

## Causerie

Nothing had particularly prepared me for an enterprise of this kind... Nothing? What about the works included in the present volume<sup>1</sup> and the greater ones, contained in the *Histoire de la langue française* (*History of the French Language*)?<sup>2</sup> No doubt; but these, which amply qualified me for the transformation of my initial, vague project, came later; and I repeat in all truthfulness: nothing had prepared me for an enterprise of this nature. I was past forty; Greek medicine occupied me entirely, except for a few literary excursions which appeared in dailies and periodicals. I was preparing, for publication by J.-B. Baillière, an edition of Hippocrates in Greek, the text having been prepared after a collation of all the manuscripts I could procure, along with notes and commentaries, the first volume of which got me elected to the *Académie des inscriptions et belles lettres* (*Academy of Inscriptions and Belles Lettres*), and the tenth and last volume of which appeared only in the year 1860. It was quite a fair amount of work. La Fontaine<sup>†</sup> says of his man already in possession of sufficient game:

Any modest hunter would have been content with it.

His hunter was not modest, and the story teller adds at once:

But what! Nothing fills

The vast appetites of a maker of conquests.

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1. *Études et glanures* (*Studies and Gleanings*), of which this *Causerie* is only a part.

† The celebrated French poet and fabulist (1621-1695), best known for his *Fables*, modelled on Aesop.

Let us understand however what my *vast appetites* were. I am one of those restless or beguiled minds who would like to scour the diverse fields of knowledge and obtain, to use Molière's fine expression, *some light on every subject*; but, miserly and greedy at the same time, I liked to let go of nothing. It is thus that I continued my Hippocrates, even while starting on my dictionary. What all did I not turn over in my mind? Had I been strong in my old age, had I not been afflicted by sickness, I would have put my hand, with some collaborators, to a universal history for which I had a complete plan.

But let us get back to the subject. In such circumstances, the conception of the dictionary was due to a fortuitous occasion, and had at first only a small beginning and a fragmentary character, and only by successive elaborations did it turn itself into a general plan and into a whole into which all the parts concurred. My readings, always very varied, had exposed me to etymological research. Following this, I amused myself by dividing some French words into prefixes, suffixes and radicals. This appeared curious to me; and forthwith, taking neither the time nor the trouble of carrying the experiment further, I imagined that there was matter in it for an etymological dictionary of the language, redoing, in the light of modern methods, what Ménage<sup>2</sup> had done, not without merit, two hundred years earlier. Besides, these preliminaries, which at first absorbed all my attention and which later shrunk on their own to their true proportions, were not completely wasted;

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2. Gilles Ménage (1613 – 1692), scholar and wit, author, among others, of *Les Origines de la langue française* (*The Origins of the French Language*) (1650) and of *Observations sur la langue française* (*Observations on the French Language*) (1673), which were considered authoritative for a long time.

in the final work, I have given a certain place to the prefixes and the suffixes, in their alphabetical order, explaining their origins and meanings; this innovation is not without use, for the prefixes and the suffixes are elements of the French language and knowledge of these matters in the analysis of words.

I proposed my plan to Monsieur Hachette<sup>3</sup>, the great bookseller, who was an old friend from school days. He accepted it. The title of the work was to be : *Nouveau dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française* (*A New Etymological Dictionary of the French Language*). A contract was concluded between us. He advanced me four thousand francs<sup>4</sup>. This was in 1841.

Five years went by without my taking in hand the work for which I had taken the initiative and the responsibility. It was, I agree, too much of a delay and too much negligence. I cannot justify myself, I can only apologise and plead extenuating circumstances. At this time, I had the misfortune of losing my mother. Her death plunged me into a profound mourning and, for months on end, I remained incapable of resuming the normal and necessary routine of my occupations. I say 'necessary', for this sloth, due to grief, brought a lot of discouragement into my affairs. Further, when I began to come to my senses, Monsieur Baillièrè, the other publisher who was always well disposed and friendly towards me, pressed me for Hippocrates, the successive volumes of which he wanted, rightly, to appear with some regularity. Under these various pres-

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3. Louis-Christophe Hachette (1800 – 1864), founder of the publishing house of his name.

4. That is, in terms of purchasing power, about 250,000 F now. At that time, a monthly salary or income of 250 gold francs was just right for living comfortably.

tures, I was not able to devote my time to the etymological dictionary, a new work which had to be introduced into my daily schedule, and I neglected my commitments, whose recollection sometimes gave me an unpleasant start.

