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Jean Charles Thiebault (de) Laveaux: The Revolt of a Jacobin Grammarian and Lexicographer against the Académie Française

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1. HIS LIFE AND WORK

LAVEAUX WAS BORN in Troyes (Champagne) on November 17th, 1749. In his early youth he entered the Order of the Dominicans and pursued his studies in Clermont (Auvergne). Probably before 1775 he left the Dominicans for good; he got his first position as a teacher of French at the University of Basle (1775–77). Between 1782 and 1785 he taught French at Berlin and it is from 1782 onwards that Laveaux entered the career of a grammarian, critic, and above all a lexicographer, mostly on a free-lance basis. His first work — *Leçons de langue françoise données à quelques académiciens et autres auteurs françois de Berlin* — appeared in 1782 anonymously at Frankfurt (no publisher indicated). Laveaux' aim was to criticise the — in his opinion — decadent and corrupt French as it was written and spoken at Frederic's Berlin Academy and in related literary circles. It was with his *Leçons* that Laveaux entered his lifelong feud with the ancien régime — not only in linguistic subject matters. In the same vein Laveaux criticizes in great detail the *style réfugié* in the writings of French clergymen and members of the Berlin Academy in his journal *Maître de langue* (published between 1783 and 1785). The gist of his criticisms concentrates on conservative tendencies which Laveaux is eager to detect in French publications in German-speaking countries. In order to remedy the lexical and stylistic deficiencies in such writings he even proposed to establish a separate section at the Berlin Academy for the cultivation of the French language. The tasks of such an institution would have consisted in working out a linguistically adequate bilingual

dictionary (French-German and German-French) and in publishing a literary journal. This plan was, however, never carried out although Laveaux must have felt himself to be qualified for it: in 1784/85 he published the second revised and enlarged edition of a *Dictionnaire françois-allemand et allemand-françois* (1st edition 1779/80) published by a "Société de gens de lettres" on the basis of the dictionary of the Académie française and of Schmidlin's *Catholicon* (1771). In 1789/1790 appeared the 3rd edition, again revised and enlarged by Laveaux.¹

His engagement as a literary critic was documented in the collection *Critique de quelques auteurs françois qui écrivent en Allemagne* (1787);² this work contains also a number of critiques on the lively discussions centering around Rivarol's and Schwab's prize-essays on the universality of the French language.³

In 1785, by the intervention of Frederic II, Laveaux obtained the position of professor of French at the Hohe Karlsschule in Stuttgart. In order to promulgate his own linguistic and didactic ideas in his French courses Laveaux wrote — on the Duke's order — a comprehensive, partially bilingual elementary text-book. Let me quote the French title-page in full:

Leçons méthodiques de langue françoise pour les allemands; contenant tout ce qui est nécessaire pour apprendre et enseigner cette langue. A l'usage de l'Université-Caroline de Stuttgart. Ouvrage entrepris par ordre de Son Altesse Sérénissime Monseigneur Le Duc régnant de Württemberg. Par M. De La Veaux Professeur de Belles-Lettres à la dite Université. Stuttgart: de l'Imprimerie de l'Université-Caroline 1787/1788.

¹ For further editions of this *Dictionnaire* and for bibliographical details see the article Laveaux in our *Bio-bibliographisches Handbuch* (Brekle et al.).

² First published in Laveaux' *Cours théorique et pratique de langue et littérature* (1784/1785); which itself is the book-form publication of his journal *Maitre de langue*.

³ See further Piedmont 1984:17 ff.

Together with some of his colleagues and students he successfully tried to disseminate from 1790 onwards revolutionary ideas in public circles.¹ Kuhn In view of the Duke Karl Eugen's strict surveillance of his "Hohe Schule" it was only natural that Laveaux' situation became untenable. He submitted his resignation and was removed from his office on October 10th, 1791.

