

Protectionism and the Linguistic Reality of the French Language as Depicted through the
Works of Erik Orsenna

By
Rachel Poulin

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French and Francophone Studies
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Unlike in most countries where the effects of globalization are noticed predominately with the introduction of foreign products and the presence of international economic interrelations, the debate over globalization in France often focuses on the fear of foreign influences on the French language. More specifically, these so-called “foreign influences” only weakly veil the glaringly obvious accusation that the English language is threatening French. During my year abroad, I grew accustomed to hearing many media-frenzied, blatant accusations of how my mother tongue was threatening the language that I had spent so much of my life attempting to master. Fearing that this might be true, I decided to look further than the media’s viral call to the French to guard against the onset of Anglicisms, and thus began research on the actual state of the French language’s linguistic health and how modern linguists view this issue.

First and foremost, when one thinks of protecting the French language, L’Académie Française (The French Academy) undoubtedly comes to mind, although the founding of the Académie was not the first political move towards the current ideology of protectionism that surrounds the French language. Languages began to diverge in the Middle Ages – a time period that has been deemed as the age of dialects, where regional languages became very pronounced throughout France. These dialects were divided into “La Langue d’oc” and “La langue d’oïl” as these were the ways in which the dialects varied with regards to saying the word yes (oc and oïl respectively) (Machonis 155). During this same time, a similar struggle was occurring between vernacular French – a relatively new and budding language – and Latin, the language of the church, academic institutions, and literature. As a result of these vast linguistic shifts, a growing concern about the disparity between these regional dialects and a fear of this dichotomy of

languages became widespread, and political entities realized that for France to remain unified and powerful, a common language must be preserved. Thus, in August 1539 the Villers- Cotterêts Ordinance was passed by François Ier, stating that all political documents must be written clearly without any ambiguity where French would take the place of Latin in all official documents (Adamson xvii). This decree was the first step in ensuring that the state would remain unified and further set a precedent that asserted that France, above all, must be united by a common language.

As this strong movement of protection of the French language exists today, it comes as no surprise that there have been various steps in the trajectory of language politics that began even before the founding of the Académie in 1635. A prime proponent of this protectionist attitude stems from François de Malherbe and his propaganda that stated the requirement that the French use their language correctly to ensure its purity. Malherbe was a poet in the 16th and 17th centuries who was known to correct Ronsard's poetry as a fun pastime, removing nearly half of the words from each poem. Malherbe was known for correcting any and all language flaws and was highly anti-dialect, requiring that everyone speak with a clear, pure French. It may seem impossible for one man's ideas to have affected an entire language speaking community, but Malherbe's ideas contributed considerably to how the French even today, view their language. Malherbe's ideas became so prominent in the language climate of the day, that only a small percentage of the French spoke French fluently, allowing the elite to abide by the purist language policies propagated by Malherbe. Additionally, during this time, French was the only widely used language that adhered to the specific rules of the antiquated languages of Greek and Latin (68 Nadeau). Shortly thereafter, the Académie Française

was founded by Cardinal Richelieu with the intent to unite the French people by a common language, admittedly aiming to set rules, to codify the French language, and to ensure that it would be a pure and eloquent way in which the French could understand each other. In addition, the Académie would create a dictionary of all accepted French words so as to ensure a clear, accessible way for the French to communicate. This Académie exists today as a functioning group of “Immortals”, as they are so called, who continue to carry out their original purpose of deliberating over the words that will be officially accepted into the French language. The Académie was founded with a board of amateurs, many of them authors, but rarely linguists or grammarians and thus, the task to which they are assigned in purifying the French language remains an impossible feat and has been a severely limiting factor on the level of effectiveness that the Académie has been able to achieve (Nadeau 74).

Interestingly enough, with the rise in technology over the past 30+ years, this question of protecting the French language has become even more prevalent and apparent in the language policies that exist in France. For example, in 1972, *Les Commissions ministérielles de terminologie et de néologie* were founded in order to prevent the addition of foreign words into the French language. These commissions instead create equivalent French words to ensure that language borrowing and code switching is kept to a minimum. Following a similar line of reasoning, the Loi Bas-Lauriol, passed in 1975, decreed that French must be used in the media in commercial publishing, advertising, and commerce in place of foreign languages. In August 4, 1994, La Loi Toubon was passed, requiring that all advertisements and documents relating to consumer goods be written in French or be translated into French to prevent the encroachment of English on their

language, and this timeline of policies correlates well with the introduction of further globalization and interconnectedness with new technologies, especially in the past two decades with the introduction of the internet (Adamson 13).

Although many other changes in linguistic policy have occurred, these are the furthest reaching and most influential policies as they are in direct response to what the Académie refers to as, “La concurrence de l’anglais, même dans la vie courante représentait une réelle menace pour le français et que les importations anglo-américaines dans notre lexique devenaient trop massives¹” (“Le Français Aujourd’hui”). With these policies and such a rich history including characters such as Malherbe, it comes as no surprise that strides to purify the French language continue to be made currently. One such example of this appeared in the debate over whether or not to accept the word “hashtag” into the French language in 2013. Indeed, it was later determined that the French government would refrain from using this obvious Anglicism, replacing it with “mot-dièse” while other language purists demanded that it be called “un croisillon” as this was the actual sign being used as opposed to the musical notation symbol for sharp (Aissaoui).

With the evident stance of language policies that have been taken by the government as well as public efforts that extend to social media spheres such as twitter, it remains necessary to review the linguistic basis of the French language and why these protectionist attitudes persist today. Although many differing linguistic ideologies exist today on how, why, and even if the French language should be protected, I have chosen to focus on the French author and linguist Erik Orsenna and his ideologies on protecting

¹ “The competition of English, even in everyday life represented a real threat for French and that the Anglo-American importations in our lexicon became too great.”

the French language by correct usage and a love for language. Erik Orsenna has written a myriad of works on multiple subjects, but those on which I will focus include: *La Grammaire est une chanson douce*, *Les Chevaliers du subjonctif*, *Et si on dansait?*, *La Révolte des accents*, and *La Fabrique des mots* that exist as a series pertaining to the protection of the French language. In these works, the idea of protecting languages is literally brought to life as he personifies different verb tenses, modes, and even grammatical structures.

In his first book, entitled *La Grammaire est une chanson douce*, the protagonist, Jeanne, and her brother Thomas are shipwrecked on a transatlantic voyage to visit their father in the United States. During the shipwreck, they lose their ability to speak but are taken in by natives of an island, including a man named M. Henri who helps the siblings regain their ability to speak. Along the way, they venture around the island to different whimsical places including the word market and a factory where words are manufactured, and where they learn the importance and value of words. Jeanne meets famous authors such as Marcel Proust and Jean de La Fontaine where she learns that language and words are so powerful that these authors are able to live on through their works.

In *Les Chevaliers du subjonctif* Jeanne and Thomas have grown up and are now adolescents. In this book, Jeanne is interested in love and after Thomas disappears, Jeanne goes on an adventure to the islands of the imperative, conditional, and subjunctive. Jeanne learns the importance of the subjunctive that is used to describe love, dreams, desires, and imagination, without which, she herself would not be able to describe her own feelings of love. Jeanne is moved to protect the French language to

ensure the ability to express one's emotions and thoughts.

The third installment in this series is *La Révolte des accents*, where the reader encounters the same characters facing a new challenge: the accents of the French language have gone on strike. The accents have rebelled after not being used in schools or implemented correctly in written French. Thomas and Jeanne search for the accents and must convince them to return, ensuring that they will be appreciated and used correctly. In this story they learn the importance of even the smallest components of the French language such as accents that allow for ease of communication that maintain the standard of their language.

Et si on dansait? opens with Jeanne who is now employed by students on the island to do their homework and write their papers. This new scheme of hers reaches the politicians of the islands and she is soon asked to write for a powerful politician. The story continues where the punctuation begins to disappear from the writing and with the help of her brother Thomas, a musician who is very familiar with rhythm, Jeanne learns the importance of punctuation in language. Together, the two save their language by ensuring the correct rhythm and musicality through the preservation of punctuation. Jeanne is yet again in love and learns that to express her emotions, she needs more than just words, and by pairing prose with rhythm, she creates a beautiful melody to which one can dance.

In the fifth installment of Jeanne's adventures, in *La Fabrique des mots*, Orsenna continues the theme of the disappearance of different aspects of language, but this time it is due to a powerful dictator, Nécrole, the governor of the island. Nécrole deems the people of the island too talkative and limits the number of words the citizens can speak to

a list of twelve accepted words that are only to be used when it is absolutely necessary to communicate. Orsenna introduces "the Captain", whose library full of dictionaries is burned down, and after that, English begins to substitute for the forbidden French words. Here, the students of the island, partnering with their teacher, Mlle Laurencin, revolt against the orders of Nécrole, and discover that languages are a patchwork of words from many different origins that must be used to be maintained, lest they be replaced by foreign words.

Throughout all of these stories, Orsenna calls his readers into action to protect the French language, thus awakening them from their apathetic slumber and showing them how English and other threats are encroaching upon the French language. By using these vivid stories, Orsenna acts as a sort of guardian of language. Orsenna's role is to defend the ideology of language purism despite whether or not the French language is actually, linguistically threatened. Although French may be healthy linguistically, Orsenna calls his readers to take part in the ownership of this language as it is so closely tied to the French national identity. By taking part in its preservation, Orsenna's readers can further strengthen Richelieu's original goals to unify the republic and solidify a common identity and ownership by learning and loving the French language.

