Prescription, description and 'artefactualism' in Renaissance vernacular grammar: the French case

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Abstract

This article argues that the received interpretation of sixteenth-century French grammatical writing in terms of the categories 'prescriptive' and 'descriptive' grammar cannot be maintained. Reconnecting our conception of the nature of Humanist grammatical writing with the ideas about language from which it derived motivates a new interpretation of its essential orientation as 'artefactualist', an ideology that stressed the status of languages as the conscious product of learned grammatical activity. Seeing artefactualism as the centre of gravity for grammatical activity has the advantage of rendering Renaissance French grammatical texts ideologically intelligible by allowing them to appear unified, and not just hybrids of the two opposed descriptive and prescriptive tendencies.

Résumé

Le présent article propose une nouvelle lecture de l'activité grammaticale française de la Renaissance. Plutôt qu'une interprétation structurée autour du contraste « grammaire descriptive / grammaire prescriptive-normative », est développée ici l'idée selon laquelle les théories humanistes de la grammaire sont déterminées par une idéologie « artéfactualiste », qui souligne le statut des langues en tant que produits conscients de l'activité grammaticale savante. Cette interprétation, qui rapporte les travaux grammaticaux du XVIe siècle aux idées humanistes sur la nature du langage, a l'avantage de rendre les textes grammaticaux français intelligibles d'un point de vue idéologique : ils apparaissent alors comme unifiés, plutôt que comme des hybridations incohérentes des deux tendances contraires, descriptive et normative-prescriptive.

Keywords

vernacular grammar, Renaissance grammar, French grammar – history, descriptive linguistics – history, grammar – history, usage

Mots clés

grammaire vernaculaire, grammaire de la Renaissance, grammaire française – histoire, linguistique descriptive – histoire, grammaire – histoire, usage

1 INTRODUCTION

Globally, Renaissance vernacular grammar has been the object of equivocal interpretations.[1] Some Renaissance specialists and many general linguistic historians take Humanist grammar as a manifestation of the basically 'prescriptive' approach to synchronic linguistic analysis that is supposed only to end definitively

in the modern era (Görlach, 1999; Hüllen, 2001, p. 237; Defaux, 2003; Bowerman, 2006; Hock & Joseph, 2009, p. 188). However, for many historians of the Renaissance and general historians of linguistics, vernacular grammars are empirical exercises in linguistic *de*scription (Seuren, 1998, p. 39; Ruijsendaal, 2000; Allan, 2007). Other commentators, meanwhile, prefer to speak of the *dual* descriptive/prescriptive (normative) character of Renaissance grammatical thought (e.g. Demaizière, 1989, p. 41-42; Swiggers, 1996, p. 177).

To judge from many standard accounts, then, the nature of Renaissance grammar can be adequately captured through some combination of the terms "prescriptive" (or "normative") and "descriptive", projecting a contemporary understanding of these categories back onto the Renaissance (an exception is what we might call the "Paris school": cf. Auroux, 2012). Whatever the particular blend of prescriptive/ descriptive tendencies a historian wishes to see in grammars of the period, the suitability of these categories is rarely questioned.

There can be no doubt that French grammatical texts of the sixteenth century are ideologically diverse, containing certain elements that resemble both descriptivist and prescriptivist tendencies, understanding these terms in something like their modern sense. This apparent theoretical heterogeneity is hardly surprising, given the inchoate and innovative nature of the project of vernacular grammatization, and the position of Renaissance grammar as the ancestor of modern prescriptive and descriptive approaches alike. There remains, nevertheless, the question of the intellectual "centre of gravity" of the Renaissance grammatical project, and the extent to which it can be simply understood through the familiar traditional categories.[2]

The adoption in intellectual history of ready-made categories such as "prescription" and "description" is likely to obscure the specificity of the actual conditions in which ideas arise. One important reason to reject any hasty application of modern concepts to the sixteenth century is that the very category of "grammar" in Renaissance linguistic thought was much less distinct than it is for us from the related domains of lexicography, spelling-reform, rhetoric, literary composition, punctuation and prosody, to name only the most obvious areas where the sixteenth-century divisions do not match our own.[3] Grammar formed part

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2 In generalizing about "Renaissance linguistics", my intention is not to suggest the equivalence of all European grammatical writing of the period. Nevertheless, the project of vernacular grammatization is so coloured by its Humanist origins and its accompanying metalinguistic attitudes, that some generalization is both possible and appropriate.

