaphor, have utilized diverse linguistic theories; e.g. structuralism (Culler 1975), dialectology (Page 1973), transformational grammar (Ohmann 1964), and pragmatics (Pratt 1977), to name a few.

However, there exists a dearth of studies which take up the application of sociolinguistic concepts to literary analysis. Noteworthy here are Sarkany (1974) and research in Production littéraire et situations de contacts interethniques (1974). Yet much remains to be done. The present study explores the literary employment of certain linguistic behaviors and attitudes which, in real speech communities, presuppose language contact. I will look at the French Canadian author Gérard Bessette's novel, Les Pédagogues (1961), in the light of perspectives associated with language contact.

Language contact implies individual bilingualism: two or more languages are said to be in contact "if they are used alternately by the same persons. The language-using individuals are thus the locus of the contact" (Weinreich 1968:1). But although the two codes in a bilingual's repertoire alternate, they are rarely equal in social function or value within the speech community wherein the bilingual interacts with others. Typically, in some domains one language is preferred over the other. Moreover, it is frequently the case, especially in urban industrialized societies, that the language of intimate domains such as family and friendship is not the language of the society at large. In such a case, the home language is regarded, at the macrosocietal level, as a minority language. Accordingly, the minority language and the majority language come to be associated with distinct values, purposes, and import. As Gumperz indicates:

The tendency is for the ethnically specific, minority language to be regarded as the 'we code' and become associated with in-group and informal activities, and for the majority language to serve as the 'they code' associated with the more formal, stiffer and less personal out-group relations. (Gumperz 1982:66)

These differing connotations of the two codes may be realized, at the level of individual behavior, either as a set of overt or covert attitudes regarding the codes or their speakers; or as conversational strategies wherein the bilingual speaker might--within a particular speech exchange--wish not only to convey a specific message, but also simultaneously to imply a value associated with the particular code chosen during that exchange.

It should be added that a writer, as a member of a given speech community, understands the linguistic and nonlinguistic conventions of his community. A literary text, as social product, is grounded in those conventions. Moreover, readers who are members of the same community also understand these conventions. Without this common knowledge between writers

and readers, literary communication would be impossible. Fowler underscores this point, when he indicates that an author "can write meaningfully only within the possibilities provided by the systems of conventions which define the culture" (Fowler 1977:125; emphasis added).

In a speech community characterized by language contact, one set of conventions involves appropriate use of the respective languages, along with attitudes regarding their differential social value. I turn now to Les Pédagogues, a novel in which the author utilized language contact as a literary strategy for defining character and presenting theme. (Because of space limitations, this analysis cannot be exhaustive.)

Bessette's Les Pédagogues is a novel written in the tradition of French literary realism. It tells the story of five professors of the fictional Ecole Pédagogique de Montréal who are oppressed by what they perceive as the mediocrity and clericalism of the Québec educational system. The solution which the author proposes--through the protagonist--is for the teachers to unionize, more specifically to join the blue-collar workers under a larger union encompassing both intellectuals and manual laborers. The novel's protagonist, Sarto Pellerin, head of the Ecole's French Department, is thrust into the leading position as unionizer of the teachers.

Although the setting and language of this novel are predominantly French (the action unfolds in Montréal), the French and English languages take on significant literary value in light of the differing social functions of the two codes in the real speech community underlying the fictional universe of Les Pédagogues. However, although the novel is written in the tradition of literary realism, language use in the novel does not precisely mirror all actual use as it exists in the real community.

In Canada, where English dominates as the language of economic and political life, French is a minority language. Even in the province of Québec, English and its speakers occupy a pre-eminent position and enjoy great prestige. As Basham writes:

French Canadians feel and know that in order to advance within Canadian society, including French Canadian society, a mastery of English is virtually indispensable. Everywhere in Québec, except perhaps in such completely rural areas as the lowest part of the St. Lawrence Valley, English exerts a pressure far, far in excess of the numerical importance of the English speakers of the region. (Basham 1978:85)

As a consequence of the subordinate status of French in Canada, many French Canadians have developed negative attitudes towards their language and group. (Research on the sociolinguistics of this issue is reviewed in Giles and Povesland 1975; see also Basham 1978.)