Chapter I: Purity

Before responding to Orsenna's call to stop the deterioration of the French language, readers must gain a better understanding of what is being asked of them by first understanding what is the ideal model of a purified and protected French. Firstly, the idea of having a pure language is, in and of itself, a contradiction and furthermore irrelevant to linguists since one of the main tenets of modern linguistic theory is that language must be studied for how it is used, not for what is prescribed as grammatically correct. This is the idea of prescriptive vs. organic grammar that will be described in more detail in chapter 3 (Milroy 1). Thus, even in the most fundamental view of language, what is proposed as needing protection (the French language as a whole) and the sphere in which most Anglicisms and so-called deteriorations are taking place (the spoken language), are different entities that cannot necessarily be considered in the same argument.

Furthermore, the fact that the way that language "should" be used and the way in which it actually is used would lead most linguists to say that this quest to purify the French language is futile since there is no way to enforce the purification of a spoken language. Thus, in this chapter we will delve into the question of whether language purity can even exist, and if so, the definition by which so-called "language purists" would deem the French language pure. If advocates for a pure French would have it that French is spoken perfectly by all, regardless of education, socioeconomic status, or native tongue, then this level of purity would certainly be impossible with the current state of French. Of course, as with most ongoing debates with little hope for a consensus any time soon, what is meant by language purity must be defined so as to measure at what point even the most stringent advocate for protecting the French language would be satisfied.

One French linguist who discusses this “quest for purity” (Rey 33) is Alain Rey who is well acquainted with the French language, having himself edited the longest volume of a modern French dictionary to the present date (Le Robert). Rey discusses in his book entitled *L’Amour du français (The Love of French)* that language purism is, “...Un système, un dogme ou bien une requête, ne peut faire bon ménage avec un usage, même bon. Il lui faut le tout de la langue²” (Rey 33). Thus, for a language to be pure, it must be systematized, as a whole, not in parts such as spoken vs. written. To an extent, this is a form of language purity that is advocated by Orsenna, as throughout his tales surrounding the island, he highlights different aspects of language, including modes in *Les Chevaliers du subjonctif*, or grammar as a whole in *La Grammaire est une chanson douce*. However, Rey goes on to explain language purity as having, “Les qualités rêvées de toute langue, dès lors qu’elle est reconnue, appréciée, revendiquée, sont peu variées. Elle doit être, et donc elle est, dans les têtes, claire, transparente et, par une métaphore biologique sans cesse à l’œuvre, vivante et en santé³” (Rey 27). At first glance, Rey’s definition of a pure language of being a regulated system that must be clear and have little variation while at the same time, being constantly at work, appears to be contradictory. How is a system supposed to be regulated if it is constantly moving? To answer this seemingly contradictory definition, Rey likens this contradiction to the idea of sexual morality, comparing a pure language to a virgin (Rey 27). However, he says that it can hardly be

² A system, a dogma or a request cannot be compatible with its usage. It requires the entirety of the language.

³ The qualities dreamed of in every language, as soon as it is recognized, appreciated, asserted, and have very little variation. It must be and thus it is, thought of [in such a way that it is] clear, transparent and by a biological metaphor, incessantly at work, living and healthy.

thought of in this manner since only the mother language can be regarded in this respect, but that language is always imperfect and certainly not virginal in nature (Rey 27) and thus, this “quest for purity” is unfounded since it cannot exist with modern languages as they have been influenced by so many other languages.

Rey goes on to admit that we must make a distinction between the language that is written and preserved vs. that which is spoken, and even then, this preserved language is not something that can actually be attained or even studied, as it requires an unrealistic level of purity that cannot be used with a living organism such as languages (Rey 28). Thus, Rey claims that attempting to completely sterilize a language would preserve the language in its current state, but this would also inhibit the language from evolving. He continues this argument stating that the only entirely standardized languages are dead languages and thus, if those concerned with protecting the French language are attempting to standardize it, purity will actually lead to the demise of French rather than its preservation.

However, he does not leave the reader hopeless to let the fates or outside influences continue to change the French language, claiming that, “Manquer à la pureté, c’est le barbarisme⁴” (Rey 32). Rey advocates the need to maintain a certain level of accountability of a language, supporting Orsenna’s works concerning Jeanne and her attempt to battle in between militaristic stringency to enforce grammar and neglecting grammar altogether.

To reinforce these ideas, Orsenna personifies both camps of this argument poignantly in *La Fabrique des mots* where Nécrole, the evil governor of the island, has

⁴ To fail at achieving purity is barbarity.

banned all words except for twelve authorized words. This list is claimed to include all words that are needed to communicate, yet only includes words used to describe basic functions such as to be born, to eat, to drink, to work, to die, to get married, to divorce etc. When introducing this new law, Mlle Laurencin, the ever-idealistic teacher, fighting for creativity in the classroom, challenges her students with the question, “Et pourquoi Nécrole n’a-t-il choisi que des verbes?”⁵ to which Jeanne replied, “Les verbes sont les moteurs de la phrase, tu nous l’as souvent répété. Nécrole veut nous mettre au travail. Donc il n’a retenu que les mots qui décrivent des actions⁶” (29). As this list is comprised entirely of infinitive verbs, the utilization of these words would create a world in which the users could only speak to explain their actions, resulting in a robotic, productive environment void of all creativity. This takes the extreme stance of language protectionism to where a language has been purified so much that its simplification renders it devoid of life. In this example, the usage of only verbs in the infinitive structure would simplify the French language so much that no grammar mistakes could be made as one could not even conjugate without using a subject — in and of itself an example of what would be on the forbidden word list. On the other side of this example, Jeanne at first exemplifies the reality of what will happen if nothing at all is done to protect the French language. Jeanne’s apathy serves as an example of the threat of what might happen if nothing is done to protect the French language, as she claims to hate conjugations and grammar (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 74). Thus, Orsenna has written this story to raise awareness of the general public, those who are neglecting the

⁵ And why did Nécrole only choose verbs, in your opinion?”

⁶ “Verbs are the driving force of the sentence, you have often repeated this to us. Nécrole want to put us to work. Thus, he only kept words that describe actions.”

correct usage of the French language, to wake them up in a way to this realization. It is this idea that is found throughout Orsenna's works that demands that the different modes of the language and even minute details, that even some French would deem trivial, be protected. Orsenna raises this reality in such a way that his readers are able to learn alongside Jeanne and her classmates in Mlle Laurencin's classroom where she challenges the students to think outside of what they are being mandated to do, and instead, to take a personal platform on the matter. One student questions the new mandate for permitted words by asking, "Mademoiselle, c'est vraiment grave d'avoir moins de mots?"⁷ (*La Fabrique des mots* 30) and the narrator continues saying,

Laurencin ne répondit pas tout de suite. Elle laissa passer l'orage. C'était l'une de ses tactiques: se taire et sourire.... 'Toi, l'élève, au tableau.' 'Mais, maitresse, tu as oublié mon prénom?' ... 'Ah, ah! Vous n'aimez pas qu'on vous retire vos prénoms! Vous vous sentez tout nus? Vous pourriez être n'importe qui? Eh bien, les arbres, c'est pareil, et tous les objets de la vie. Ils veulent un mot qui les désigne chacun, qui les distingue⁸... (*La Fabrique des mots* 31)

By using this teachable moment, Laurencin explains why purifying the language to such a sterile degree, would in fact, kill the French language just as each student deserves to have his own name, so each object, inanimate or otherwise, does deserve a

⁷ "Miss, is it really serious to have fewer words?"

⁸ "Laurencin did not respond right away. She let the storm pass. It was one of her tactics: to stay quiet and smile... 'You, student, to the board.' 'But professor, did you forget my name?'.... 'Oh, oh! You don't like that your names are taken away! You feel naked? You could be anybody? Well it's the same for trees and all objects of life. They want a word that designates each, that distinguishes them.'"

distinguishing name. This example shows that language purity in the sense of sterilization is not only unattainable, but also undesirable, and that each language should consist of a verbose lexicon where every object is called by its own name.

Another important component in the debate over language protectionism in France is the influence of foreign languages and how French is being invaded by words that are not French in origin. This is one debate that holds little stock in the linguistics sphere as was discussed earlier; the only languages that can be considered pure or virginal are the mother languages. For the case of the French language's specific history, besides stemming from Latin, as is the case with all Romance languages, it has had much English, German, and Italian influence over the years (Adamson 3). Furthermore, the French language has been in large part influenced by Arabic and other languages as well. The concept of preventing foreign languages from influencing French is addressed directly in Orsenna's book *La Fabrique des mots*. Orsenna seems to address this linguistic purist's pipedream directly as he writes of a police force whose sole job is to stop the acquisition of foreign words that seems absolutely ridiculous to Jeanne (*La Fabrique des mots* 84). Orsenna further refutes this argument by teaching his readers that languages are a patchwork, a sort of interworking of influences, meshed together to create something beautiful, and that attempting to extricate all foreign influence would be impossible and prove to be more harmful than helpful. Although this over-simplified explanation of languages being a patchwork might make any educated linguist disagree, (and in fact, did in an interview I conducted) it provides a way of removing the stigma of the introduction of foreign words into a regulated language such as French. Robin

Adamson writes about this very concept, claiming that language borrowings⁹ and influences from other languages are actually an enrichment showing that the language is healthy and living as it continues to evolve.

