
A DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS OF NON-STANDARD VOCABULARY IN THE DIALOGUES OF 1930S FRENCH FILMS

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Abstract

This study examines non-standard lexical items in a 1930s corpus of French films. Its purpose is to investigate the evolution of such items and gauge whether they are still part of today's linguistic repertoire of French people. The study is based on an analysis of French dictionaries prior to and contemporary with the films which have been compared with today's to assess the degree of acceptability of the words investigated, as well as on surveys conducted in 1999 on a sample of French speakers.

1. Introduction

The existence of early sound recordings enables us to study aspects of language change in French over the 20th century in a way that was not possible in earlier centuries. In this analysis¹ I investigate the evolution of lexicographers' attitudes towards non-standard items found in a corpus of 1930s films, over a sixty-year period. For this purpose, I compiled a glossary of the non-standard words in the films used. In the first section, I ask whether the colloquial vocabulary used in the films investigated is still in use today, by comparing the labels of words in *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* (1932) with first of all those

used by *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* (1993) and secondly by *Le Petit Larousse* (1989). I would like to mention at this stage that the former is less conservative in its policy than the latter, which certainly has an effect on the results. In the second part, I estimate the vitality of non-standard vocabulary through the perception of current users of the French language.

2. The Corpus

For this research, a corpus of French films (recorded on videocassette) dating from the 1930s has been assembled. This provides interesting and previously unexploited evidence concerning Parisian vernacular speech at that time. The film corpus comprises five black and white films: *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), *Fric-frac* (1939), *Circonstances atténuantes* (1939), *Le Jour se lève* (1939), *La Règle du jeu* (1939).

Adapted from a play by Bourdet, *Fric-frac* stars Arletty, Michel Simon and Fernandel. The film derives much of its humour from the contrast between the ‘vernacular speech’ of the proletarian speakers and the ‘standard speech’ of the upper-group characters. Fernandel, acting as a bridge between the two, attempts to integrate himself with petty thieves by accommodating to them both socially and linguistically. The comic film *Circonstances atténuantes*, starring Michel Simon, Suzanne Dantès, Dorville and Arletty, presents a variety of Parisian speakers from different social classes. *Le Jour se lève* encapsulates the pessimistic mood that pervaded France in the 1930s. In Carné’s film, scripted by Jacques Prévert, Jean Gabin portrays the tormented working-class male, who murders the obnoxious seducer of an innocent flower-seller, played by Jules Berry. *La Règle du jeu* is one of Jean Renoir’s most famous films. It is a satire and a caricature of the bourgeoisie in its most stereotyped form. Marcel Dalio and Mila Parély play the aristocrats, while Julien Carette is the working-class Parisian speaker. Finally, Arletty’s line ‘atmosphère, atmosphère’ contributed to the popularity of Carné’s *Hôtel du Nord*. Jeanson, the author of this famous dialogue between Jouvet and Arletty, wrote the scripts of several classics which opened the way to poetic realism, offering ‘les gens du peuple’ important roles in 1930s French cinema.

I chose these films first because of their lasting popularity. They are some of the most famous films of the 1930s. Above all, however, I thought they were plausibly representative of the most stereotypical Parisian sociolect of that period.

3. Diachronic Analysis

3.1 French dictionary labels

The cleavage between the prestige norm (codified usage) and non-standard items (colloquial usage) in the lexicon can be expressed in terms of High and Low varieties. All languages seem to have a stock of high-value words reserved for formal contexts and low-value words for informal situations. In French dictionaries, the convention is to adopt such labels as *arg.* (*argot*, ‘slang’), *enf.* (*enfantin*, ‘childlike’), *fam.* (*familier*, ‘informal’), *pop.* (*populaire*, ‘lower class’), *rég.* (*régional*, ‘regional’), *triv.* (*trivial*, ‘crude’), *vieilli* (‘outdated’), *vulg.* (*vulgaire*, ‘vulgar’) and *vx* (*vieux*, ‘obsolete’) etc. *Familier* is often confused with *populaire*. The former is, as Batty and Hintze note, ‘a register’ that is mostly associated with informal situations (1992: 340) and spontaneous French. Constructions, expressions and lexis that are stylistically marked as *familier* allegedly do not belong to a definite socio-economic group but are shared by both lower and upper-class speakers. The label *populaire* is prescriptively thought to convey a negative sociological connotation in contrast to the *français familier*. It concerns varieties of French that are primarily spoken.