A joyless outlook on French Canadian culture is the dominant motif of Les Pédagogues, and it is the pédagogues themselves who censure the culture. One object of attack is an irrational clericalism, which stresses conformity

at the expense of intellectual creativity, social harmony at the cost of social cultivation, and marital fidelity at the cost of conjugal satisfaction. Other sources of dissatisfaction are more immediate to the professors' daily lives: the men are poorly paid, so moonlighting is common. Moreover, as their influence in decision-making at the *École* is minimal, they lack the opportunity to improve their lot. The disaffection engendered by these problems is manifested in various ways among the men.

Yves Lambert, professor of music, is also a pianist who plays publicly. But because he cannot find sufficient nourishment in the culture for his artistic aspirations, he flounders as a performer. He confesses to feeling in Québec like un poisson dans l'air 'a fish out of water' (LP, p. 65). In order to compensate for his professional mediocrity, Lambert, a bachelor, seeks victories in the area of 'amour.' He has a mistress, Annabelle, a former ballerina from France, who is convinced that Lambert enjoys a breadth of social experience which she can use to launch herself into the highest social circles. In order to encourage this illusion, Lambert occasionally code switches, from French to English, in intimate conversations with her. He will, for example, call her darling instead of ma chère. Lambert is pretentious, and the prestige associated with English is supposed to impress Annabelle.

For the professor of English, John Sloper, English represents economic survival in the most basic sense. Although Sloper draws a salary, because of medical expenses incurred by his sick wife, Sloper moonlights as a private tutor of English. His clients are French Canadians, and the more well-to-do they are, the better it suits Sloper. Sloper is ashamed of his economic inadequacy, so he rationalizes on every possible occasion. For instance, he cannot afford a car, but he explains his walking--when others might drive or take a taxicab--as a health habit: walking, he affirms, is sain, naturel 'healthful, natural' (LP, p. 237). Because opportunities to teach English privately are all that stand between Sloper and penury, one is not convinced that intellectual integrity underlies this professor's declaration that every Canadian ought to be bilingual. Sloper's stand here is so radical, that he would also like to see public assistance rendered to the poor and unemployed only on condition that they learn the two languages. As he states before a group of acquaintances:

Nous vivons dans un pays bilingue. Par conséquent, tout le monde devrait pouvoir s'exprimer dans les deux langues. Ce serait la première condition. Ceux qui refuseraient d'apprendre soit l'anglais, soit le français, selon le cas, ne devraient pas recevoir d'aide.
(LP, p. 271)

'We live in a bilingual country. Consequently, everyone ought to be able to express himself in the two languages. This would be the first requirement. Those who refused to learn either English or French, whatever the case, shouldn't receive assistance.'

Thus for Sloper and Lambert, English connotes economic survival and prestige, respectively.

Canadian French, on the other hand, elicits reactions different from these. Although as a code it is not negatively assessed in relation to English, careless or vulgar French evokes the ire of linguistically sensitive men. The loudest voice arguing for good French is that of Sarto Pellerin, the protagonist, who is head of the École's French Department. Pellerin's own French is extremely correct, even in intimate settings wherein, in real life, colloquial structures would be appropriate. For instance, Pellerin's language is dominated by multiple negation (ne...pas; ne...rien, etc.), which is formal. A typical sentence for Pellerin is Il n'a pas dû être content... 'He could not have been happy ...' (LP, p. 82). In this, his speech contrasts with that of his wife, a simple country woman, whose language is more colloquial. For her, a typical sentence is Tu dois rien à Paul, tu sais 'You don't owe Paul anything, you know' (LP, p. 82), in which ne...rien is reduced to rien. (On multiple and reduced negations in real Montréal speech, see Sankoff and Vincent 1980.) This is one of several linguistic distinctions that underscore the disparity in social class between Pellerin and his wife. The couple are ill-matched, and both are unhappy with each other.

Pellerin's French, together with his passion for good French, is the linguistic manifestation of his desire to see his culture elevated, to see it freed from mediocrity of every sort. Although the character of Pellerin is somewhat overdrawn, this pédagogue nevertheless speaks for the author. Bessette is suggesting that the answer to Québec's cultural ills lies not in Lambert's pretentiousness nor in Sloper's conservatism--both expressions of escapism--but in a sincere commitment to social ennoblement. This is why Professor Pellerin speaks the best French--and ultimately joins the trade union movement.

Notes

1. Some of the data here are expanded and clarified in my research project, in progress: The Application of Sociolinguistics to Literary Analysis.

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