Not only can the influence of foreign languages be a marker of a healthy language, but also can result in an interesting phenomenon as discussed in the linguistics compilation *Beyond Boundaries*. The chapter entitled, “Who we are and where we are going,” written by Jenny Cheshire, discusses an example when European young adults were influenced by English to the extent that they were more likely to create graffiti art in English in cities. This was due to their belief that by using English, rather than their native tongue, they would be able to communicate within the global community (Cheshire 27-30). Thus, sharing a language between many different cultures can be a way of connection that could not exist otherwise. By using English, the youth were able to communicate different emotions and relate to each other in a different way than they would have with their mother tongues. Interestingly enough, this was seen in countries such as Germany and the Netherlands where their English proficiency is much higher and thus, could be a motivation for the French to embrace English and other foreign languages to better connect amongst the European community. This concept of language and identity will be further discussed in chapter 2, yet is tied directly to foreign influence. In this same text, the ideology of how global identities are additive is discussed, since an individual can identify as both a German and a European. For those who were exposed to

⁹ “Language Borrowings” are defined by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* as a, “Conventional term for the introduction into language *a* of specific words, constructions, or morphological elements of language *b*. Thus *table* and *marble* are among the many loan words ‘borrowed’ into English from Old French in the period after the Norman Conquest” (Matthews).

the foreign influence of English in their nation, their dual understanding of self combined to add an additional layer to the way they were able to communicate amongst the larger, European community.

As has been discussed, foreign influences can have a positive effect on forms of communication and to be threatened by word borrowings actually means that only individual words are being defended and not the language itself. In fact, Adamson claims that this results in a state where, “To go to a battle over words is to mistake the symptom for the disease” (Adamson 145). A language must be promoted in more ways than by focusing on the slight changes that have occurred as a result of the influence of foreign languages, and thus, it is necessary to at first, gain a better understanding of the actual health of the French language. After doing so, it will be easier to gain insight about where it seems to be weakening and where protectionists could better focus resources and efforts to treating the disease, if one exists, instead of fearing any and all foreign influences.

Most educated linguists would admit that to purify languages is a fruitless endeavor; especially as language purity should never be the goal, as Rey explains in his definition of an ideal language. Thus, perhaps protectionists should instead be striving for ways to continue to promote the health of the French language, as the French language is, by definition, a prototype of a healthy, evolving language at present. In fact, Robin Adamson cites that, “French is more widely spoken throughout the world now than at any other time. There are growing numbers of learners of French as a second or foreign language and the language itself is adapting well to the demands of the modern world” (Adamson xvi). In addition, many of the more level-headed analysts who have been observing the

trajectory of the French language have admitted that allowing new words of foreign influence into the French language is actually a sign that the language is alive and healthy, and is a result of natural language change and does not translate into a need for the French to resist foreign influence (Adamson xv).

This idea of acknowledging that the French language exists as a healthy, thriving language is found throughout Orsenna's works, especially in *La Fabrique des mots* in the examples I have previously discussed. These ideas are strengthened by statistics from a study performed by the Diplomatie Française that showed how French is cited as the only language other than English that is spoken on all continents, and is the second (to English) most-widely learned foreign language in the world. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2014, French speakers have increased by 7% with the majority of this taking place in sub-Saharan Africa. Additionally, even in the realm of technology, French is widely used, ranking at number 4 for the number of internet users, websites, and social media networks as well as being 3rd for the language most used in blogs on the web ("Infographie: le français, 5e langue mondiale").

Another leading French linguist, Claude Hagège, author of *Halte à la mort des langues* (2001) (*On the life and death of languages*), expounded on the concept of the current state of French in *The New York Times* in response to a reader's question concerning the distinction between American English and British English, and whether or not this could be applied to the French language as well. However, he responded by saying that although some deviations exist between these English dialects, they are much more prevalent in other dialects such as those that are not spoken by native speakers (a linguistic discipline referred to as "Non Native Varieties of English"). He goes on to say

that this is simply not a likely trajectory for the French language due to the established norms that exist in the French language that do not exist in the English language. Furthermore, as French extends to multiple continents as a first language, Hagège claims that the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF), which I will discuss in further detail in chapter 4, has strengthened the community of official speakers, thereby strengthening the French language as a whole. He also claims that due to boards of people such as lexicographers and grammarians (which we can only assume he is alluding to the Académie Française for the latter) allow for the upkeep and standardization of the French language, and thus, it remains unthreatened by this evolving tendency that has happened ever so slightly to the English language (“Q and A: The Death of Languages”).

Thus, when facing these realities of the current state of the French language and the pipe-dream level of attaining purity of any language, it seems that the question should not be whether or not the French language needs to be protected, but rather, why is it so important to native speakers that it be protected, if there is no real threat from English as was demonstrated by being front-runners in almost every category of the aforementioned survey. The real struggle may simply be for who will win out on top as opposed to claiming that English is rendering the French language dead. If the English language is more at risk of deviating in its differing dialects as suggested by Hagège, it leads the reader to consider how Francophones could ever believe that the French language is at risk. Although no simple answer can be agreed upon while so many differing points of views exist even within the linguistic community, this belief is, in large-part due to France’s unique history in acquiring her language. However, even more importantly, this

protectionist phenomenon is closely tied to French identity in relation to the French's native tongue, an identity that, if believed to be threatened, will be forcefully defended.

Chapter 2: Identity: You are What You Speak

In political science theory, when discussing the concept of a nation or a people, the two most important distinguishing factors in defining a nation-state are a shared language and ethnicity. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the concepts of identity and language are so closely linked when studying this question of protecting the French language. As was referenced in the introduction, the historical trajectory of the acquisition of the French language was largely a political move to unify what is now modern day France at a time when the transition from Latin to French resulted in differing dialects, not only between the North and South, but also region by region. Even in the 19th century, only 75% of the population spoke French and many more than that only spoke it as a second language (Robbins 107) since the majority of the population spoke patois as their first language. Thus, the unifying force that created the French nation also underlined the importance of this common language as a part of French identity. In this chapter, I will focus on the larger question of language and identity and on the origin of the “fear of losing their *disque dur*” (hard drive) (Adamson xvii).

After the founding of the Académie in the 17th century and throughout the 18th century, standard French was considered a refined language that, as was the aim of founding the Académie, was known for its purity and clarity and was thus considered a language of the elite (Coupland 307). During this time, this myth of purity that was discussed in chapter 1 spread to the fear of adopting foreign words into the French lexicon, as they feared this would lead to the degeneration of the quality and purity of the French language. With this idolization of standard French, a great cultural divide amongst speakers of local dialects (patois that was considered less refined and elegant) and those

of standard French was born (Coupland 307). With even this simplified background of France's history, the reader can understand this line of reasoning since this mentality has been ingrained in the entire trajectory of the history of the acquisition of the French language in France. Furthermore, the current state of French protectionist ideologies and attitudes stem from an elitist historical perspective that has pervaded centuries. Thus, it is evident that although the patois spoken and standard French did share similarities stemming from the same original language, the language that was spoken was integral in determining an individual's status. The disparity between the "elite" and of the "common people" demonstrates one of the vital ways of how language both influences identity on a personal level and can also create an "other" of those who do not share the same language. This fear of the other and their inevitable encroachment upon "la langue française" led to an ironic turn of events where the elite determined that the French language must be standardized in order to ultimately render France a more inclusive state where all shared the same language, and the lines of us and them would become blurred, united by this common language (Ball 206).

Orsenna takes this idea of languages uniting a vastly different people a step further as he argues that language can go so far as to transcend the differences between people, since it is the one thing shared by all in a common place and nation. In an interview with "Le Figaro" Orsenna discusses the idea of "Ma patrie, c'est la langue¹⁰" of Albert Camus, author of *L'Etranger* implying that even when one is a foreigner, it is his mother tongue that is truly home for him. In this interview, Orsenna underlined how he interpreted this idea stating, "La langue reste la seule chose qui définisse, finalement, la

¹⁰ "My homeland, it's [my] language"

nation. Qu'est-ce qui unit un pays? La monnaie? L'euro est partagé par une vingtaine de nations. Les frontières? Il n'y en a plus. Ma patrie, c'est la langue¹¹” (Aissaoui). When nation-states are formed, the act of combining a country is geographic and bureaucratic at first, and combining a number of different people who will ultimately share the same language and culture is often even more problematic. For Orsenna, what remains the only way of determining his homeland and country is his language and this is ultimately his reason for protecting it, as it is, in its purest form. To protect the French language means to protect one’s culture, history and home. Orsenna feels that, by fighting for the integrity of the French language, he is fighting for his homeland that is ultimately united by the French language.