Monsieur Hachette drew me out of this torpor, which had lasted only too long, and insisted that I begin. We know that occasionally, during sleep, ideas which preoccupied us just prior to it take final shape unconsciously; similarly, during this too long suspended animation of our project, his ideas and mine had changed, and he proposed cancelling our earlier agreement, concluding a new one, and giving the work a new title, the title of *Dictionnaire étymologique, historique et grammatical de la langue française* (*Etymological, Historical and Grammatical Dictionary of the French Language*). The addition of *historical* will be remarked. This was, indeed, ever since I considered my project under all its aspects, the dominating thought which preoccupied me and corresponded best with my scholarship and my position as a member of the Academy of Inscriptions. I was not the first to have thought of the introduction of history in a lexicon of the French language. Voltaire had proposed an outline of it, advising that sentences drawn from the best writers should be quoted instead of arbitrary examples. But it was Génin<sup>5</sup>, a lover of the old language, who recommended that one go back deliberately to it, and not be afraid of seeking authorities therein. I appropriated both Voltaire's and Génin's views, out of which I composed an original plan that was all my own. I was the first to attempt subjecting all aspects of the dictionary to history, executing the task if I had the strength, patience and good luck.

5. François Génin (1803 – 1856), author of *Des variations du langage français depuis le XII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (1843) (*Variations of the French Language since the 12th Century*)

See how indeed luck operates. Much later, and when I had already begun the printing, I learnt indirectly that a learned man, Monsieur Godefroy<sup>6</sup>, had also thought of a historical dictionary of the French language and collected material to this end. The news of the lead that I had taken over him made him lose all hope. He was not lucky. However, all was not lost. His vast readings and his rich collection of examples from the old language readily furnished enough material to make a dictionary of the *langue d'oïl*<sup>†</sup>, which we needed. Soon I got in touch with Monsieur Godefroy, and I gave my approval for such an enterprise; I convinced him in his belief that it was very much desired; I exhorted, I pressed, I put forward time and again my example and my procedures. Busybody, one would say. Not quite; for Monsieur Godefroy *paid me for my trouble* by dedicating to me his book, whose first fascicle has just appeared, thus robbing German scholarship of the honour it had been merrily preparing for, of giving us French a glossary of our old language<sup>a</sup>.

To me luck came in the form of the second proposal of Monsieur Hachette. Perhaps, after so many preliminaries, I

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6. Frédéric Godefroy (1826-1897), philologist, author of the monumental *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française, du IX<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (*Dictionary of the Old French Language, from the Ninth to the Fifteenth Century*), in 10 volumes (1880-1902).

† *langue d'oïl*, Old French (as spoken in the North of the Loire).

a *Le Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française et de tous ses dialectes du neuvième au quinzième siècle* (*The Dictionary of the Old French Language and of All Its Dialects from the Ninth to the Fifteenth Century*), by Frédéric Godefroy, carries indeed this dedication: 'To my dear and respected Master, Monsieur E. Littré, I offer my most affectionate respect and deepest gratitude.' This great work (1880-1895) consists of no less than 8 volumes 4to. The author is preparing a supplement to it which is no less extensive. The *Académie des inscriptions* has honoured this work with the *Govert Grand Prix*.

shall astonish my reader by confessing to him that, far from eagerly grabbing it, I asked for twenty-four hours of reflection. These twenty-four hours were a time of anxiety for me; I passed the night without closing my eyes, weighing up in my mind the burden which I must carry irrevocably. Never did the harsh reality of the lines of Horace<sup>b</sup> come more intensely to my mind. The length of the undertaking, which, as I had foreseen it, would take me into my old age, and the necessity of combining it, during a number of years, with the work by which I earned my livelihood, came in the way of my resolution. Finally, towards the morning, my courage got the upper hand. I was ashamed to withdraw after having come forward. The lure of the plan which I had conceived proved to be stronger, and I signed the agreement.

However, my confession is not quite complete. I have said that Monsieur Hachette had advanced me four thousand francs, and returning that advance became my first obligation, since nothing was concluded between us. I was not incapable of paying it back, but the money was part of some savings to which I was attached like a small saver to his savings. It was not, therefore, without some influence on my decision. All the same, I was not destined to enjoy it. The February revolution that came two years later<sup>†</sup> robbed me of it, with the rest of those savings which were so dear to me, placed in deposits which were wiped out by the universal credit crisis. The catastrophe did not affect my dictionary, my plan, my resolution. The result (for one must certainly judge by the result since we cannot gauge

b ... *Quid ferre recusent,  
Quid valeant humeri.*

(‘Why refuse the burden when one can carry it?’)

† i.e. in 1848, when King Louis-Philippe was dethroned and the Second Republic was established.

the future beforehand) gave me much more than what, in my most ambitious expectations, I was hoping by way of compensation.

The beginning was to collect together a good number of examples from our classics and from the texts of the old language. The classics of course, without my having to restrict myself from going beyond them; as regards texts of the old language, I took the most celebrated ones in each century from the twelfth (the eleventh has very little to offer) to the sixteenth included. The sixteenth century is the limit of my historical coverage. My work group was soon constituted. Monsieur Hachette put at my disposal well-read persons who read the authors for me, and wrote down, on small sheets of paper, having at the top the word of the example, the sentences they had picked up. I have cited these persons in the preface of the dictionary and thanked them, as well as some volunteers who were happy to help me. My instructions were very general: to collect, as much as could be done, examples of all the words (despite our searches more than one word has remained without a citation), not to omit either archaisms, or neologisms, or infringements of grammar: to look out for oblique or odd acceptations, and to give preference to the examples that were interesting either for their elegance, or for their anecdotes, or for their history. Such were the points which I discussed with them, leaving the execution to their own views, to their habits, to their personal taste and also to chance discoveries.