3 Renaissance grammars characteristically contained long sections on orthography (e.g. Ramus 1572; Garnier 2006 [1558]), and could also be paired with a rhetoric and an ars poetica – such, for instance, is the case of Bembo's 1525 *Prose*. For Tavoni (1982, p. 246), "the fact that a language could be written down (which in effect meant the fact that a written tradition of that language existed) was one and the same thing, in the eyes of these grammarians, as its articulatedness, and was therefore ultimately what determined the *rationalitas* itself of that language." Orthography was thus intimately linked to grammar.

of the Humanists' broader intellectual project, embracing all these other subjects, from which it was often not fully distinguished. For this reason alone, it would be remarkable if "descriptive" or "prescriptive" intentions could be discerned in sixteenth-century French or Italian grammarians that were exactly equivalent to those of linguists today – the place of grammar within the wider system of metalinguistic categories has changed too much to make it probable that these two terms should be entirely applicable in their modern meanings.

Renaissance grammars have more often been approached with the goal of tracking their contribution to the development of particular formal grammatical categories, than for what they reveal about underlying conceptions of language and grammar themselves. Investigation of the latter question, in fact, has most usually been limited to brief remarks related to the alleged irregularity of vernaculars, or to the reminder – a crucial one, as we will see – that the vernaculars being "grammatized" in the sixteenth century really corresponded to what we would now consider dialects (see e.g. Defaux, 2003, p. 19; cf. Padley, 1988, p. 322-4). As will become clear, however, it will be impossible to deal satisfactorily with sixteenth-century grammatical writing without also investigating the question of what Renaissance grammarians thought languages actually were. This is a topic of fundamental importance for the Renaissance as for any other period of linguistic history. Just as it would be impossible to understand a contemporary grammar inspired by generativist or systemic-functional theories without an appreciation of what these theories take language to be, so too Renaissance grammars in general, and French ones in particular, can only be understood in light of the period's conception of the nature of language.

In what follows, I will argue that a new category is needed to understand French Humanist grammatical activity: instead of *fundamentally* being examples of linguistic prescription, description, or some hybrid of the two, French grammars of the sixteenth century are best interpreted as exercises in what I shall call "artefactualism" or language *constitution*, a project to transform the vernaclar from a natural, chaotic ensemble of variable dialects into a rational grammatical *ars* comparable to Latin or Greek (see e.g. Trudeau, 1992, 2008; Bierbach & Pellat, 2006; Colombat, Fournier, & Puech, 2010, p. 146-150; on *artes* see, among others, Auroux, 1998, p. 20-21; cf. Mazière and Auroux, 2006).

The argument is structured as follows. Section two clarifies the nature of descriptive and prescriptive grammar. Section three argues that Renaissance grammarians had a normative conception of "usage", and that, consequently, their claims to "describe usage" do not compromise a non-descriptivist interpretation of

their activity. Sections four and five argue that French vernacular grammarians of the Renaissance are better seen as artefactualists than as prescriptivists. Artefactualism, I will argue, characterizes grammars of French as both a first and a second language – just as prescriptivism is also supposed to. I will also argue that artefactualism is common to all vernacular grammatical writing of the sixteenth century, which I will consider here, largely without reference to the internal chronology of authors and works, as instantiating a coherent ideological system, regardless of its language of expression (French, English or Latin).

2 DESCRIPTIVE AND PRESCRIPTIVE GRAMMAR

"Descriptive" grammar offers a supposedly "objective and nonjudgmental description of language use" (Nelson, 2010, p. 146). On this definition, "descriptive" is a highly misleading characterisation of Renaissance grammar, which had a fundamentally *evaluative* rather than objective approach to languages. Humanists saw the vernacular as needing both to be made linguistically and metalinguistically comparable to Latin, and *fixed* in such as way as to *prevent it changing*. This is an explicitly expressed goal (Tory, 1529, Aux lecteurs, rº; Peletier, 1966 [1555], p. 79-80, 86, 133-4; Ramus, 1572, p. 53-4), obscured by references to the "descriptive" character of Renaissance grammar.