3.2. Stylistic evolution of ten non-standard items

By way of introduction, the following study examines the treatment of ten examples of non-standard lexical items found in my corpus by the best-established dictionaries from the 17th to the 20th centuries, by looking at their stylistic labels. A similar exercise was carried out by Désirat and Hordé in 1976 and later by Müller (1985), but over a much shorter period of time, focusing solely on 20th century dictionaries. Désirat and Hordé’s findings of language levels in three different dictionaries illustrated that ‘*Le Petit Larousse* (1970) [était] plus conservateur que *Le Littré* et le *Petit Robert* plus libéral que ses prédécesseurs’ (1976: 43-44).²

The purpose of this exercise is firstly to establish when these words were first lemmatised and to see how their level of acceptability has changed throughout the centuries, and secondly, to see whether there is much variation between dictionaries. The following words were chosen at random from the glossary.

Table 1 does not feature any work prior to 1932, as none of the prominent French dictionaries examined, ranging from Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (1690) and the first edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* (1694) to the

Dictionaries	pépère	pèze	picolo	piger	pinard	pognon	poireau	popotin	potasser	proprio
Bloch O. and Wartburg W. von, 1932, <i>Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française</i> , Paris, PUF	-	-	-	terme familier	argot scolaire	-	-	-	terme familier	-
<i>Dictionnaire de l'Académie</i> , 1931-5, 2 vol., 8th edition, Paris, Hachette	-	-	-	-	pop.	-	-	-	abs.	-
<i>Le Larousse du XX^e siècle</i> , 1932, Paris, Larousse	enf.	fam.	pop.	-	arg. militaire	arg.	-	pop.	arg. des écoles	arg. parisien
Dauzat A., Dubois J. and Mitterand H., 1964, <i>Nouveau dictionnaire étymologique et historique</i> , Paris, Larousse	fam.	pop.	pop.	pop.	pop.	pop.	-	-	arg. scolaire	-
<i>Dictionnaire du français contemporain</i> , 1966, Paris, Larousse	pop.	-	-	pop.	pop.	pop.	fam.	-	fam.	-
Robert P., 1985, 9 vol., 2nd edition, <i>Le Grand Robert de la langue française</i> , Paris, Robert	pop.	fam.	pop.	fam.	pop.	fam.	fam.	pop.	fam.	-
<i>Trésor de la langue française</i> , 1988, 16 ^e volumes, Paris, Gallimard	pop.	arg. and pop.	vieilli, pop.	pop. and fam.	pop.	arg. and pop.	fam.	pop., fam.	fam.	pop.
<i>Dictionnaire Larousse</i> , 1989, Paris, Larousse	fam.	arg.	-	fam.	pop.	pop.	fam.	très fam.	fam.	pop.
<i>Le Nouveau Petit Robert</i> , 1993, Paris, Robert	fam.	arg.	fam., vieilli	fam.	fam.	fam.	-	fam.	fam.	fam.

Table 1

eighth edition (1931-35) recorded these words. It has to be said that in early dictionaries, there were no labels in abbreviated form, and style was hardly referred to at all. The inclusion of dictionaries in table 1 has therefore been considered in terms of the registers they embrace. Indeed, they have all conventionally adopted the same labels to indicate degrees of informality: *fam.*, *pop.*, *arg.* and *vulg.* Table 1 shows that the non-standard items investigated only started to appear in general dictionaries of French in the 1930s. However, this does not necessarily mean that they could not be found in earlier literature. The words *piger* and *pognon*, for example, are mentioned in Sainéan's glossary to *Les Sources de l'argot ancien* (1912). It is the frontier between *fam.* and *pop.* that dictionaries find most difficult to define. One can note that the label *pop.* confuses stylistic and social criteria, whereas *fam.* is purely stylistic. Over the past sixty years, the tendency is for *pop.* words to become *fam.* and for *arg.* words to become *pop.* The attribution of stylistic labels in *Le Petit Larousse illustré* (1989) differs from that of *Le Robert* (1993) as regards the labels *pop.* and *fam.*, but there is agreement concerning the label *arg.*