The idea of language and identity is explained in a unique way in Orsenna’s work, *Et si on dansait?* where Jeanne has made a name for herself as a professional writer, both acknowledging the importance of language and her role in protecting it after having experienced the detrimental effects of the misuse and loss of language throughout her many adventures. In this book, Jeanne is asked by the president to write on his behalf, which results in Jeanne having an internal crisis when she sees someone else gaining credit for her work. In her panic, she claims, “Moi, perdue toute petite dans les tribunes et folle de fierté, j’avais envie de me lever et de crier: je m’appelle Jeanne, c’est moi l’auteur¹²” (*Et si on dansait?* 28). For her, to allow someone to reap the benefits for her words, for what she truly values as an integral part of her identity, she begins to feel lost

¹¹ “Language remains the only thing that ultimately defines a nation. What unites a country? Currency? The Euro is shared by 20 nations. Borders? There are no longer any. My homeland, it’s [my] language.”

¹² “Me, lost so tiny in the tribunes and crazy with pride, I wanted to get up and scream: my name is Jeanne, I’m the author!”

and undervalued, desiring to gain the credit for her writing. Orsenna presents this as a link between words and language to a tangible identity and example that all can understand. In this example, Jeanne has been awakened from her apathy towards her language, and refuses to allow someone to take credit for her words. In the same way, Orsenna would argue that one's mother tongue, being such an important part of one's identity and "homeland" should be something that is fought for and appreciated. Just as Jeanne must declare that she is the author, native speakers should be defending their language that help shape them and unite them by creating these speech communities of which they are a part.

Just as Orsenna had claimed that language is the only definitive factor that truly determines a people, it is also evident throughout *Et si on dansait?* where he defines language as a way to understand others who are vastly different. In this story, Jeanne receives a letter from the president of the Republic of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, who invites her to be a part of an association with the sole goal of protecting the semi-colon. Senghor also hopes to place this punctuation mark on UNESCO's threatened species list in order to ensure that it be protected from the threat of those who do not use it correctly. He writes to Jeanne saying, "Notre langue n'est pas seulement un moyen de nous comprendre. C'est un bien que nous avons tous en partage, les petits comme les grands, les faibles comme les puissants; c'est le ferment de notre unité; c'est notre chose commune¹³" (*Et si on dansait?* 84). By sharing this common language, even someone from a different continent than Jeanne is able to find something in common with an

¹³ "Our language is not only a way to understand each other. It is a commodity that we all share, the small and the big, the weak and the powerful; it's the catalyst of our unity; it's what we have in common."

otherwise foreign person, exemplifying that language transcends differences in nationalities and cultures, uniting people with different ways of life. In a way, Orsenna is using Senghor in this story not only because he was the president of Senegal, but also because he was the first member to be accepted to the Académie Française from Africa. He uses this example to demonstrate how geography means very little when language is such a unifying force and results in a common identity for even vastly different peoples. Just as Orsenna had experienced commonality by working with Senghor on the Académie, he uses Jeanne's interactions to show two very different people from very different countries unified by their goal of protecting their common language, thus demonstrating the power of the Francophonie (a subject that will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 4.)

Another example of the importance of language in determining identity that Orsenna introduces in *La Grammaire est une chanson douce* appears when Jeanne is kidnapped and forced to stay in the factory of words where she begins to explore and finds a man who is writing. She strikes up a conversation with him and soon discovers that he is the author of the famous children's book *Le Petit prince* (The Little Prince), Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. She questions how he is alive, despite his death many years previously, and he responds, "Je ne suis pas mort parce que j'écris. Si tu ne me laisses pas travailler, je vais mourir de nouveau"¹⁴ (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 139). A similar experience occurs during her meeting with Marcel Proust who hints at lacking air the longer she stays (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 143). Finally, she meets Jean de la Fontaine who explains again that "Quand la mort s'approche d'un grand écrivain, ses

¹⁴ "I am not dead because I am writing. If you don't let me work, I will die again."

amis les mots, au dernier moment, l'enlèvent et le déposent ici, pour qu'il continue son travail¹⁵” (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 145). In each of these examples, words and language are shown to be so closely linked to their life and their identity that these writers literally begin to struggle to breathe when they are torn away from their work. Orsenna uses this example to show the importance of words, using this hyperbolic parallel of life and language since it is so closely related to who a person is, that it can even be the source of life.

Another angle from which Orsenna explains this link to identity is that of grammar with Madame Jargonos' ability to speak properly even when the accents had gone on strike in *La Révolte des accents* and had affected the pronunciation of everyone else. Her claim to why this has not been the case for her is, “Peut-être que j'aime trop la grammaire. Elle fait partie de moi, elle me donne la mesure comme mon cœur; elle relie tous les morceaux de moi, comme mon sang ou mes muscles. La grammaire est comme ma vie¹⁶” (*La Révolte des accents* 51). Yet again, Orsenna takes an extreme case to make his point, comparing grammar and different aspects of a language to interconnected parts of Madame Jargonos' physical body, unable to differentiate between a mental or physical connection. This example is extremely pertinent as it explains language in a way that can show the importance of prescriptivism, in the realm of grammar, and also supports the necessity of learning one's native tongue so well that it becomes an extension of oneself,

¹⁵ “When death approaches a great writer, his friends – words – at the last moment collect him and leave him here so that he can continue his work”

¹⁶ “Maybe I love grammar too much. It is a part of me, it gives me the beat of my heart; it binds all of the pieces of me, like my blood or my muscles. Grammar is like my life.”

furthering this idea of words being the source of life that he introduces with the writers in *La Grammaire est une chanson douce*.

Interestingly enough, this theme of identity being closely tied to one's language is perhaps most pertinent to France as this country has a unique sociological phenomenon that creates a divide between its neighboring countries of Western Europe. Namely, that they have what many consider the lowest (on average) English proficiency in Western Europe and the fourth lowest of Europe on the whole with only a 51.84 on the English Proficiency Index, where the average amongst European countries is a 55.65 ("EF English Proficiency Index"). This encourages the sole use of French in a continent where, as was discussed in chapter 1, many (specifically in the younger generations) feel that their ability to use English is a benefit and aids in uniting them to the rest of their continent in a way that their native tongue would simply not allow (Gubbins 27). This leaves many French to feel that not only are they first and foremost French, but also ultimately do not identify strongly as Europeans, and accept their national identity in comparison to other Western European nations (with the exception of Great Britain) (Gubbins 27). By not having this "additive" European identity, this results in a tighter hold on their French identity and encourages the French to be more protective of their language.

Another aspect of identity that is often associated with France's protectionist attitude is their attempt to remain centralized in a globalizing world. As can be seen in some of these trends, an aversion to English coupled with the push-back on technological words such as "hashtag", as was explained in the introduction, exists as one form of this aim to avoid globalizing trends. Another example of this appears even in the realm of

media and the Loi Toubon that insists upon French programming and music to be played during certain hours of the day on the radio so as to inhibit English domination in this sphere. However, Orsenna represents this debate in the example found in *Les Chevaliers du subjonctif*, where the governor and antagonist of this story, Nécrole, bans travel in an attempt to contain the island's culture and to place boundaries on the population. Once Jeanne learns that she is required to have a permit to fly in an airplane on her quest to find the island of the subjunctive, Jeanne declares that Nécrole is crazy, especially after she learns that he has also mandated that all boats be burned. Jeanne's friend, the cartographer and pilot of the island replies to her accusation, saying, "Pas du tout, Jeanne. Notre dictateur est de plus en plus logique. Qu'est-ce qu'un bateau? Un être libre. Un bateau peut aller partout: il n'y a pas de route sur la mer... un bateau est forcément un ennemi des dictateurs qui détestent les libertés, toutes les libertés"¹⁷ (*Les Chevaliers du subjonctif* 46). Jeanne continues by asking why there must be a permit for altitude, but Jeanne quickly realizes that it is, "La vue, une meilleure vue, une vue plus large, plus générale ..."¹⁸ (*Les Chevaliers du subjonctif* 46). To which he replies, "Bravo! Eh bien ce genre de vision, les dictateurs ne le supportent pas. Le point de vue peut entraîner la critique. Et, pour eux, aucune critique n'est acceptable"¹⁹ (*Les Chevaliers du subjonctif* 46). This interaction shows two things: the first that Nécrole has now been deemed a fully-fledged dictator, taking over control of what is allowed in and out of the island and

¹⁷ "Not at all, Jeanne. Our dictator is more and more logical. What is a boat? A free being. A boat can go everywhere: there is no road on the sea... a boat is certainly an enemy of dictators who hate freedoms, all freedoms."

¹⁸ "View, a better view, a larger, more general [point of] view."

¹⁹ "Well done! And dictators cannot stand this type of vision. Point of view can lead to criticism, and for them, no criticism is acceptable."

the knowledge that even some of the islanders possess about his true nature. Additionally, on a subtler note, it shows that to be against globalization and allowing for the influx and exiting of information, knowledge, technology and even people is infringing upon the freedoms of all. This will allow new points of view and will allow for new ideologies to be created, and to be against this is to unrightfully dictate people's liberties. In a similar example where Nécrole limits the French language to a list of 12 words, even implementing a police force to stop the influence of foreign words, to which Jeanne responds, "Mais c'est idiot. Et impossible. Tu nous l'as expliqué: notre langue s'est nourrie d'innombrables mots venus d'ailleurs²⁰" (*La Fabrique des mots* 84). In all of these examples, Orsenna clearly takes a stance against remaining thoroughly centralized to the extent of refusing an influx of knowledge and globalization on a larger scale, since this would take individual freedoms and reduce the French language to only 12 words. Additionally, this brings back up the linguistic quandary of whether or not to protect a language since this must be balanced to avoid barbarism: language should be standardized to a certain extent, but not so standardized that it would become a dead language that is no longer receiving influence from foreign languages. These influxes from other languages are necessary for the life and health of a language as Milroy discusses and as I discussed in the previous chapter.