Laveaux left Stuttgart for Strasbourg where he joined — together with some of his students — the Jacobins' club. During the years 1791–1793 he served the revolutionary cause on both sides of the Rhine as the editor of the *Courrier de Paris* and of the *Courrier de Strasbourg*. In 1793 he went to Paris where he edited the Jacobin newspaper, the *Journal de la Montagne*; besides he held a position in the Ministry of War.

In 1793 he had to defend himself against the charge of not being a true Jacobin. He published his *Réponse de J.Ch. Laveaux à un écrit anonyme intitulé Portrait de Laveaux*, in which he explains in great detail the reasons why he came back to France only in 1791.² Somehow Laveaux managed to survive the period of "la Terreur". Judging from his later publications he must have worked in Paris as a grammarian and lexicographer until his death in 1827.³

2. LAVEAUX' IMPORTANCE AS A LEXICOGRAPHER AND CRITIC OF THE ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE

As we have already seen, his first attempts as a lexicographer date back to his years in Berlin when he saw through the press several editions of a bilingual French-German and German-French dictionary. The relative success of this work can be measured against the fact that between 1784/85 — when the first edition revised by Laveaux was published — and 1812 we have been able to locate at least eight editions in such places as Berlin, Braunschweig and Strasbourg.

¹ For details see Kuhn et al. (1989:147, 151–163).

² For details and quotations see Gough (1974) and Kuhn et al. (1989:153–163).

³ It is unfortunate that for so far we have been unable to consult Hugh Gough's unpublished 1974 Oxford dissertation: *Jean-Charles Laveaux (1749–1827): A political biography*.

It was in 1802 when Laveaux published in Paris his two-volume *Nouvelle édition, augmentée de plus de vingt mille articles* of the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française*. This edition must be seen as a preparatory work for his *Nouveau dictionnaire de la langue française* (Paris 1820, 2 volumes, approx. 2.200 columns). Reduced versions of this dictionary were published in 1823 and 1825, both in Paris.

The second edition, revised, corrected and enlarged, was seen through the press one year after his death by Laveaux' daughter Rose-Dorothée Thibault-Laveaux, Mme Jean Baptiste Marty, in 1828.

The structure and types of information that can be found in the dictionary are clearly indicated on the title-page:

1°. Le Recueil de tous les Mots de la Langue usuelle, dont un grand nombre ne se trouve point dans les autres Dictionnaires, avec leurs définitions, et des exemples propres à en indiquer l'usage et la construction; — 2°. Les Étymologies nécessaires pour l'intelligence de ces mots, tirées des langues anciennes ou étrangères; — 3°. Un grand nombre d'Acceptations non indiquées ni définies jusqu'à présent, justifiées par des passages d'auteurs classiques, et auxquelles ces passages servent en même temps de fondement et d'exemples; — 4°. L'explication détaillée des Synonymes; — 5°. Des Remarques sur la Prononciation et l'Orthographie, lorsqu'elles s'écartent des règles générales; — 6°. La Solution des principales Difficultés grammaticales; — 7°. Les Noms des Outils et Instrumens [!] des Arts et Métiers, avec l'indication de leurs usages divers; — 8°. Les Termes des Arts et des Sciences, avec les définitions ou les descriptions des objets qui sont soumis aux procédés des uns et aux spéculations des autres; — 9°. La Critique de plusieurs Mots recueillis ou insérés mal à propos dans quelques Dictionnaires modernes, etc., etc. (Laveaux 1820: title-page).

In the preface to his *Nouveau Dictionnaire* Laveaux in the first place argues in favour of descriptivism; a reliable and representative dictionary should be founded on sound empirical work:

le lexicographe ne doit ni proposer, ni inventer des mots et des acceptations nouvelles [...] il faut qu'il recueille dans toutes les classes, dans tous les arts, dans toutes les industries, tout ce qui est approuvé par

la raison, par le goût, par l'utilité, tout ce qui rentre dans les règles générales du langage (Laveaux 1820: I).