Before correlating *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* (1932) with *Le Petit Larousse Illustré* (1989), it was felt necessary to check the representativity of *Le Petit Larousse Illustré* by comparing its treatment of the non-standard words in the film corpus with that of *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* (1993). The latter is generally regarded as not excessively prescriptive (Lodge 1989: 430).

Le Petit Larousse appears to be more conservative than *Le Petit Robert*. The disagreement between the two dictionaries is found in the percentage of

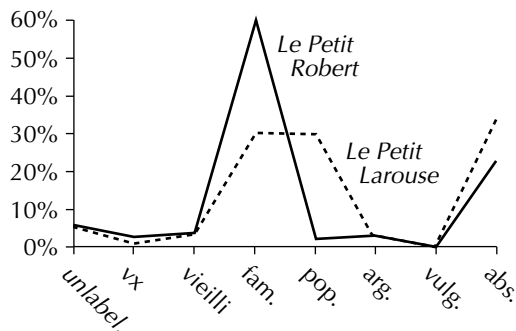


Figure 1

the words that receive the labels *fam.* or *pop.* Most of the lexical items allocated the style-label *pop.* by *Le Petit Larousse* appear with the label *fam.* in *Le Petit Robert*. *Le Petit Robert* obtains a lower score of *absent* words³, which suggests a greater readiness to accept these items into the general language. There seems to be agreement between lexicographers on the words labelled *arg.*

3.3 Comparison of style-labels in *Le Larousse du XXe siècle* (1932) with *Le Petit Larousse Illustré* (1989)

In what follows I will consider the changes which have taken place between 1932 and 1989 in the way lexicographers regard these words. I intend to compare like with like by studying two different editions of Larousse dictionaries. A preliminary caveat concerns the relative sizes of the dictionaries. The *Larousse du XX^e siècle*, in six volumes, compiles 120,000 words (Matoré 1968: 142), while *Le Petit Larousse illustré* has 58,000. Despite the difference in the number of words, the two dictionaries work in the same style. Paul Augé in his introduction to *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* (1932: 1) claims that the dictionary is descriptive:

Ainsi, à l'ancien fonds de la langue, dont les Dictionnaires Larousse ont toujours fourni l'inventaire le plus exact, nous avons ajouté tous les mots nouveaux, sans négliger les termes spéciaux ou techniques, ni même les mots d'argots, réalisant de la sorte dans nos colonnes le vrai miroir du "français vivant".⁴

However, in spite of this statement, *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* is highly prescriptive as this study shows.

In these dictionaries, some words appear *unlabelled* (abbreviated below as *unlabel.*), which I take to mean that the lexicographers consider these words to be *standard*. However, one dictionary might regard a word as *non-standard* and another not. The adjective *mimi*, 'cutie' standing for *mignon* was *unlabelled* in 1932 and rated *fam.* in 1989. This shows that lexicographers' views about *standard* words are not necessarily stable.

Tables 2-3 and Figures 2-3 show the numbers of words labelled *vx.*, *vieilli.*, *enf.*, *fam.*, *pop.*, *arg.*, *triv.* and *vulg.*, in both *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* and in the *Le Petit Larousse illustré*, and those items that were excluded. Figure 4 indicates the evolution of the stylistic labels that the two dictionaries have in common. This exercise takes into account *types* (*members*) only and is restricted to the 450 items compiled in my glossary.⁵ Labels are ranked in descending order of socio-stylistic value from the left to the right of the table.