All descriptive grammars are also inherently normative in presupposing a "conventional register" of grammatical structures as the background against which variations can be recorded. For a descriptive grammar to become *prescriptive*, this register must be established in terms of notions like language "purity" or "correctness", coupled with the intention to *impose* or *recommend* certain forms as the only ones worthy of use. The label "prescriptivist" is thus mainly understood as a language attitude oriented towards *use* or *parole*: it "involves laying down, or prescribing, rules for correct *use*" (Nelson, 2010, p. 146; my emphasis).

There are two respects especially in which Renaissance grammar cannot be considered prescriptive in this modern sense. First, the palette of possible grammatical choices was seen as *yet to be constructed*. A modern prescriptivist need not deny the empirical reality of the linguistic choices they condemn, nor deny that these choices form part of an autonomous linguistic system. As we will see below, however, Renaissance vernacular grammar inherited a deep-seated understanding that natural vernaculars were, in a certain respect, *not even languages* in the true sense of that word. Grammarians' aim was precisely to *establish* the paradigmatic linguistic system – the *language* – that literary production in the vernacular required, by specifying the range of acceptable

grammatical forms that would *constitute* the written standard, and doing away with dialectal variety.

Renaissance grammar is, furthermore, better conceptualized as about Saussurean *langue* than as about *use* or *parole*. As has been demonstrated by Sylvain Auroux (1992, 1994), grammarians wanted to *construct* a grammar for their languages, conceived of as not already equipped with one. Sixteenth-century French grammarians saw their grammatical activity as *fashioning*, as if for the first time, an entirely new artefact – a grammatized French language that had been 'reduced' or 'put into art' in a way that strongly differentiated it from the pre-existing chaotic vernacular dialects (see Mazière & Auroux, 2006). The grammarian was thus only derivatively trying to influence use in the standard prescriptive way. Indeed, we will see that some Renaissance scholars, like Ramus (1572, p. 7; see also Peletier, 1966 [1555], p. 56, 80), explicitly repudiated that aim; instead, their principal aim was to *shape the grammar of the language itself*, conceived as the product of human artifice. "Constitution", not prescription, is therefore the term that best captures what Renaissance grammarians had in mind.

Artefactualism, I will argue, is the main driving force behind sixteenth-century French grammatical activity – but it also gave rise to secondary impulses, both prescriptive and descriptive. The fact that grammarians envisaged their activity in an artefactual way naturally sometimes led them to give fully *prescriptivist* descriptions of their project: if one's aim is to constitute a *language*, then of course one wants speakers to *use* it in a certain way. The first systematic continental grammarian of French in the Renaissance, Jacques Dubois (Sylvius), makes some telling remarks in this connection in the introduction to his grammar:

> It was not without justice that I set myself to cultivating the French language, in order, so to speak, to enlighten our descendants who would treat these matters more elegantly, copiously and felicitously (1998 [1531]: a v r⁰)[4]

The purpose Dubois mentions first − 'cultivating the French language' – is directed at *the French language itself*: his project is the artefactualist one of transforming French into a codified "language" in the full contemporary sense of the term. But, if his grammar is read, it will naturally affect the usage of the future, leading people to write more correctly – a usage-oriented, prescriptivist *result* of an artefactualist *intention*.

As a grammatical ideology, artefactualism also gave rise to descriptivist moments: French grammarians forged rules by generalizing about the language of the court and political establishment, a mainly inductive activity. But they did not

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4 Translations from Latin are my own except where the bibliography lists a translator.

think of themselves as having a purely passive role, as simply *registering* already constituted grammatical facts: in endorsing certain linguistic choices, they were constructing and *fixing* a grammar. The Latin verb *invenire*, often used to describe the process of grammatical analysis, meant both to "find out" and "invent" – a significant ambiguity, and one that, when missed, allows the artefactualist motivation of language *construction* to go unnoticed.[5]

A prescriptive/artefactualist intention will be harder to spot when a grammarian is simply advocating the *maintenance* of current paradigmatic choices than when he is promoting structures which do *not* correspond to the current norm: in the former case, what looks like descriptivism may cloak a prescriptive/normative conception of the grammarian's role. It is therefore crucial not to misinterpret the apparently wholly descriptive statements in which Renaissance grammars of French abound. In themselves, apparently descriptive grammatical generalizations are ambiguous. For all their empirical, descriptive appearance, they can be understood perfectly easily as stipulations of the norms that *should* be, and in fact are, observed. The danger in not acknowledging this kind of ambiguity – a wholly systematic one – is that historians will fail to see the prescriptive or artefactualist intent behind what appears to be a descriptive project.

