

A NOTE ON "ARCHAISMS" IN CANADIAN FRENCH

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Most writers who have dealt with the subject in question have used the term "archaism" to describe what they are talking about. This term is not, strictly speaking, satisfactory. It is already used to denote linguistic elements which have been out of current usage usually for some time, and can be found only in either "langues spéciales" (e.g. the language of the law and of the Church), or in literary works where they are used for some conscious purpose. But those dialectal features generally referred to as archaisms have been in current usage in French Canada from the time of the earliest immigrants to the present day, and the Canadian Frenchman, unconsciously using them in his everyday speech, is generally unaware that there is anything noteworthy about them. They are not archaic at all, and can be called archaisms only in terms of metropolitan French. Naturally, this French is the criterion by which other types of French will be compared; but, if Canadian French were as important as or more important than metropolitan French, there would be no question of using the term "archaism" in the present context, except with the strict meaning referred to above. When discussing any particular case of "archaism", one should not say that it has "not been regularised according to modern French", because this would give the false idea that Canadian French is an out-of-date form of the language. The point is that Canadian French has developed separately from metropolitan French in a normal fashion, just as the Romance languages developed from Latin. Moreover, are features of modern dialects (which is what Canadian French is) ever called archaisms? All that would be said is that the feature is archaic in the central language.

There seems to be no single word to replace the merely relative, somewhat ambiguous term "archaism", and strictly speaking one should use a circumlocution such as "dialectal feature which is archaic in Continental (or Parisian) French".

However, if in the past the survival of "archaisms" is the result of purely historical developments, their survival in the future will probably be the result of different factors. Now that the hostility towards France that formerly existed in Canada has broken down, and that metropolitan French is being taught in many of the schools, the 'Canadian dialect' will undergo a strong challenge from 'standard French'; and if 'archaisms' survive, it will be because of sentimental reasons and because the French Canadian mind seems to be basically conservative: in such a context, the term 'archaism' would be somewhat more valid.

It is interesting to determine the date from which a separate Canadian development in the language takes place. There were very few contacts between Canada and France after the cession of 1763, and even before that, in the period 1700-1763, the only newcomers from France were a few churchmen, administrators, etc., who were unimportant from the point of view of linguistic development; the main influx of immigrants came in the years 1632-1700. Hence the end of the Classical Era, approximately 1700, is the time of linguistic separation. This fact has given rise to the erroneous opinion which holds that the French spoken in Canada is the purest 17th century French and, for that reason, that Canadians 'parlent mieux français que les Français eux-mêmes'; however, among other reasons, the language of today is too marked by Anglicisms and Canadianisms to be described unqualifiedly as such. But it may well have been so at the end of the 17th century. Although a large number of the colonists were pure provincials, one of the largest groups came from the rural centres of the Ile de France around Paris, where most of the local dialects had by this time been replaced by central French, the language of the administrators, churchmen and land-owning seigneurs. Thus their language must have exercised an important influence over the rest of the immigrants' dialects. Hence Canadian French in the first half of the 18th century would have been somewhat closer to Parisian French than some of the other regional dialects. In fact, at the beginning of the century, Father Charlevoix declared that 'nowhere is purer French spoken than in New France.'

However, the other dialects of the colonists were far from being completely extinguished. Some of the features of contemporary Canadian French did not even survive into Classical French, the last examples of them being found in the Pléiade poets or Montaigne: but they survived in the dialects, they were on the lips of the immigrants, the majority of whom, as we have said before, were provincials.

There was a further restriction: most of them came from the northern and western provinces and features common to the dialects of these areas had important effects, especially regarding the formation of the Canadian accent: "There is a Canadian accent which is the result of historical causes....Being country people, the settlers of New France had the country accent, reminiscent of some provinces of France but belonging to no province in particular. Rather it seems to be connected....with the average pronunciation north of the Loire."

When studying specific cases of 'archaism', an interesting class of words which one meets is that containing words whose origin is doubtful, words which could be either archaisms or anglicisms. The Canadian word mappe is paralleled in O.Fr. by the word 'map' meaning 'carte, plan'; but in Montreal at least, this must be an anglicism. Similarly le barley (more probably an anglicism since it does not exist in any of the French dialects), le panel (which is the O.Fr. form of 'panneau') and merci à (meaning grace à). Pec or peque in Normandy and Brittany mean "bec". The English word 'peak' seems to be derived from this. In Canada, peque also means 'visière de casquette' - anglicism or archaism?

Is pennette another form of French pennon or is it a deformation of English pennant (which is itself derived from pennon)? Rouche seems to be an anglicism except that it is found also in some of the western dialects in France, is the popular French for "rush" or "sedge", and is more likely to have come into Canadian French in the form rush or roche. Some claim that the use of comme for que after si, aussi, tant and autant is an archaism. (it occurs in the Classical authors but not later), but it has always been common in popular French and again, in Montreal at least, it must be an archaism. (Another feature which is sometimes quite incorrectly claimed as being archaic, is the fall of final -le and -re after a consonant, which is very common in Canada. This feature, however, although it dates from the 16th century, is still common in 'le langage populaire' and in many of the dialects.

The main source for material on this subject is the "Glossaire du Parler Français au Canada". This is very useful, but being the work of amateurs, it has certain limitations. It is very comprehensive in giving dialectal parallels for entries, but is inadequate in giving the date when an archaic word or phrase disappeared from Central French. The extent of usage of any word is not recorded either, but this limitation will be covered by the Linguistic Atlases of French Canada which are soon to appear.