From this clearly follows the necessity of a new dictionary-structure (as indicated on the title-page); above all a dictionary should meet the demands of the general public. This again implies that Laveaux must needs reject Vaugelas' and to a still greater extent the Academy's application of the criterion of "la cour et la ville". He also disagrees with d'Alembert who wants to exclude the terminologies of the arts and sciences from a dictionary. Contrary to d'Alembert, Laveaux sticks to the principle that a national language should be "une et indivisible" (my wording); there should not be "deux langages différens [...] entre moi et les hommes qui me procurent les besoins et les commodités" (Laveaux 1820: V). In this passage — and in many others¹ — of his *Discours préliminaire* the connection between Laveaux' political convictions as a democrat and his lexicographical axioms is obvious.

In his opinion a dictionary should also reflect partial vocabularies of a sociolectal and technical nature; as to the latter he is, however, eager to distinguish encyclopaedic from dictionary information: it is the task of a dictionary to give such semantic explications of a technical term so that the layman may understand them; in contrast, an encyclopaedia should provide its user with optimally detailed theoretical and procedural informations about a given technical term. As to the textual or literary sources for the lemmata and examples of his dictionary entries Laveaux relies heavily on Enlightenment authors like Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and Condillac, without, however, neglecting authors

¹ For instance, when justifying the etymological parts of his dictionary entries Laveaux is eager to point out their usefulness for the general public; again he pleads in favour of one unified language and its conscious and transparent usage. In the case when "les racines étant puisées dans les langues que le peuple ne comprend pas, les dérivés et les composés ne lui paraissent pas plus compréhensibles; et s'il y attache quelque idée, c'est toujours d'une manière vague, imparfaite, et sans connaître la signification précise des élémens. Alors les mots formés de racines étrangères restent toujours en quelque sorte, séparés du langage commun; ils s'y mêlent plus difficilement; de sorte qu'il existe dans la nation deux langages dont les différences et la séparation sont d'autant plus sensibles, que le nombre des mots dérivés des langues mortes ou étrangères est plus considérables. C'est ici qu'il est souvent nécessaire d'indiquer les étymologies". (Laveaux 1820:VII)

of the seventeenth century such as Molière, Arnauld, Nicole and the great moralists.

He explicitly mentions Voltaire's lexicographical dictum that "un dictionnaire sans citations est une squelette" (Laveaux 1820:V) and consequently blames the Academy's dictionary for not having followed this principle.

Based on his intimate knowledge of the historical development of the Academy's dictionary work¹ which he criticizes as being theoretically inconsistent and empirically hopelessly inadequate, Laveaux considers his own *Nouveau dictionnaire* as being superior to any other existing French dictionary.

Laveaux' second major lexical work is his *Dictionnaire raisonné des difficultés grammaticales et littéraires de la langue française*. Its bibliographical history is quite remarkable: 1st edition Paris 1818 (810 pages), 2nd edition "revue, corrigée, et considérablement augmentée" Paris 1822 (2 volumes, 1353 pages!), then, revised by his grandson Charles Marty-Laveaux, four more revised editions between 1846 and 1910 (from 1847 onwards the publisher was Hachette). Based on these bibliographical facts alone we may venture the hypothesis that the lexicographer and grammarian Laveaux must have influenced and guided generations of French writers, teachers, and pupils during the nineteenth and well into the twentieth century.

In his preface to the first edition Laveaux discusses at some length problems of the correctness of usage in connection with the phenomenon of linguistic change (mostly changes of lexical and stylistic usage) and argues against the Academy's strong — and in Laveaux' opinion misguided — normative tendencies. He criticizes the linguistic work of the Académie française wholesale: their dictionary always lagged behind the developments of the "bon usage", the people working on it certainly were not the brightest minds, and, above all, the Academy never managed to produce a really good French grammar. Laveaux is quite explicit about this:

¹ We cannot here go into the "chronique scandaleuse" in and around the Académie française (Richelieu and his "côterie" against Corneille and Racine) which Laveaux relates in considerable detail.