We must, then, beware of jumping to an interpretation of the Renaissance material which goes beyond the texts themselves. We should be particularly circumspect about allowing the biases of our own (meta)linguistic ideology to influence the interpretation of earlier grammatical documents. Thus, Glatigny (1987) draws attention to the "terminological parallelism" that characterizes Renaissance grammarians' programmatic statements of their activity: Palsgrave speaking of having "brought the French tongue under rules certain", Dubois of "discovering" or "inventing" the system (*ratio*) of French and "bringing it into rules", and Meigret of the possibility of "reducing" the inherent system of French into rules. What is striking about all these statements is that they stress the *active* participation of the grammarian in the fashioning of the grammatical code – *bringing* it under rules, *inventing* it, *reducing* it. Glatigny's conclusion (1987, p. 138), however, completely effaces this activity on the grammarian's part: early French grammarians' principal formulation of their activity, he concludes, "is to *discover* the rules" [emphasis added] – a description which makes the grammarian nothing more than a passive recorder of already existing regularities. As we will see, paying closer heed to what the grammarians themselves actually say about their grammars often gives us reason to discern a strong non-descriptive intent behind Renaissance grammarians' analysis.

5 Cf. Cicero, *Brutus*, 71: *nihil est enim simul et inventum et perfectum* "for nothing is ever invented and perfected at the same time".

3 Reason, norms and usage in Humanism

One of the risks of not paying attention to grammarians' presuppositions about the nature of language itself is that their inherently evaluative conception of grammar will be missed. According to the definition taken from Latin grammar, grammar was the "art de bien parler", the *art* of speaking *well* (Ramus, 1562, p. 7). Nebrija's definition of Latin grammar as the "science of speaking and writing well, drawn from the authority of the most learned men and from their usage of it" (*Introductiones latinae* III, quoted in Margolin, 2007, p. 105), applies, substituting "art" for "science", just as much to grammars of the modern languages. Humanists viewed language use in the same light they saw the other liberal arts – as an activity which inherently determined varying degrees of mastery.

The first words of Henri Estienne's 1579 *Précellence du langage françois* make the author's evaluative view of language very clear:

> Entre les beaux et grands avantages que Dieu a donnez aux hommes pardessus tous les autres animaux, cestuy-ci estant un, qu'ils peuvent s'entrexposer leurs conceptions par le moyen du langage : il est certain que ceux qui sçavent mieux faire cela, n'ont seulement cest avantage general, ains sont aussi avantagez pardessus les autres hommes. (Estienne, 1896 [1579], p. 10)
> [Among the fine and great advantages given by God to man above all the other animals, this being one, that they can display their conceptions to each other by the means of language, it is certain that those who can do that better not only have this general advantage, but are also advantaged over and above other men.]

Human linguistic ability, then, is graded and defines a hierarchy of competence among its possessors (cf. Du Wes, 1858 [1532], p. 894-5). As Dubois (1998 [1531]: a v r°) put it, "if man is different from other animals through language, one man differs from another in the development of language." The "distinction between men and people" – that is, between the cultivated and uncultivated – was the "essential goal" of the Humanist perspective on language, as Bossong (1990 p. 137) has noted in reference to this passage.

Grammarians did not think it was just up to them to define what counted as correct or elegant usage. Their role, instead, was to codify a particular linguistic variety. In France, the reference variety was that of the court, seen as the locus of elegant French (Estienne, 2003 [1557], p. 3), giving way later in the sixteenth century to the language of the *Parlement* and *Palais* (Cerquiglini, 2007, p. 47-8; Lodge 1993, p. 169). This was in contrast both to the language of "le menu peuple", the uneducated masses (Estienne, 1896 [1579], p. 170), and to the affectations of pedants (Estienne, 1999 [1582], p. 2; see Trudeau, 2008).