Throughout France's history it is evident that identity, whether established by the government or the very act of solidifying the nation-state, has been directly linked to the French language. The transition from regional dialects to a unifying mother-tongue remains one of the aspects of which the French are so proud, defining what it is to be

²⁰ "But that's idiotic! And impossible. You explained it to us; our language has thrived upon innumerable words that have come from elsewhere."

French. It is for these reasons, deeply rooted in the politics, history, and culture of the French people that the French are so protective over their language and are so adamant about refusing English to drastically change their language. Although it may not be linguistically necessary due to the current state of the French language to remain so stringent in implementing these protectionist attitudes, the way in which the French use their language is now a tradition from which they can boast great authors such as Molière, Rimbaud, Baudelaire. It is this tradition of the cultivation of such an eloquent language that is so closely tied to French identity, this alone warranting the protectionist efforts to safeguard their identity and culture.

Chapter 3: Words and Usage

When discussing language, how one defines the term grammar varies greatly, from a definition widely-accepted by linguists to the more widely-used colloquial sense of the word to refer to the rules of language. In the colloquial sense, when one hears the term “grammar,” one might be reminded of a vivid image of sentence diagramming and subject-verb agreements. However, from the point of view of sociolinguists, grammar exists as too broad a term to serve any real purpose before being broken down into its sub-definitions of prescriptive and organic grammars. Prescriptive grammar is defined by the linguists James and Leslie Milroy as a grammar that takes into account the importance of social and cultural ideologies of what is considered correct (Milroy 1). In their book, *Authority in Language*, they describe this concept in layman’s terms, likening these subcategories of grammar to the collectively cultural customs that are expected to take place at a dinner party. Examples of these customs include the expectations that guests will arrive in a certain type of evening wear, matching a certain style, and will know how to eat according to a particular fashion, using certain cutlery with certain courses. Although the reader may be absentmindedly nodding along, waiting for a more groundbreaking revelation, Milroy addresses the somewhat subtle truth of how this expected behavior is not determined by any of the guests at the party themselves. Instead, the customs are determined by society and unknown authorities with which the average partygoer will comply. Albeit adhered to in refined company, these unspoken rules are found to be entirely arbitrary as none of the dinner guests have a personal motivation other than following with society’s expectations.

Additionally, Milroy extends this metaphor to the argument that complying with the prescribed “correct” form of dinner party etiquette does not necessarily ensure an enhanced efficiency. In fact, there may exist other, more efficient ways to consume a meal such as with one’s hands that would not even be considered in certain social functions as society has mandated a specific, “proper” etiquette at such times (Milroy 1). Much as in this illustration, social constructs mold much of our actions including the ways in which we speak, encompassing syntax, specific phrases, and the ways in which we communicate. This grammar, although defined in multiple ways, is nonetheless always prescribed to be correct, regardless of its actual use. Although often deemed less refined, organic grammar can be just as effective at expressing a complete thought as was the “uncultured” guest was at consuming his meal.

Although seemingly jargon-heavy, the idea of these different forms of grammar is evident in the writing of Orsenna who writes from a standpoint of frustration with the way in which the education system in France teaches grammar. Not unlike the tradition of the Académie Française, the French school system teaches grammar in acceptable and unacceptable forms of use, with the aim to teach how to correctly use the French language. Although in and of itself, no great evil exists in teaching in this fashion, Orsenna’s works argue that in teaching grammar there must be further, relatable explanations that encompass wordplay and stories. In a personal email correspondence I had with Erik Orsenna, he responded to the question of why he wrote these stories:

J'ai écrit ces contes parce que je détestais la manière dont on enseigne le français en France : trop théorique , trop sèche , trop technique. Je n'ai rien contre la Linguistique, bien sûr. Science essentielle et magnifique. Mais

pourquoi en imposer les concepts en classe de 6e? Pourquoi ce jargon ? Pourquoi cette manie du commentaire composé au lieu de la pratique du récit , du reporter. Contre les avis de l'Éducation Nationale , des milliers et des milliers ont utilisé mes livres pour donner du PLAISIR et notamment celui [que j'avais] détesté: GRAMMAIRE à des centaines de milliers d'élèves.²¹ (Orsenna)

Passionate about reducing the emphasis of prescriptive rules in grade school pedagogy, Orsenna exists as an enigma to the linguistic community. As one of the immortals of the Académie Française, Orsenna aims to teach grammar by way of creativity and teaching children to love the French language in place of drilling grammar rules and conjugations into an adolescent's mind. Despite the Académie being tied to the French government and its centralized education system, he advocates for a change in the school system's pedagogy that would benefit students, as was his main motivation for writing these books. In an interview in *L'Express*, Orsenna claims to have begun writing about Jeanne and her adventures with words on the island of words as a result of not understanding the questions asked of his children at school (Philippe). Thus, this new world stemmed from his desire for his children to better learn the French language in such a way that is understandable instead of learning vague words such as “past participle” and “subjunctive.” This critique of the French school system becomes evident

²¹ “I wrote these stories because I hated the way in which French is taught in France: too theoretical, too dry, too technical. I have nothing against linguistics, of course. [It is an] essential and magnificent science. But why are these concepts imposed in 6th grade? Why this jargon? Why this obsession of “commentaire composé instead of practicing telling stories. Contrary to the National Education directives, thousands upon thousands have used my books to give pleasure and most notably, the one I hated, grammar to hundreds of thousands of students.”

as soon as the reader begins *La Grammaire est une chanson douce*. The story begins with a young, energetic teacher named Mlle Laurencin, who teaches using the fables of Jean de La Fontaine and whose teaching style is being observed by the principal, Mme Jargonos. This name, Jargonos, calls to the reader's mind all of the specific jargon crammed into an average language art's course, and exists as the representation of the prescriptive pedagogy specific to France's school system. Jeanne goes so far as to describe her as a skeleton (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 15). Mlle Laurencin is forced to continue her explanation of the fable under the watchful eye of Mme Jargonos, creatively expressing the usage of verb tenses such as imperfect and the past perfect. Although the message is still explained in correct terms, Mme Jargonos is unimpressed with this method of teaching, saying, "De la paraphrase alors qu'on vous demande de sensibiliser les élèves à la construction narrative: qu'est-ce qui assure la continuité textuelle? A quel type de progression thématique a-t-on ici à faire?...Voilà ce qu'il est fondamental d'enseigner"²² (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 16). Ultimately, Mme Laurencin is suspended and told she must attend an internship to relearn how to teach after being told, "...vous ne savez pas enseigner. Vous ne respectez aucune des consignes du ministère. Aucune rigueur, aucune scientificité, aucune distinction entre le narratif, le descriptif et l'argumentatif"²³ (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 17). By her best efforts at questioning this logic, demanding whether her students in the 6th grade should really need to be learning in such a stringent system, (*La Grammaire est une chanson*

²² "Paraphrasing whereas we ask you to make the students aware of narrative construction. What will ensure textual continuity? What type of thematic progression are we dealing with?...That is what is fundamental in teaching."

²³ "You don't know how to teach. You don't respect any of the orders of the ministry. No rigor, no science, no distinction between the narrative, the descriptive and the argument."

douce 17) Mlle Laurencin represents Orsenna's own efforts in writing these stories. The adventures that Jeanne experiences relate directly to this battle over how to teach French, whether by strict rules or by way of allowing students to experiment with language and to understand it through tales and fables such as La Fontaine. Additionally, Orsenna's main goal in writing these stories is to show how pure prescriptivism is, in fact less effective in resulting in a love and true comprehension of the language. It is not until Jeanne and Thomas are shipwrecked on an island during this same story that Jeanne truly develops a love for language after regaining her words and ability to speak in an active learning process, taught by instructors whose whole lives and livelihoods revolved around words (such as the word vendors in the market place, surviving off of writing love poems or reminding the world of obscure, nearly forgotten words in the French language.) The reader may find it especially interesting to see Jeanne's trajectory of language acquisition, beginning with letters swirling around her at the time of the shipwreck, to the understanding of how music and words are related. This continues with Jeanne finally understanding how language and stories can render an individual immortal as was the case for the works of Jean de la Fontaine, Proust, and Saint Exupéry all of whom Jeanne meets while stuck in the factory of words. Furthermore, Jeanne continues her education throughout the rest of the books in this series, growing in understanding and even using her skills to make a living. Through this, the reader understands that Jeanne, due to her re-education that takes place on the island, gains a deeper understanding and love for the French language that would not have taken place without passionate teachers such as M. Henri who claims that Jeanne will learn to love even grammar if only she will give it a chance, vowing to break his guitar if she still does not like grammar after a week (*La*

Grammaire est une chanson douce 74). He likens language's need for grammar to music's need for theory, requiring a system of guidelines for it to truly be rendered beautiful (*La Grammaire est une chanson douce* 74). Throughout the rest of the series, Jeanne learns to love the different aspects of grammar and even becomes a sort of advocate for these different aspects. These books support neither of the clear-cut theories of linguistics (prescriptive vs. organic), but maintain that there must exist a combination of the two, much like languages themselves.