LE LAROUSSE DU XXI^e SIÈCLE

<i>unlabel.</i>	<i>vx</i>	<i>vieilli</i>	<i>enf.</i>	<i>fam.</i>	<i>pop.</i>	<i>arg.</i>	<i>triv.</i>	<i>vulg.</i>	<i>abs.</i>
3%	0%	0%	0.5%	11%	14%	17%	1%	0%	53.5%

Table 2

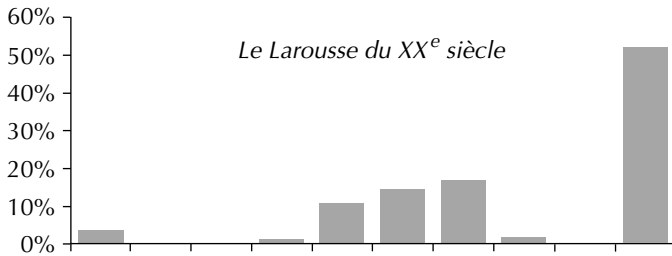


Figure 2

LE PETIT LAROUSSE ILLUSTRÉ

<i>unlabel.</i>	<i>vx</i>	<i>vieilli</i>	<i>rég.</i>	<i>fam.</i>	<i>pop.</i>	<i>arg.</i>	<i>vulg.</i>	<i>abs.</i>
5%	1%	3%	0.1%	28.5%	28.3%	2.4%	0.1%	31.6%

Table 3

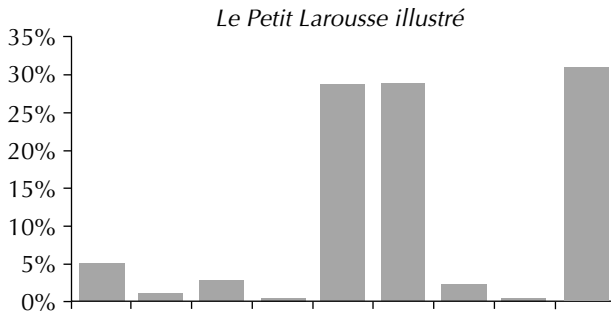


Figure 3

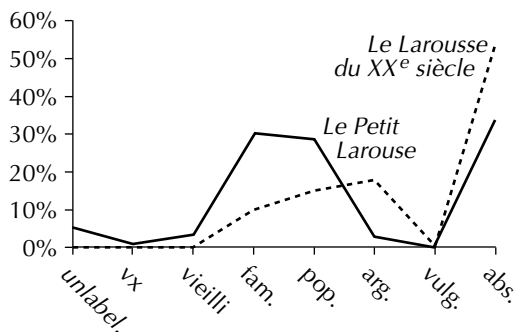


Figure 4: Style-labels common to *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* and *Le Petit Larousse illustré*

3.4 Conclusions and observations

Figure 4 gives us indications of the way attitudes to language have evolved over a sixty-year period. The most outstanding feature is that *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* excludes the majority of the investigated items which appear in my data. These lexical items were highly stigmatised in 1932 and attitudes to these items have evolved. They are now conventionally labelled *fam.*, *pop.*, or *arg.*. Figure 3 shows that a small ratio of unlabelled words in 1932 (*un gars*, ‘a guy’; *faire marcher*, ‘to pull somebody’s leg’; *un mêtèque*, ‘a wog’; *merde*, ‘shit’ etc.) have been placed in the *fam.* category today. On the other hand, a small percentage of words rated non-standard in *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle* (5%) have now been accepted into the standard (e.g. *aguicheuse*, ‘a prick-teaser’; *dragées*, ‘bullets’; *un crème*, ‘a small white coffee’). The proportion of *arg.* words has decreased, falling from 17% in 1932 to 2.4% in the more recent dictionary. This indicates that traditional *argot* terms have now passed into the general French vocabulary. Certain patterns are more or less systematic. It is noticeable, for instance, that most words *absent* from the 1932 dictionary receive the label *pop.* in 1989, which means that sixty years later they are still heavily stigmatised and attributed to low-status groups. One item *absent* from the 1932 dictionary belongs in 1989 to the *vulg.* category (*un salopard*, ‘a bastard’). Those that were labelled *arg.* are generally labelled *pop.* in 1989. Items with the labels *fam.* and *pop.* in 1932 are quite stable, despite a weak tendency for *pop.* words to become *fam.* One can say that the non-standard vocabulary of my film corpus cannot be characterised as specific

to a particular time period and is still commonly used today. Indeed, only 4% of the non-standard words in my corpus are now regarded as obsolete (*vx*) or outdated (*vieilli*).