This anchoring in the register of a particular sociolect underlies many apparently descriptivist statements. Meigret, for instance, tells us that he has written his grammar "selon l'expérience que je puis avoir de l'usage de la parole et langage

français [according to the experience I have been able to have of the use of French speech and language]", which leads him to express the rules "que j'ai pu extraire d'une commune observance, qui comme une loi les nous a tacitement ordonnées [which I have been able to extract from common usage, and which have been tacitly enjoined on us by it as though by a law]" (1980 [1550], p. 5; see Mazière, 2013, p. 40-3). Meigret's grammar is, of course, full of descriptively couched statements. Du Wes also describes his project in apparently wholly observational, inductive terms (1858 [1532], p. 896): he has not, he tells us,

> neverthelesse *founde* rules infallybles, bycause that it is nat possyble to *fynde* any suche, that is to say, suche whiche may serve withoute any faulte, as do the rules compiled for to lerne Laten, Greke and Hebreu and other such languages [emphasis added]

This descriptive ring is typical of Renaissance grammars of French. Sometimes, indeed, explicit statements can be found to the effect that usage trumps grammatical reason in disputes over grammaticality:

> Car c'est au savant ou autre de proposer à un peuple les vocables tels que bon lui semblera, au bon plaisir des oreilles des hommes et au danger d'être rebutées comme désagréables ou bien reçus comme dignes d'être mis en usage. (Meigret, 1980 [1550], p. 101-2)
> [For it is up to the savant or someone else to suggest to the people those words that seem right to him, at the discretion of men's ears and with the danger of being refused as unpleasing or indeed accepted as worthy of being put into use.]

In a similar vein, Ramus (1572, p. 168) says of the grammarian who tries to exclude "anomalous" constructions that "ce seroit cõme desgainer lespee luy tout seul a lencontre de toute la France [this would be like drawing a sword alone against the whole of France]" (see also 1572, p. 164-5 and 179). So important is usage that it is sometimes said to constitute the *only* way of acquiring the principles of French (Garnier, 2006 [1558], p. 98).

For all that, the fact is that French grammarians of the 1500s did not usually understand "usage" in an empirical, descriptive sense. In the sixteenth century, grammarians intended "usage" in a way impregnated with the very normative notions banished from the modern concept. For Humanists, "usage" meant "usage of the *best speakers*", where the category of "best speakers" was one that stood under the grammarian's authority. One of the participants in Peletier's *Dialogue de l'Ortografe* asks: "Qu'apelerons nous plus resonnablemant Usage, sinon ce qui et aprouve par hommes qui sont les premiers antre les leurs an toutes sortes de Disciplines, e de Filosofie? [What will we more reasonably call usage than what is approved by men who are the first among their peers in all kinds of Disciplines, and Philosophy?]" (1966 [1555], p. 63-4). This conclusion was meant specifically for questions of orthography, but it was representative of broader language attitudes.

Regardless of the fact that the language of members of the court exemplified the normative standard for French, only the most learned could be the final arbiters of correct grammar.

The Humanists' vision was one in which grammatical authority emanates from the grammarian himself. Consistently, the teacher in Ramus' 1572 Grammar says that it is

> bien seant, combien que le langaige demeurast a la populasse, neantmoins que les hommes plus notables estans en charge publicque eussent, comme en robbe, ainsi en parolle quelque præeminence sur leurs inferieurs (p. 50)
> [appropriate, although the language belongs to the people, that nevertheless the most notable men in positions of authority should have, just as in dress, so too in speech some preeminence over their inferiors]

These 'notables', of course, were not just the courtly speakers of the reference dialect: they were also precisely those who benefited from and dispensed grammatical instruction, a circumstance that consolidates the grammarian's role at the epicentre of linguistic authority. Appreciating this allows us to reach a correct interpretation of a passage sometimes cited as the clearest evidence *in favour* of Ramus' descriptivism:

> le peuple est souverain seigneur de sa langue, & la tient comme un fief de franc aleu, & nen doit recognoissance a aulcun seigneur. (1572, p. 30)
> [the people is sovereign lord of its language, and holds it as its free and rightful fief, and owes recognition for it to no lord.]

