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Wendy Ayres-Bennett, *Sociolinguistic Variation in Seventeenth-Century France: Methodology and Case Studies*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xii + 267 pp. Tables, figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-521-82088-X.

Review by Paul Cohen, University of Toronto.

For historians interested in the relationship between society and culture and open to interdisciplinary perspectives, the field of sociolinguistics offers a particularly rich set of tools. Sociolinguists study the ways in which formal aspects of language, like accent, syntax, vocabulary, and speech acts, are shaped by social experience. Informed by an understanding of social identity, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and social context, their work demonstrates how languages are not closed linguistic systems but dynamic cultural forms influenced by the society in which they are used. Because sociolinguists are ultimately interested in understanding linguistic phenomena, albeit in social context, their scholarship can also present certain challenges to readers without some background in linguistics.

The work under review is an excellent example of sociolinguistics' promise as well as its limits for historians. Wendy Ayres-Bennett has published widely on the history of the French language and of linguistic thought during the seventeenth century. In her latest book, she returns to the *Grand siècle* and proposes to examine socially distributed linguistic variation in spoken and written French. Focusing on a period known more for the normalizing linguistic tendencies encouraged by elites and institutions like the Académie française, Ayres-Bennett argues that considerable sociolinguistic variation and rapid change nonetheless continued to characterize seventeenth-century French. Her book delves into a wide range of source materials in an effort to reconstruct the contours of this socially variegated vernacular.

Ayres-Bennett's book is organized around four thematic studies. Chapter two attempts to trace differences between written and spoken language practice. To this end, she compiles evidence from metalinguistic texts, model dialogues, and sources which purport to transcribe speech faithfully, like the journal kept by Louis XIII's childhood doctors who meticulously recorded his speech as he struggled to overcome a stutter. Chapter three scours dictionaries, treatises on language use, and the burlesque dialogues published as *Mazarinades* during the Fronde for evidence of specific forms of language practice tied to social status. Chapter four seeks to determine whether there existed a specific form of women's language. Chapter five explores the possibility of tracing the precise nature of linguistic change over time. Throughout, Ayres-Bennett tests contemporary observations and normative prescriptions concerning socially-specific language use against empirical evidence of language practice, based primarily on exhaustive quantitative analysis of the FRANTEXT corpus.

Certain examples of sociolinguistic methodology that Ayres-Bennett draws upon will be of considerable interest to cultural historians. Her attempts to test whether the French spoken in overseas settlements like Québec, or the French-influenced creoles, lingua franca and trading pidgins in use in the Caribbean and the Atlantic, can be used to deduce the forms of oral French which originated in particular regions of France or in specific social milieu are particularly fascinating. Such use of sophisticated linguistic tools to tease out big hypotheses from seemingly modest data provides much food for thought.

Historians will likely find that the book's representation of the social hierarchy in seventeenth-century France is too reductive. A more nuanced portrait of this complex social universe and a fuller use of the work of social historians would have done much to enrich the argument, making it possible to highlight

not only important social distinctions, but also the slippages, ambiguities, and internal contradictions that were part and parcel of the early modern social order. It would for example have been possible to move beyond the question of language practice and analyze more fully how contemporaries themselves imagined language use to constitute social distinctions. Ayres-Bennett succeeds in doing just this in her chapter on women's language, by drawing more extensively on relevant historiography and including a thorough discussion of the *querelle des femmes* and the early modern debate over the quality of women's linguistic usage.

What will perhaps seem most striking to historians reading this book is the extent to which Ayres-Bennett marshals considerable evidence and thoughtful analysis in order to show the intrinsically limited possibilities of her own project. Her work is particularly strong in demonstrating the enormous difficulties in reconstructing oral language in general, and in recovering examples of spoken usage among the lower orders in particular. Her close readings of particular types of written sources repeatedly demonstrate their problematic nature as representations of oral or popular usage. Was the language of the nurse Jacqueline and her husband Lucas in Molière's *Le Médecin malgré lui* authentic peasant speech? Or was it a kind of stylized nod towards popular spoken French language, recognizable as such to contemporary theatregoers, with only a limited connection to actual usage in the countryside? To a considerable extent, her book represents an exploration of the limits of our linguistic knowledge of early modern France. Given how much scholarship has been published and how much linguistically self-conscious contemporaries themselves penned on language in the early modern period, Ayres-Bennett's central arguments constitute something of a salutary surprise. In the end, this is a book about how much we *don't* know about language in early modern France.

This book is not an easy read for the linguistically faint of heart. Nor is it to be consulted for a grand argument. Instead, it is a work to be mined as a rich source for contemporary testimony on language and social distinction, as an excellent illustration of the methodological difficulties associated with recovering oral language practice, and as a thought-provoking essay on the limits of sources. Without such useful correctives, we as historians can all too easily lose sight of the possibility that there may be questions which our sources cannot help us to answer.

NOTES

[1] See for example Ayres-Bennett's discussion of what she calls "style labels"--socially inflected descriptions of particularly kinds of usage (pp. 64-73). Terms like "bourgeois" were not merely descriptions of particular linguistic registers, but were understood by contemporaries to describe complex social categories. The relationship between the function of such socially charged terms to describe particular forms of language and to characterize particular kinds of people would have been an especially interesting avenue to explore.

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