4.0. Surveys of the Use of the Non-standard Lexical Items in Today's French

4.1 Purpose

One can derive some idea of the vitality of these non-standard items today from dictionaries like *Le Larousse* and *Le Robert*, but there is always the possibility that lexicographers have a different view of the lexicon from 'ordinary speakers'. Following Lodge (1989) and Armstrong (1998), I conducted my own survey of speakers' reported actual use of non-standard words in my corpus leaving aside their sense of the words' stylistic value.

4.2 The survey

In this survey, I presented a list of a hundred items from the film corpus to native French speakers currently resident in Scotland or France. Some of the informants were unknown to the investigator and contacted by electronic mail. The use of electronic mail restricted the people surveyed to those who were computer literate, but this method opens new perspectives for self-reporting questionnaires on the current use of language. Informants were asked to '*Soulignez les mots qu'il vous arrive d'utiliser dans la conversation*'.⁶

Table 4 presents the hundred words or expressions from my film corpus that were investigated. To avoid the confusion of some of these words with possible homonyms, I gave, where necessary, their 'standard' labels (e.g. *battant* in the sense of 'coeur', *bavard* in the sense of 'avocat'). The stylistic indicators are those given by *Le Petit Larousse illustré* (1989):

The following results are derived from the labelling of *Le Petit Larousse illustré*:

- unlabelled: 7
- vieilli* labelled words: 1
- fam.* labelled words: 34
- pop.* labelled words: 30
- arg.* labelled words: 6
- vulg.* labelled words: 1
- abs.*: 21

ITEMS	LABELS IN PETIT	ITEMS	LABELS IN PETIT
à la revoyure (idiom), <i>so long</i>	<i>pop.</i>	comme dab (idiom), <i>as usual</i>	<i>abs.</i>
allumeuse (noun), <i>prick-teaser</i>	<i>fam. and péj.</i>	contredanse (noun), <i>police summons</i>	<i>fam.</i>
apéro (noun), <i>aperitif</i>	<i>pop.</i>	copain (noun), <i>pal</i>	<i>fam.</i>
au béguin (idiom), <i>in love</i>	<i>fam.</i>	copine (noun), <i>female pal</i>	<i>fam.</i>
avoir le béguin pour (idiom), <i>to have a crush on</i>	<i>abs.</i>	coucou (exclamation), <i>hello</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>
avoir quelqu'un à la caille (idiom), <i>to have a grudge against someone</i>	<i>abs.</i>	crème (noun), <i>small white coffee</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>
avoir un petit pépin pour (idiom), <i>to have a crush on</i>	<i>abs.</i>	Croquenot (noun), <i>beetle crushers</i>	<i>fam.</i>
balles (noun), <i>francs</i>	<i>fam.</i>	dégueulasse (noun), <i>disgusting</i>	<i>pop.</i>
battant (noun) [coeur], <i>ticker</i>	<i>abs.</i>	dragée (noun) [balles de pistolet], <i>bullets</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>
bavard (noun) [avocat], <i>mouthpiece</i>	<i>abs.</i>	écluser un godet (idiom), <i>to sink a drink</i>	<i>pop.</i>
biberonner (verb), <i>to drink</i>	<i>fam.</i>	en avoir sa claque (idiom), <i>to be fed up</i>	<i>pop.</i>
bicot (noun), <i>wog</i>	<i>abs.</i>	en avoir plein le bide, <i>to be fed up</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>
bistrot (noun), <i>bar</i>	<i>fam.</i>	entraver (verb), <i>to understand</i>	<i>arg.</i>
bobos (noun), <i>bruises</i>	<i>fam., or</i> <i>langage enfantin</i>	être à la page (idiom), <i>to be up-to-date</i>	<i>fam.</i>
boniche (noun), <i>skivvy</i>	<i>pop. and péj.</i>	être en boule (idiom), <i>to be angry</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>
ça boume (idiom), <i>everything goes</i> <i>well</i>	<i>pop.</i>	être en rogne (idiom), <i>to be angry</i>	<i>fam.</i>
cambrousse (noun), <i>countryside</i>	<i>pop. and péj.</i>	faire des paillardes (idiom), <i>to have sex</i>	<i>abs.</i>
cambriole (noun), <i>burglary</i>	<i>abs.</i>	faire du gringue à (idiom), <i>to chat up</i>	<i>fam.</i>
carbure (noun), <i>dough</i>	<i>abs.</i>	faire la gueule (idiom), <i>to pull a long face</i>	<i>pop.</i>
casement (noun), <i>burglary</i>	<i>abs.</i>	faire sisitte (idiom), <i>to sit down</i>	<i>abs.</i>
c'est du nanan (idiom), yum-yum	<i>vieilli</i>	fauché (adjective), <i>broke</i>	<i>fam.</i>
c'est pas bézef (idiom), <i>there is not much of it</i>	<i>pop.</i>	flopée (noun), <i>a whole bunch</i>	<i>fam.</i>
c'est le bouquet (idiom), <i>that's the last straw</i>	<i>fam.</i>	flouse (noun), <i>dough</i>	<i>arg.</i>
c'est ta noce (idiom), <i>it's your lucky day</i>	<i>abs.</i>	fric-frac (noun), <i>break-in</i>	<i>pop.</i>
charognard (noun), <i>skunk</i>	<i>fam.</i>	fripouille (noun), <i>swindler</i>	<i>fam.</i>
cochon (noun), <i>pig</i>	<i>fam.</i>	gauloise (noun), <i>cigarette</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>
colback (noun), <i>neck</i>	<i>pop.</i>	godasse (noun), <i>boot</i>	<i>pop.</i>
comaque (adjective), <i>like that</i>	<i>abs.</i>	gonflé (adjective), <i>cheeky</i>	<i>pop.</i>
combine (noun), <i>shady scheme</i>	<i>fam.</i>	guincher (verb), <i>to dance</i>	<i>pop.</i>
		jetée (noun) [argent], <i>hundred francs</i>	<i>abs.</i>
		la der des ders (idiom), <i>the last of all</i>	<i>pop.</i>

