

(Summary of a paper read to the Linguistic Society of New Zealand on 10 August, 1959.)

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The purpose of what follows is to suggest that the formula "nos Français" -- "our Frenchmen(?)" -- arose originally out of "nous Français" -- ModFr. "nous autres Français" -- and is thus due to a possible homonymic collision between the pronominal and adjectival forms of the first person plural.

As the appended list of dated examples will show, this expression, and others like it, have occurred in French from the time of the Chanson de Roland right up to the present day. When we find Calvin using "Gallis nostris" (ex. 5), it is not unnatural to suspect that he had "nos Français" in mind; it is scarcely less so when we find Lessing, the admirer of Diderot, using (exx. 13, 15) "unsern Deutschen". The examples also show that the formula has been extended to other proper names: Grecs, Bourguignons, Asiatiques, Napolitains, etc. (exx. 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 17, 20), and also to the second person, as in "vos Français", "tes Grecs" (exx. 11, 18). By the time we come to "nos Anglais", used by Maupassant as a title to a story, the meaning is obviously something like "the English whom we all know". But what was the original meaning of the formula? Surely not "our Frenchmen", but much more probably "we Frenchmen".

When, in the 16th century, Norton translated Calvin's preface (whether from the Latin or the French is immaterial), the words he used to translate the phrase quoted are "for my countrymen the French". In a modern translation of Le Neveu de Rameau(1), the words "ce que nos Bourguignons appellent un fieffé truand" (ex. 17) are translated: "as they say in Burgundy". In both cases there seems to be an instinctive tendency to avoid the un-English expressions "our Burgundians". To emphasize the stilted and unnatural sound of the latter phrases, let us quote Professor Bruford's less sensitive translation of the passage from Lessing (ex. 16): "If the masterpieces of Shakespeare... had been translated for our Germans". Much more accurate is the modern translation of Rousseau's phrase "vos Français" as "your countrymen the French"(2), which in effect comes down to "you Frenchmen".

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1. J. Stewart and J. Kemp in Diderot: Interpreter of Nature, 1957.
 2. Boswell in Holland (1763-64) Research Edition p.319.

If the suggestion here put forward is sound, some account must be taken of the history and incidence of the modern equivalent "nous autres Français", "nous autres femmes". According to Brunot and Bruneau (3), "nous autres" is as early as Joinville, but in the example quoted there is no following noun ("nous autre qui estiens entour li"). When did French begin to insert the word "autres" into the formula? In any case, it appears that the formula "nos Français" existed earlier.

Now what are we to make of the following from the Voyage de Charlemagne (ex. 25): "sire eissistes de France por nos femmes ocire?" These words are addressed to Oliver by the king's daughter; they can scarcely therefore mean "our women" or "our wives". The meaning must surely be what in ModFr. would be expressed by "nous autres femmes", i.e., "... to slay us women!" It is worth noting that in this poem the form nous does not occur; nos does duty for three different cases in their own right (688: "nos savons"; 652: "herseir nos herberjastes"; 844: "donez nos le congiet") and after a preposition (687: "avoec nos"; 188: "entre nos"). Conversely, although examples seem to be rarer, the form nous occurs as the possessive adjective (exx. 26, 27, 30).

If then the forms nous and nos are to some extent interchangeable, may not "nos femmes", before the emergence of the formula "nous autres femmes", mean "us women"? If this is so, then "nos Français" could mean "we (us) Frenchmen".

There are, admittedly, features of the foregoing explanation that require further investigation, e.g., the occurrence in the Roland of the nominative form "nostre Franceis" (exx. 28, 29; the second of these is translated by Dorothy Sayers: "our French will light them down on foot", and by Jessie Crosland: "our countrymen of France shall dismount from their horses"). If the oblique form nos was commoner -- as in all probability it was -- it is conceivable that the formula with the nominative nostre could have arisen by analogy. Also in ModFr., "nous autres Français" and "nos Français" no longer mean quite the same thing. If the foregoing hypothesis is correct, when did the divergence of meaning appear?