On my part I read and examined in detail certain books, not only to contribute to the amount of work, but above all to have for myself the experience of this kind of work and to appreciate better the contributions of my assistants. In any case, the true touchstone was the use of these examples and their incorporation into the composition of the

entries to which they referred. At that point I realised that several, whether they came from my collection or from those of my assistants, were suspect for various reasons. Monsieur Hachette wanted that I should confine myself to naming only the author of the citations and should not give additional information which would enable one to find them: edition, chapter and page. His motive was that, given the vast number of indications and the ease with which a mistake could occur either while writing down a number or while printing it, the dictionary would be a storehouse of errors. Such was his expression. But even if I had accepted this decision, by far too radical, it would not have remedied what was incorrect or insufficient in certain citations. The only solution was verification every time some suspicion arose, and this was highly laborious, very time-consuming and required a great deal of investigation. Nevertheless I was not put off, and I succeeded in giving my citations all their quality of precision. In spite of Monsieur Hachette's forecast, the dictionary did not become a storehouse of errors.

While I was peacefully collecting examples, terrible events erupted, which changed the face of France. In 1848 a riot, quickly transformed into a revolution, changed it into a republic. The stupefaction, not too benevolent, of the provinces at a change on which they had not been consulted, the revolutionary ideas of some, and the socialist systems of the others, and, among the victors, the uncertainty over the outcome of such a crisis, threw into disarray the public and private fortunes. The bloody conflict of June in Paris itself, between the National Assembly and the workers of Paris, was destined to amend nothing; and when Monsieur Hachette, commanded with his company of the *garde nationale* (National Guard) to attack, on a

Friday, a barricade erected in his locality (he was then residing in rue Pierre-Sarrasin, which has since been demolished), received a volley which covered him with the blood of several people near him, it is not surprising that he should have hesitated to continue with such an onerous enterprise as the dictionary, and suspended during the storm the assistance that he was providing me. But the firm was from that time solidly established, and its intrepid and clever chief withstood the circumstances. After what was only a momentary hesitation, he persevered, and I persevered with him.

After a time, the collection that I was making increased so much in volume that I considered that I had provided myself sufficiently with examples. As a matter of fact, it was not the case, but I did quite well to stop the work of collection, subject to resumption. Given the proportions which I had conceived for my dictionary, I would have been lost without any resources of time and space if I had let myself give in to the very natural temptation of making each of the sections of the dictionary comprehensive. It was urgent to resign myself to a sacrifice and go on to the whole by refusing to give finishing touches to the parts. I did not have to regret my decision, The whole was accomplished; that was the essential; for in many cases, it is the supreme judge of the parts. Thereafter the parts were taken up separately and with a better understanding, which compensated sufficiently for the interruption which I had imposed on them.

I recall that some years ago an Englishman, wanting to do for his language what I had done for mine, asked me through an intermediary to apprise him of the manner in which I had proceeded. I wholeheartedly gave him some essential indications; but, I admit it only too readily now,

they were certainly insufficient; and if I had then been able to give him the note that I am writing presently, I would have been more useful to him in sparing him a lot of trial and error that I had to go through myself. I had, it is true, illustrious predecessors in lexicography; Henri Estienne, Du Cange, Forcellini; Du Cange above all, whom I was leafing through constantly, and to whom I am grateful, as if he had been there, listening to me. I do not have the presumption to compare myself with them. Their task, moreover, had not been the same as mine; for they concerned themselves with dead languages wherein everything is closed, whereas I was dealing with a living language in which everything is open. However that may be, they have not told us how they proceeded to compose *their Treasuries*†. I shall be less discreet and, at the risk of being considered less modest, more personal or, to use an English expression, more *egotist*, by my reader, continue my lexicographic narration.

So I put an end to the collection of examples. They were written on little squares of paper, each carrying the name of the author, the title of the work, the page or the chapter. Each writer was represented by a packet of these square slips, already arranged in the alphabetical order. This had to be transformed into a general alphabetical order. This entirely material work, which I took upon myself, kept me busy for many hours a day during more than three months. One can judge by that how considerable the volume of work was. I truly admired it; not without some secret fright, as I saw it loom so large in front of me. But my trouble was beginning to pay off; for in this heap of small papers, I possessed, in a nebulous state, it is true, the col-

† A play on words, giving one of the meanings of the Latin word, *Thesaurus*, which was the title under which many dictionaries and encyclopaedias were then published.