[...] l'Académie française [...] a totalement manqué son but. Elle a composé un dictionnaire sans avoir fait une grammaire, c'est-à-dire établi des conséquences sans avoir reconnu de principes, élevé un édifice sans avoir posé de fondemens. (Laveaux 1818:V).

In contrast to his own lexicographical work with its fine-grained semantic, syntactic and stylistic differences, Laveaux harshly criticizes his colleagues from the Académie:

On y prenait, par le moyen des définitions, une idée assez juste de la signification plus ou moins générale d'un grand nombre de mots usuels, mais les exemples ajoutés à ces définitions n'indiquaient ni les différentes places que ces mots peuvent occuper dans le discours, ni les nuances ou les reflets qu'ils peuvent recevoir, ou de ses places, ou de leur union avec certains mots, ou de leur opposition à d'autres, ou enfin des différens tours dans lesquels ils peuvent figurer. (Laveaux 1818: V).

He furthermore complains that writers and grammarians were divided:

Vaugelas, Bouhours, Ménage, les écrivains de Port-Royal, furent divisés; Furetière s'éleva contre l'Académie française; de nos jours, Desfontaines, Fréron et Geoffroi; contre les meilleurs écrivains de notre siècle; La Harpe contre Voltaire, son maître; et Domergue contre plusieurs de ses contemporains (Laveaux 1818: IV).

By the way, the main sources for Laveaux' examples, decisions on grammatical correctness, and stylistic adequacy are Voltaire, Marmontel, Jaucourt, La Harpe, and above all, Condillac.

Laveaux criticizes not only the various lexicographical deficiencies of the Academy's dictionary-work, he also deplores in a rather polemical tone the fatal consequences of the Academy's authoritarian influences on the development of French as a living language. His chain of accusations runs as follows.

[...] ne pouvant justifier ou défendre un grand nombre de leurs bizarres décisions, ils voulurent en faire des dogmes, [...] . Alors on vit s'élever une sorte de superstition grammaticale et littéraire qui fit regarder le Dictionnaire de l'Académie comme le recueil unique et sacré de toutes

les beautés et de toutes les délicatesses de la langue, et l'Académie comme un conseil grammatical perpétuel, contre les décrets duquel il était défendu de s'elever sous peine d'anathème. [...] les hommes faibles et timides, et c'est toujours le plus grand nombre, se courbèrent devant l'idole; [...] On n'osa plus hasarder d'autres expressions que celles qui se trouvaient dans le Dictionnaire de l'Académie; tout ce qui ne s'y trouvait pas fut déclaré barbare et mal sonnant, et la langue resta comme stationnaire devant cette barrière magique. (Laveaux 1818:V f.)

A piece of fine rhetoric, fully imbued with the spirit of the Enlightenment; all the anti-authoritarian and anti-clerical key-words are there. At the time when Laveaux wrote this — 1818 — he was, moreover, quite optimistic as to the future positive developments of the French people, its language and its usage; he is confident that

[...] la raison a fait des progrès, et que les lumières se sont étendues sur toutes les classes. Il est bien encore quelques hommes qui en ont conservé le langage, mais c'est, ou par intérêt, ou par politique, ou par vieille habitude. La croyance n'y est plus, et le ridicule attend quiconque tenterait de la faire renaître. (Laveaux 1818:VI)

This is not the place nor the time to inquire into the truth of Laveaux' evaluations and prophecies. With his grammatico-stylistic encyclopaedia he certainly had his share in liberating the French and their language from the grammatical and lexical supremacy of the ancient Académie.¹

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¹ Due to restrictions of space we cannot analyze Laveaux' *Dictionnaire synonymique de la langue française* (1826). See the article on Laveaux (2.12) in our *Bio-bibliographisches Handbuch* (Brekle et al.).

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