An interesting detail of Orsenna's world that may seem trivial to the reader upon first glance is who teaches Jeanne on the island where she is shipwrecked. Furthermore, the location is never specified to the reader, outside of being called an island somewhere in between France and the United States. These details lead the reader to understand the importance and unlikelihood of Jeanne and the inhabitants of this remote island sharing the same language. By using this unlikely circumstance, Orsenna whether wittingly or not, demonstrates the importance of maintaining linguistic standards in languages as this ensures the possibility of a far-reaching and widespread speech community, united by a common language. As is exemplified by Jeanne and M. Henri both speaking a type of formal French, this creates the possibility to allow different communities and vastly different peoples to remain connected around the world. The French language is unique in that it is second only to English taught as a foreign language on 5 continents, in nearly every country in the world ("Infographie: le français, 5e langue mondiale"). This creates a unique phenomenon of an exceedingly far-reaching language community that is exemplified in this seemingly happenstantial meeting between two unlikely individuals that takes place in this book. Furthermore, French has previously begun a course of

divergence and this component of the story serves as a motivation to prevent different dialects from co-evolving despite location. Since Jeanne and Thomas are able to communicate with the islanders and their gracious host, M. Henri, this demonstrates the possibilities of maintaining a global French and emphasizes the importance of the larger Francophone community's role in preserving French out of a love for the language and a realization of the importance of global communication.

In modern linguistic theory, prescription is deemed as obsolete or a concept of little academic interest since the subject that linguists focus most of their efforts on is how language is actually used in conversation in day-to-day communication. Milroy describes this phenomenon as organic grammar and how that language can be communicated easily even if it does not follow the ideals of a culture's set grammar rules. Thus, Orsenna's more conservative and rigid ideas on grammar are not supported fully by modern sociolinguistic community as language prescription has not been fully studied and has not been accepted as a necessary part of linguistics. One argument supporting Milroy's ideas is that prescriptive grammars are always comprised of an arbitrary set of rules that stifles modern languages. In fact, linguistically speaking, changing and evolving languages are the signs of a healthy language and maintaining a language too rigidly, could thus in fact inhibit language growth.

However, as is expected, many professional language scholars accept that it is best to write with formal grammars so as to remove ambiguity (the very goal of establishing the Académie Française and ascertaining French as France's only language) as well as to create a facility of inter-communication between different communities. One instance in which Orsenna uses grammar and rules of languages to propagate a very

tangible and logical form of communication appears in his tale, *La Révolte des accents*. For the reader, (especially a foreign reader such as myself), the literal disappearance of accents inhibits comprehension and confuses the reader on specific meanings and pronunciations as he literally removes all accents from the text. He does this so as to emphasize their importance and to expound upon the plot in which all of the accents go on strike to challenge the people's ignorance toward the importance of accents. In this story, Jeanne acts as valiant champion for yet another aspect of the French language as she ventures to reclaim these accents and thus preserve the clarity of the French language. Interestingly enough, this is not simply a silly anecdote, perpetuating the stereotype of the French's love for strikes and their own language, but one that highlights a modern linguistic debate. This question of the necessity of accents in the French language has surfaced so as to promote facility in communication (specifically with the rise of technology such as computers). One such advocate for this process is linguist Mickael Korvin who has claimed that Orsenna is actually a murderer of the French language as he advocates correct usage of accents and thus limits the French language, reducing its parameters and thus possibilities of innovation (Martinet).

Another notable modern linguistic debate that Orsenna stresses is the introduction of new words and the influences of other languages on French. Although this is a well-known argument for the French-speaking community, Orsenna's moderate view on this is surprisingly refreshing for an immortal on the Académie Française. He explains how all languages share commonalities with other languages, as is explained to the protagonist: "Ma petite Jeanne, chaque langue a plusieurs mères, elle descend de beaucoup d'autres

langues. Mais il y a toujours une mère principale. Celle du français, c'est le Latin²⁴” (*La Fabrique des mots* 85) As shown in this quotation from *La Fabrique des mots*, Orsenna does not take a stance in which he claims that the influences of foreign languages are always bad, but instead explains the idea that languages are enriched by word sharing and being influenced by other languages, an idea that is explained in detail in *The Defence of French* by Robin Adamson (144). This is precisely how Orsenna explains languages, claiming that to stop the acquisition of foreign words is “idiotic” (*La Fabrique des mots* 84).

Orsenna’s stance is so important because it denotes the importance of both the roots and interworking of languages, modern and past, as well as acknowledges that the French language does need to be protected to the extent that a shared, common language can persist around the world. Thus, standardizing a language is beneficial insofar that it aimed at clarifying and uniting communities. This very goal is demonstrated repeatedly as Jeanne tries to defend the French language, often quite literally, while at the same time accepting that language borrowing is not necessarily a threat but can even be seen as a definitive symbol of a healthy, living, and evolving language. The linguist Ball explains that a language must be standardized in order to oppose a possible threat to the language, yet the only fully standardized languages are dead languages (Ball 206). This phenomenon highlights the need to both embrace other languages’ influences as well as to ensure a certain level of standardization of the French language. This topic is also discussed in depth in *The Defence of French* by Robin Adamson where she expounds that, “It is important to note that the more balanced analysts of the French language have

²⁴ “My little Jeanne, each language has many mothers, it descends from many other languages. But there is always a principal mother. French’s is Latin.”

been at pains to point out that the introduction of new words, rather than signaling the imminent demise of the language is a proof that it is alive and healthy. Inroads into the syntactic system of the language on the other hand may be a proper cause for concern” (Adamson 12). Thus, as this remains a subject of contention among the linguistic community, Orsenna incorporates both sides of the argument. Jeanne is a young person who not only understands grammar and its importance, but has been exposed to it from both the rigid, pedagogic side as well as by the fluid, hands-on way in which she was re-acclimated to French on the island via M. Henri. By the words and usage presented in Orsenna’s stories, the reader understands that the personification and the attempt to preserve the French language goes much further than the shallow debate between the varying levels of effectiveness of communication. However, it is further tied to ensuring that relationships can be established and Richelieu’s goal of promoting a united France, that now extends to a united Francophonie. Although linguists often disregard the call for French to be protected from the threat of the English language, Orsenna provides a middle-of-the road argument as is seen through his characters who are able to learn, appreciate and even teach the readers as well as other characters the value of a standard language. By critiquing the French school system, this challenges educators worldwide to critique their own methods of teaching and nearly disregards the question of whether or not the French language needs to be protected, begging the greater question of how can we better facilitate the communication within the Francophone speech community.

Chapter 4: Aimer le français

In Chapter 3, by explaining the different forms of grammar and the way in which words can be used and protected, I introduced one of Orsenna's main focuses with his writings that stems from his linguistic background. However, his call to protect the language does not end at prescriptive grammar and using the French language exactly as is prescribed in grammar textbooks. As is evidenced throughout Orsenna's works, there is a much higher call to love the French language. His writings encompass many simplified examples of how the French language is both threatened and can literally be sought out and protected in a very tangible sense such as with Jeanne's expedition to the island of the subjunctive and her quest to find to where the accents went. However, Orsenna presents the idea that perhaps the French language's greatest weapon in the face of potential threats is for French speakers to simply both love and learn the language so that they too can claim that even the ever-daunting linguistic facet of grammar is, in fact, a sweet, gentle song.

After having only read Orsenna's *La Grammaire est une chanson douce*, I wondered how Orsenna could be so passionate about his language to the extent that he could liken it to beautiful music. This is a common theme throughout his books where he strives to evoke in the reader a comprehension of the musicality and beauty of the French language, writing "Alors comment pourrais-je continuer à employer des mots sans musique?"²⁵ (*Et si on dansait?* 29) Orsenna writes this question to underline how language and music are intertwined and codependent, and how language could not exist without music. The reader sees Orsenna's passion for the French language, but more

²⁵ "So how could I continue to use words without music?"

importantly, the urgency with which he writes for the need to preserve the musicality and the current state of this language, nitpicky grammar and all. The fact that this point of view was so foreign and surprising upon my first reading of *La Grammaire est une chanson douce* touches on one of the main issues that linguist Alain Rey discusses in his aptly titled book *L'Amour du français*. This issue is that of the French people's apathy toward their language and their overall ambivalence with regards to the future of this melodic language. Rey presents this argument by saying, "Contrairement à ce que pensent certains désespérés les francophones de langue maternelle que ce soit en France ou ailleurs, n'abandonnent pas leur langue. Mais il arrive qu'ils l'ignorent et qu'ils ne l'aiment qu'au passé – ce qui est peut-être pire²⁶" (Rey 22). In this quote, he claims that the argument that French speakers are actively disowning their language or choosing other, foreign (more "accessible" languages such as English) languages over their native languages would be perhaps better than this apathy toward their language. By not defending their language, they have become apathetic to the French language's future, an issue that he claims to be much worse than any active abandonment of this language. In this same way, Orsenna writes with this aforementioned urgency that calls the characters and readers alike from their slumber and makes them realize that real threats do exist, but the greatest threat of all appears when native speakers no longer use the language correctly and stop defending it in its most pure state: at home where it truly matters.