ITEMS	LABELS IN PETIT	ITEMS	LABELS IN PETIT
la ramener (idiom), <i>to grumble</i>	<i>pop.</i>	rigolo (adjective), <i>funny</i>	<i>pop.</i>
la trouver mauvaise (idiom), <i>not to find that all funny</i>	<i>fam.</i>	roteuse (noun), <i>cheap champagne</i>	<i>abs.</i>
machin (noun), <i>what's-his-name</i>	<i>fam.</i>	rupin (noun), <i>rich</i>	<i>pop.</i>
marc (noun), <i>coffee grounds</i>	<i>unlabelled</i>	salaud (noun), <i>bastard</i>	<i>pop.</i>
marrant (adjective), <i>funny</i>	<i>pop.</i>	salopard (noun), <i>bastard</i>	<i>vulg.</i>
micheton (noun), <i>prostitute's client</i>	<i>arg.</i>	sécher (verb) [boire], <i>to sink a drink</i>	<i>abs.</i>
ne pas être fichu de (idiom), <i>not capable of</i>	<i>fam.</i>	sécottine (noun), <i>pain in the neck</i>	<i>abs.</i>
ne pas les attacher avec des saucisses (idiom) <i>to be very mean</i>	<i>fam.</i>	en avoir marre (idiom), <i>to be fed up</i>	<i>arg.</i>
oseille (noun), <i>dough</i>	<i>pop.</i>	se grouiller (verb), <i>to hurry</i>	<i>pop.</i>
pèze (noun), <i>dough</i>	<i>arg.</i>	se magner le train (idiom), <i>to hurry</i>	<i>pop.</i>
piger (verb), <i>to understand</i>	<i>fam.</i>	s'en ficher (idiom), <i>not to care</i>	<i>fam.</i>
pinard (noun), <i>plonk</i>	<i>pop.</i>	en avoir plein le dos (idiom), <i>to be fed up</i>	<i>fam.</i>
pognon (noun), <i>dough</i>	<i>arg.</i>	s'en foutre (idiom), <i>not to give a damn</i>	<i>pop.</i>
pompe (noun), <i>beetle-crusher</i>	<i>pop.</i>	s'en jeter un (idiom), <i>to sink a drink</i>	<i>pop.</i>
popotin (noun), <i>bum</i>	<i>pop.</i>	s'en laver les mains (idiom), <i>not to give a damn</i>	<i>abs.</i>
potasser, <i>to swot</i>	<i>fam.</i>	se planquer (verb), <i>to hide</i>	<i>fam.</i>
pote (noun), <i>mate</i>	<i>pop.</i>	se rincer (verb), <i>to drink</i>	<i>abs.</i>
radin (adjective), <i>mean</i>	<i>fam.</i>	truc (noun), <i>thingummy</i>	<i>fam.</i>
raffut (noun), <i>noise</i>	<i>fam.</i>	veine (noun) [chance], <i>luck</i>	<i>fam.</i>
raide (adjective) [sans argent], <i>broke</i>	<i>abs.</i>	verni (adjective), <i>lucky</i>	<i>fam.</i>