Examples

1. De nos Francais i fist essart. (c. 1080: Gormont et Isembart, 579).
2. De nos Franceis mi sembleit avoir mult poi. (c. 1100: Roland, 1050).
3. De noz Franceis vait disant si mals moz:
"Feluns Franceis, hoi justerez as noz." (Ibid., 1190-91)

4. Et quant noz François les voient, si saillent as armes de toutes parz. (c. 1206: Villehardouin).
5. Atque hunc laborem Gallis nostris potissimum desudabam, quorum permultos esurire et sitire Christum intelligebam. (1536: Calvin, Preface to Institutio).
6. Et principalement vouloye par ce mien labour servir à nos François, desquels i' en voyoye plusieurs avoir faim et soif de Jesus Christ... (Ibid., French version).
7. Hé bien, mon Dieu: nos François, si souvent redressés. (1661: Molière, Les Fâcheux, I,1).
8. Voilà de nos François l'ordinaire défaut. (1662: Id., Ecole des Femmes, III, 3).
9. ... Il expire et nos Grecs irrités
Ont lavé dans son sang ses infidélités. (Racine, Andromaque, 1496-7).
10. J'ai couru vers le temple, où nos Grecs dispersés
Se sont jusqu'à l'autel dans la foule glissés. (Ibid., 1499-1500).
11. Va faire chez tes Grecs admirer ta fureur. (Ibid., 1535).
12. Si les Européens disent qu'il n'y a pas de générosité à rendre malheureuses les personnes qu'on aime, nos Asiatiques répondent qu'il y a de la bassesse aux hommes de renoncer à l'empire que la nature leur donne sur les femmes. (1720: Montesquieu, Lettres persanes, XXXVIII).
13. Je ne me laisserai point de crier à nos Français La Verité! La Nature! Les Anciens! Sophocle! Philoctète! (1757: Diderot, Entretiens sur 'le Fils Naturel').
14. Il n'y a rien de moins singe que nos Bourguignons. (1757: Piron, Lettre à Dumay du 1er août).
15. Nos Français voudront que leur poète sache davantage. (1758: Diderot, De la poésie dramatique).
16. Wenn Man die Meisterstücke des Shakespeare, mit einigen bescheidenen Veränderungen, unsern Deutschen übersetzt hätte, ich weiss gewiss, es würde von bessern Folgen gewesen sein... (1759: Lessing, Literaturbrief 17).
17. Vous savez que je suis un ignorant, un sot, un fou, un impertinent, un paresseux. Ce que nos Bourguignons appellent un fieffé truand, un escroc, un gourmand. (after 1761: Diderot, Neveu de Rameau).

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18. Il faut avouer que vos Français sont un peuple bien servile, bien vendu à la Tyrannie... (1764: Rousseau à Deleyre).
 19. Quelle idée donneraient un jour de nos Français d'aujourd'hui les drames de fabrication nouvelle, si nous les voyions sur nos théâtres aussi fréquemment que sous la presse. (1773: Bret, Oeuvres de Molière, Discours préliminaire).
 20. Dites ceci à Diderot, dites-lui que nos Napolitains sont convaincus que sa pièce est la meilleure de tout le théâtre français... (1773: Galiani à Mme d'Épinay).
 21. Ami, chez nos Français ma muse voudrait plaire. (c. 1789: Chénier, Épître II).
 22. Nos Anglais. (1885: Maupassant, Toine).
 23. Nos Français ont toujours aimé ces anecdotes. (1952: J. Plattard, La Renaissance des lettres en France, p.17).
 24. Ces têtes-la ont plus de feu que de pensée... Celles de nos Balesta, dures et obstinées, n'avaient pas une bonne réputation dans la famille. (1956: H. Bosco, Les Balesta, p. 61).
 25. Sire, eissistes de France por nos femmes ocire? (1149: Voyage de Charlemagne, 711).
 26. Envers nous amis en Jhesu Crist. (13th cent. translation of a charter of 1261 -- Godefroy).
 27. Qui a nous maulx a sceu si bien pourvoir. (early 16th cent., Chanson: Doulce mémoire).
 28. Nostre Franceis n'unt talent de fuir. (c. 1100: Roland, 1255).
 29. Nostre Franceis i descendrunt a pied. (Ibid., 1746).
 30. ... un de nous ambassadeurs, qui assure l'avoir veu jurer. (early 15th cent.: Commynes, Lettre).