The most apt example that Orsenna presents for a total transformation of apathy to a love of language, is, of course Jeanne's reacquisition of French after being

²⁶ "Contrary to what some hopeless think, native French speakers, whether in France or elsewhere, are not abandoning their language. But it so happens that they are ignoring it and that they only loved it in the past, which is perhaps worse."

shipwrecked. And, if Jeanne is the greatest before-after metamorphosis, Monsieur Henri is the greatest catalyst for this change. When Jeanne is shipwrecked, she has lost her language, it having been quite literally knocked out of her and it now exists, encircling her in the ocean where she is unable to speak. This is the point at which Jeanne could have apathetically lost her language, and most likely would have, had she not been greeted by M. Henri and his nephew on the shore of this island. M. Henri vows to not only take care of these siblings but also to help with the rehabilitation of their language. Yet again, these characters are presented with a choice of regaining their language for efficacy's sake, but M. Henri will not allow this to be the case and takes this whole process many steps further. He teaches these siblings not only words, but also demonstrates the value and the power of these words throughout their adventures on the island. Additionally, he claims that he can make Jeanne love grammar, if only she will take the time to learn it. Although she believes that these claims are ridiculous, she is inspired by M. Henri's obvious passion for language and the promise that it would only take a week so she decides to give him a chance. All the while, the French grammar is being reinforced by the beauty of music and shown that it is not this rigid, arbitrary thing, but something that instead, allows for the beauty of the language to be measured and constant like a beautiful piece of music.

As the reader tags along Jeanne's adventures, he or she understands Jeanne's move from ambivalence toward the language to her love and passion for protecting and defending it, becoming its greatest champion. In the same way that M. Henri reintroduces Jeanne to her language, Orsenna does this with his readers, showing them the importance of appreciating its musicality and then reinforcing this by explaining that the beauty of

this language is only maintained when the language on the whole is maintained.

However, it is here that Orsenna underlines that it is not necessary to blindly follow whatever the grammar texts say, but to learn to love the language in its correct state because of its beauty. This is motivation enough to defend the language.

Finally, by using this fantastical approach to language, and personifying different aspects of language such as accents and even modes, Orsenna awakens the readers from their apathy toward the loss of words and as a motivation for them to learn French in its purest form. Orsenna not only writes for children but adults as well who are able to revert back to their childhood and realize the beauty in simply communicating via words. By personifying what before seemed to be useless marks on a page, not actually mattering in the spoken and arguably most important aspect of language, Orsenna brings value to all aspects of the language and incites readers to first and foremost love the language since he believes that correct usage will follow, as often is the case when someone develops a love for any given thing.

Another aspect of the love of French that Rey discusses and further defines draws a distinction between love of grammar rules and the actual love of a language where he writes,

L'amour de la langue ne vise pas cette abstraction que le grammairien et le dictionnaire peinent à décrire; il s'adresse à un être mythique, à des foisons de réalités actives, à des usages, des discours, des babils, des fables, des

romans, des poèmes, des lois, des récits et des prescriptions, des hurlements et des soupirs, à condition qu'ils soient 'articulés'.²⁷ (Rey 43)

This citation supports Orsenna's writings where he claims that language is both alive and gives life and is a being that is composed of many things, not simply the rules given by grammarians and dictionaries (which is particularly ironic as Rey himself is both a linguist and an editor of dictionaries.) Thus, although he sees personal value in both of these things, he admits that love of language goes even deeper than this, even going so far as to call the latter a "mythical being." This being is composed of the novels and poems and laws and all that makes up not only a language but many different, integral parts of a culture, thus further explaining an even deeper-rooted link to French identity and reason for casting off ambivalence for living the French language. He continues his argument by saying that, "...la langue est ce miroir où bouge, se forme et se déforme notre image d'être humain, l'énergie du langage individualisé en chacun des francophones, l'essence collective du français²⁸" (Rey 44). This again is what is shared among French speakers of different backgrounds, geographic and otherwise but exists as a strong unifying force that creates a common identity that transcends any of these differences.

As was underlined in Chapter 3, Orsenna's writings are clearly tied to a larger French-speaking community that has a greater potential and conviction to protect the

²⁷ "The love of language does not aim for this abstraction that the grammarian and the dictionary struggle to denigrate; it addresses a mythical being, the abundance of active realities, of uses, discourse, babbling, fables, novels, poems, laws, tales, prescriptions, cries, sighs, on the condition that they be articulated."

²⁸ "Language is this mirror where moves, takes form and is deformed our image of a human being. The energy of language individualized in each of the Francophones the collective essence of the French language."

French language. This call to protect the French language, despite its not necessarily needing to be linguistically protected, stems from the identity related to the French language and the desire to protect something that has been cultivated and edited for hundreds of years. Orsenna, motivated by his time spent working with Francophone writers, sees the full potential of this larger speech community as something that could either further degrade the French language, further diverting its coevolution due to geographical differences as has been the case with the differing dialects of English, or could become even more of a global force in the language community. In this chapter, I will discuss how Orsenna writes from a non-specific location to reach a larger audience and spurs his readers to simply love the French language as that is his job as a part of being in the Academy. We must love and protect our identities by ensuring that languages are used correctly and that they do not sway too much as a result of outside forces.

Firstly, I will discuss some background of the concept Francophonie and the importance of the example that I discussed in chapter 2 with the letter that Léopold Senghor writes to Jeanne, hoping to form with her an alliance to protect the semi-colon, one of the smallest aspects of a formal grammar. This alliance created by Senghor and Jeanne is very important in relation to Francophonie, as it exemplifies how integral language can be in uniting vastly different cultures. As was discussed in chapter 1, the French language spans all continents and is spoken as a mother tongue on four continents ("Infographie: le français, 5e langue mondiale"). Thus, it is important to explore this question of how the French can be so protective over the language as it is something that extends to all ends of the globe and is not solely their language to guard. Although the

concept of “francophones” (all French speakers in the world) is often acknowledged as an important aspect of the language, what is more pertinent to this question is the organization that was established in order to promote French as this shows political action being taken and the continued governmental control and protection of this language well into even present day. In fact, the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) was created so that those countries that spoke French could be united by language, more specifically, a common, French language. Interestingly enough, the way that countries can be accepted as member nations in the OIF is simply by having a large speech community of French speakers, not needing to have French as an official language. In Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow’s book *The Story of French*, they discuss the current state of the OIF and its main goal being to “promote French and langues partenaires” (Nadeau 350). Not only does the OIF aim to promote French, but also those countries where French may not be spoken as an official language but does have large French speech communities. Additionally, the OIF aims to show respect and support for plurilinguism in hopes of preventing any one language (in this case most often English) from dominating the political or diplomatic spheres, since any country not able to speak their mother tongue will be put at a disadvantage, saying that,

We all know that forcing international civil servants, diplomats or ministers to express themselves in a language that is not theirs amounts to putting them in a situation of inferiority. It deprives them of the capacity for nuance and refinement, which amounts to making concessions to those who speak that language as a mother tongue... also we all know that

concepts that look similar often differ from one civilization to the next.
(Nadeau 351)

Nadeau discusses this by saying that one language for diplomatic purposes is simply insufficient and that all languages deserve respect and to be promoted so that all are able to use their mother tongue to some degree in diplomatic affairs. What is interesting, is that English speakers often argue that it would be most efficient or simple for all to use English in such circumstances, but Francophonie argues that each language is valuable and all should have the right to use their language for discussions of this kind.

In the same way, Orsenna is arguing that even the smallest part of languages: a punctuation mark (the semicolon given in Chapter 2) is worth saving and that by giving value to even minute aspects of languages, this will allow for the preservation of languages. This goal is aided by such institutions as the OIF that create a cross-cultural team of agents passionate about and united by a common language and love for French that serves as a motivation to protect this language. In his book, *La Fabrique des mots*, Orsenna presents his idea supporting this, writing, “On ne défend pas son pays si on n’aime pas son pays. Et si on n’aime pas son pays si on ne le connaît pas²⁹” (*La Fabrique des mots* 38). In the same way, this can be applied to language, as this is such an integral part of what defines a nation, or even many nations that share a common language. Thus, this connection between knowing a country or language and loving it, is interchangeable and this is Orsenna’s greatest attempt to awaken the French people and French speakers on the whole to love French and know French, and the prescriptivism of grammar will be but a minimal aspect of this.

²⁹ “One does not defend his country if he doesn’t love his country. And if he doesn’t love his country if he doesn’t know it.”

Similarly, this example of the alliance between Jeanne and Senghor has a parallel in her relationship with M. Henri and his nephew where they learn about the importance of grammar. The different people are united by the French language despite being from vastly different lands, demonstrating the extent to which the French language can serve as a unifying force that transcends cultural and geographical differences.