Table 4: List of lexical items ranked in alphabetical order

4.3 Parameters of the experiment

In these statistics, I attempt to correlate speakers' perceptions of their use of non-standard items with age and gender parameters in order to discover which generation uses most of the low-status items in my 1930s corpus.

A) SEX

The sex of informants is believed by Milroy (1992: 163-179) to be a parameter of variation independent of style and social class. Male speakers are believed to use more non-standard items and swear words than females.

B) AGE

The informants were evenly divided into six different age groups (see Lodge 1989):

10-15, 20-29, 30-39, 40-50, 51+, 65+

I did not find informants between 15 and 20 years old.

C) ORIGIN OF THE SPEAKERS

The majority of the informants, roughly 75%, live in Paris, although some of them have moved temporarily to Scotland to study or teach. The other 25% live in other parts of France (Alsace, Jura, Rhône Alpes).

D) SOCIAL CLASSES

In the spirit of a self-report survey, I invited the informants to locate themselves in one of the four categories:

1. Upper class
2. Middle class
3. Lower class
4. Without profession (pupils, students, retired people)

I am aware that the latter category is a 'hybrid' distinction, as it does not account for level of education, which is the important factor in this study. Retired people could belong to the upper, middle or lower class, being educated or uneducated. However, I felt that this extra category was needed, as none of the pupils, students or retired people questioned considered themselves to belong to any of the first three. Table 5 indicates how many informants fall in each category.

E) PROBLEMS WITH SELF-REPORTING SURVEYS

The limitations of self-report questionnaires are obvious. The skewing of information in such surveys may be accounted for by the speakers' concern to preserve, in Brown and Levinson's terms, their 'faces' (1987). There is a risk that the informants might understate or overstate their usage of non-standard terms to protect their public images. The methodological issues of the size of the sample and the quantity of data are also serious issues (see Butler 1985; Milroy 1987; Asher's section on 'data collection' 1994, vol. 2: 815-816 and Stubbs 1983: 223-4). I make no strong claims about the representativeness of this survey, but it gives some idea of the current vitality of the colloquial vocabulary used in my films from the 1930s.

NUMBER OF INFORMANTS	
Upper class	17
Middle class	23
Lower class	1
Without profession (pupils, students, retired people)	19
Total	60

Table 5

4.4 The results

The general observation one can make is that most of these items are still used by today’s French natives; although a small number (e.g. *c’est du nanan*, *c’est pas bézef*, *roteuse*) are only used by few informants.

Table 6 and figure 5 represent the average proportion of non-standard words which the different categories of speaker admit as belonging to their active vocabulary.