By acknowledging the importance of language and one's identity in reference to it, one can begin to love the language and thus protect it. Orsenna demonstrates the importance of all aspects of language with his *La Révolte des accents* where he shows that even the simplest degradation or loss in language has far-reaching and potentially threatening results to the capacity of the speech community to be able to communicate effectively (such as was the case when the accents disappeared and there was much confusion in conversation.) In an interview with *L'express* Orsenna connects accents with his role on the Académie saying, "Comme, en cuisine, de se priver d'épices. Je suis à l'Académie pour y faire quelque chose. C'est mon boulot de faire aimer la langue française. C'est sa mission depuis 1634. Rien ne m'a rendu plus heureux que ce que j'ai reçu avec ma grammaire³⁰" (*L'Express*). By saying that it is his job on the Académie to make the French language loved, he explains how punctuation is necessary to language. What may have started for him as a project to teach his children about different aspects of language, has certainly become a voice to the French for learning to cast off their notions of prescriptive grammar that is all that many associate with the French education system (such as is represented by Mme Jargonos and Jeanne's first experience with grammar that

³⁰ "As, in cooking, to go without spices. I am at the Academy to do something. It's my job to make the French language loved. It's been its mission since 1634. Nothing made me happier than that which I received with my grammar."

she must unlearn with the help of M. Henri.) Thus, Orsenna underlines how words and grammar are like music and magic and things that we might only associate with one's childhood. By doing so, he shows us a way in which we can unlearn and cast off our preconceived notions of language and grammar, search past what we had perceived, thus gaining a blank slate similar to that which Jeanne acquired in her shipwreck. In this way, we can approach the relearning of and understanding of language and grammar with the whimsical value of such a "mythical being" as it truly is. We can thus, then learn to appreciate the creativity with which language and even grammar can extend, and Orsenna's writings do a fantastic job of creating this connection for even the most pedantic grammar follower, as I myself. When language is recognized for what it truly is, the user cannot help but to use it in such a way that creativity becomes second nature and he can then, abandon the ideas of rigidity and learn to love language, protecting it at the same time.

Conclusion

In the four preceding chapters, I have aimed to answer the question of why the French language evokes this protectionist attitude from Francophones around the world despite its linguistic health. By touching on the categories of purity, identity, words and usage, and love of French, I have demonstrated how the French language is being and has been historically protected as well as how linguists such as Orsenna aim to protect it out of a love and deeper understanding of the language that ultimately instills in the speaker a passion for the language instead of a mandate to follow grammatical prescriptions.

As I began this study, the fact that many linguists such as Rey argued that the idea of language purity is unattainable and even mythical, drove my research as I continued to seek answers to the seemingly contradictory attitude to what is linguistically conclusive. After having read from many different points of views and among many different disciplines, I believe that this attitude persists because of this incredibly strong tie to identity. As was explained in chapter 2, this is a shared understanding among Orsenna, Rey, Senghor, and Albert Camus who have all written or spoken to differing degrees about this concept. This identity, although rooted in a rich history of the evolution of the French language, is much more important as it presently binds the Francophone community together. This was exemplified with Jeanne and Senghor's alliance to protect the semi-colon and exists as a bond that promises to continue to unite these varying peoples well into the future.

As for the future of the French language, it has been predicted, by a recent study performed by Naxtis, that the French language will likely become the most spoken language per capita within the next 35 years, even surpassing Mandarin (Gobry).

Although there are potential flaws in the methodology due to the fact that the methods accounted for all speakers in countries where French is an official language, this study informs us that due to the large population growth in Africa, French will continue to persist and be strengthened not by the Parisian branch of its speakers or the Académie, but by its Francophone community throughout the world.

Regardless of who wins out in this race to become the most spoken language by 2050, it is clear that French will exist as a competitive candidate for that honor. Furthermore, this has been a recurring trend in the present data – that the French language need not fight to survive, but ultimately seems to be fighting to gain the number one spot. Interestingly enough, what the media says and has said for many years about the French language being threatened seems a bit preposterous when looking at the data, and in my research, I have found that it is not the actual French language being protected but it is this “mythical being” that Rey discusses and the hopes of maintaining the level of prestige of the French language. It is not a worry that French will cease to exist in its current state as is ever apparent in the current data, but that it will cease to exist as it was 300 years ago with the founding of the Académie. However, I believe that writers like Orsenna are embracing language change and even advocating for it, as Orsenna urges his readers throughout his books to find new and creative ways to communicate. As is made obvious in the need to communicate clearly and effectively such as Rey discussed, there is only so much freedom one has when being creative with language. For Orsenna, this creativity exists in story telling and one’s ability to creatively use words. He does not advocate an abandonment of syntax or subject-verb agreement, but simply to employ new words and to experience firsthand the magic of creating narratives. One such way to

encourage proper usage of the French language in a creative environment is with his board game (*La boîte de la langue française*) that encourages the use of the French language in a way that quite frankly shocked me and drastically challenged the pedantic, old, grammatically correct image I had in my mind of what an immortal of the Académie Française would look like. The opening phrase of the game's description is, "Erik Orsenna vous invite à jouer avec la langue française³¹!" (*La boîte de la langue française*), and this is precisely the way that he teaches conjugations, rare words, and the origins of words as well through this card game. By doing so, Orsenna has created a world in which the beauty of words outweighs this fear of losing both this "disque dur" as well as this prestige that has been associated with the French language.

By creating a world in which he emphasizes intercultural bonds by writing about the friendship between the inhabitants of a tropical island and a French girl, Orsenna challenges the stereotype that it is Parisian French that is singlehandedly fighting to prevent the degradation of the French language from occurring. By writing about such characters as M. Henri who is better suited to educate Jeanne than the French school system, Orsenna spurs this international movement of protecting the French language. Orsenna's characters challenge traditional roles of Western supremacy and show that it is only by coming together that French speakers can truly begin to protect the French language. His writings demonstrate that the academic convictions of protecting French based on prestige, pale in comparison to M. Henri's love of language that evokes a total transformation for Jeanne from apathetic speaker to avid guardian and serves as a new

³¹ "Erik Orsenna invites you to play with the French language!"

standard and call for French speakers, showing how and why they should protect their language.

Recently, the Francophone community has refused to allow their language to become stripped down and simplified in the battle that appeared via an unlikely medium: Twitter. The Académie Française announced what was a delayed implementation that stems from a consensus that occurred in 1990 to reform certain, tricky spellings in the French language that baffle native and foreign-speakers alike. This reform will remove the circumflex accent that originally served to mark a previous spelling change of the removal of s' from 11th century French, that changed spelling from words like “mesme” to “même” (Posner 52). There has been immense backlash to the announcement that this orthographical reform would finally be implemented, 26 years after its original decree, most notably in the realm of removing the circumflex from school textbooks. This announcement resulted in a backlash on twitter that occurred in the hashtag “Je suis circonflex” to trend, with an evident reference to the “Je suis Charlie” campaign in response to the terrorist shootings that occurred in January 2015 at *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris (Johnson). As this may seem to an American like an insensitive and ill-fitting attempt to parallel a silly spelling change with terrorist acts, upon further study, I realized that just as the French felt that these shootings were an encroachment on their freedom of speech and freedom in general, this change struck a similar vein. This reform would not only change their entire written customs, but it ultimately suggests that the French language should be simplified due to the French’s inability to maintain this elevated form of writing. The French took this personally and fought back, with AlloCiné quipping with

the phonetic spelling of, “Alor vou an pansé koi de cet raiformme çur laurtograf?³²” (Bowman). This tweet acknowledged the public’s suspicion that the Académie Française thinks very little of the general public’s ability to uphold the tradition of eloquent, written French and fought back with the irony of such a tweet that plays with phonetic speech.

If anything is to be gleaned from this battle it is that the French are rediscovering their voices and taking the protection of their language back into their own hands. This, I believe, is exactly what Rey is advocating, because these French citizens are refusing to be apathetic as their language is being simplified to an insulting degree. Additionally, this example shows the combined efforts of French speakers from all over the world that refused to allow for a simplified version of the language that has been crafted by their writers for centuries and has become an integral part of French national identity. What is perhaps the most innovative aspect of this is that it was via the medium of technology and social media that this defense took place. This demonstrates hope for the future of the French language as it proves that globalization and technology can be a wonderful resource for the upholding of the standards of the French language.

From my research, I have learned that the French language is linguistically healthy but that such occurrences as this spelling reform have resulted in the French-speaking community to be awakened from their apathy. This occurrence shows a promising movement that will hold French-speakers to a higher standard that is motivated by a love of their identity and history, as well as a way that continues to foster strong connections within the Francophone, global community. Erik Orsenna’s writings depict language as it is intended to be seen, as a living organism that must be appreciated and

³² Correct spelling: “Alors, vous en pensez quoi de cette reforme sur l’orthographe?”
 “So, what do you think about this spelling reform?”

defended. By partnering all available resources, including technology, Francophones can continue to teach and share this language, in its current form to ensure a common understanding and level of spoken and written French. I have hope for the future of the French language that it will be protected and defended out of love, and not out of a pedantic conviction. As was demonstrated in this backlash to the spelling reform, the French identity is so firmly rooted in their language that the French language serves as a strong motivation for the French to pay tribute to their history and protect their identity. Just as French initially united France, if protected by a unifying force such as the OIF, the French language has the potential to unite the entire francophone community at large by a love of the French language that transcends even the greatest differences.

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