	10-15	20-29	30-39	40-50	51+	65+
Male speakers	25%	36%	59%	61%	48%	40%
Female speakers	24%	55%	46%	53%	38%	32%

Table 6

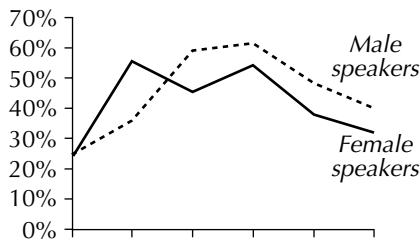


Figure 5

The percentages have been calculated according to the total number of lexical items listed (100). If an informant's perception of his use of the sampled non-standard items is 30 out of 100 then the percentage of items used will be 30%.

A) AGE GROUPS

The percentage of perceived use is smaller in the young than in the older speakers. Speakers between 10 and 15 years of age are the ones who use these non-standard idioms least. Most of the non-standard items investigated in this survey are not recognised by the younger informants. People in the 40 to 50-year-old category today, born in the 1950s, ten to twenty years after the films were first released, get the highest scores.

B) GENDER

In the 10-15 bracket, there is no clear difference between male and female speakers. Female speakers aged 20-29 obtain higher scores than males. Thereafter, the situation is reversed. This shows a tendency for females to use non-standard items as a means of expressing their identity as students (20-29) and to be more conservative in their speech after 30, when they start working.

C) SOCIAL CLASS

The scores for the different informants in their respective social classes are set out in table 7.

It would appear that there is no social correlation in the use of these items; the low score for the 'without profession' category is due to the number of informants between 10 and 15 years of age whose proportion of use is extremely low. It would be interesting to pursue this research further and to

	PERCENTAGE OF USE
Upper class	42%
Middle class	41%
Lower class	45%
Without profession (pupils, students, retired people)	33%

Table 7

assess whether ‘ordinary speakers’ have a different view from lexicographers, by questioning them on how they rate the non-standard words of the film corpus.

5. General conclusion

I carried out several diachronic studies, following the evolution of non-standard items of a 1930s film corpus over sixty years. The compilation of non-standard items into a glossary led to the comparisons of stylistic labels in a 1930s dictionary and a late 1980s dictionary, and permitted us to follow the evolution of stylistic indicators through time. General dictionaries have become increasingly tolerant of this kind of item. In pre-20th-century dictionaries, most of these words were absent. *Le Larousse du XX^e siècle*, for instance, was highly prescriptive, and as a result most non-standard items were not included. Dictionaries from the 1980s tend to incorporate these non-standard words, but there is some disagreement on the stylistic label they should receive. On the whole, *Le Petit Larousse* appears to be less tolerant than *Le Petit Robert* and the frontier between *pop.* and *fam.* in dictionaries is particularly nebulous. The film script-writers clearly did not engage in any instances of lexical creativity, apart from very few one-off expressions. A survey among today’s native French speakers revealed that a great deal of the vocabulary found in the film corpus was still commonly used in the 1990s and only rare expressions were rated as obsolete. It is also inferred from the statistics that it is middle-aged people who use the words of the film corpus most, but no social correlation can be established from these results. It is hoped that such an analysis will open further investigations on the language of the first talkies, which provide invaluable material for the understanding of the progresses of evolution of language.

Notes

- 1 The following revised research has been conducted in the course of my doctoral dissertation on “The Representation of Parisian Speech in the Cinema of the 1930s (University of St Andrews, Scotland 2000). I am very grateful to my supervisor Professor R.A. Lodge (University of St Andrews, Scotland) and to W. J. Anderson (University of St Andrews, Scotland) for her unstinting help when writing this paper.

- 2 'Le Petit Larousse (1970) [was] more conservative than *Le Littré* and *Le Petit Robert* more liberal than its predecessors'.
- 3 I use the label *abs.* standing for *absent* when a word is not found in the body of a dictionary.
- 4 'Thus, to the old reserve of language, the most accurate inventory of which has always been supplied by the *Larousse* dictionaries, I have added all the new words, without overlooking specialised and technical terms or even slang words, in this way achieving a true mirror of "living French" '.
- 5 *Tokens* (or *usages*) count the total number of words used by each character, therefore including multiple occurrences of the same word. Here, I disregard the frequency factor and count the total number of *word types* (or *members*) for each character.
- 6 'Underline words that you sometimes use in conversation'.

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