This passage has been taken as evidence of Ramus' empiricism. But as is clear if read in light of the rest of his work, it is not at all a manifesto for a descriptive linguistics along modern lines. Instead, Ramus is taking position in a dispute about *which social category* gets to define grammatical accuracy. Unsurprisingly, he comes down on the side not of Aristotelians, but on that of the "peuple", *the very audience his grammar is designed to influence*:

> il nest pas loysible a aulcun peuple derrer, ny destre inconstant en son entreprise, quil ne soit aussi loysible de ladmonester de son erreur & inconstance (1572, p. 16)
> [it is not permissible for any people to err, or to waver in its undertaking, without it also being permissible to admonish its error and wavering]

Even members of the court, then, are subject to the grammarian's admonitions, and it is the grammarian who is the origin of the lines of linguistic authority that lead first to the court and then into the public generally. Peletier du Mans stages his orthographical dialogue between the four people who "best" know French (1966 [1555], p. 30); Du Wes, likewise, wants to 'teche and instruct by the principles and reules made by divers well expertz auctors' (1858 [1532], p. 895) – a sign that linguistic authority was seen as centralized in a handful of *doctes* (see Trudeau, 1992, p. 54 and Bossong, 1990, p. 141-2 for some relevant discussion).

Any orientation towards usage in Humanist grammar would have been understood against the background of Quintilian's definition of usage (*consuetudo*) as "consensus eruditorum", "the consensus of the educated" (*IO* I.6.44-5):

> However, he [Quintilian] defines custom in the following way, so that no one could believe that custom is the mistress of language at pleasure: 'I will call "linguistic custom" the style of the learned; as the custom of life is the manners of the good.' (Ramus, 1559, p. 21-2)

Since it was, of course, precisely the grammarian who equipped educated speakers with a standard of grammatical correctness, Quintilian's definition works to refocus linguistic authority on the grammarian himself, thereby delegitimizing usage as a source of grammatical judgement. The kind of usage that should have authority in French was like the classical standard – a self-conscious, highly planned mode of discourse mediated through the explicit categories of the grammarian's metalinguistic expertise.

Quintilian's move, whereby usage becomes *educated* usage, is taken even further by Humanist grammarians, for whom "usage" means not "whatever constructions educated speakers use", but "only those constructions in conformity with grammatical reason" – a thoroughly normative conception. The idea is explicitly stated often enough:

> Mes quele aparence i a il d'apeler Usage, ce qui et contre la reson? …E … faut il apeler Usage, ce qui a ete tolere interim, e nompas aprouve? (Peletier du Mans, 1966 [1555], p. 82-3)
> [But what grounds are there to call what goes against reason "usage"? And… must one really call usage, that which has been tolerated for the time being, but not approved?]

> nous devons dire comme nous disons, puisque généralement l'usage de parler l'a reçu ainsi: car c'est celui qui donne autorité aux vocables: *sauf toutefois là où les règles françaises et la congruité sont offensées: comme font ceux qui disent, je venions, je donisse, frapisse: qui sont fautes qui n'ont jamais été reçues par les hommes bien appris en la langue francaise.* (Meigret, 1980 [1550], p. 29; emphasis added)
> [We should speak in the way we do speak, since generally spoken usage has accepted it; for that is what gives expressions authority: *except, that is, where French rules and congruity are violated, as with those who say* je venions, je donisse, frapisse, *which are faults which have never been accepted by men who are well taught in French*.]

> Que si daventure le peuple Francois estoit icy au commencement refraictere ou reveche, nous luy dirons qu'il a veritablement la souveraine authorite de sa langue, … mais quil doit en tout & par tout user de raison & proportion: comme Varron le plus scavant de tous les Romains a tres doctement juge. (Ramus, 1572, p. 54–5)
> [If perchance the French people is uncooperative or churlish in this at the start, we will tell it that it genuinely has sovereign authority over its language, … but

> that it must on absolutely every occasion use reason and proportion, just as Varro, the most learned of all the Romans, judged with great learning.]

The people's "sovereignty" over their own language is, therefore, highly circumscribed, and cannot infringe grammatical – and hence grammarians' – reason. This is emphasized, most often, by a consistent terminological effort to avert a non-normative interpretation of terms like "usage" or "the people", by qualifying them in such a way as to insist that usage must be carefully moderated before it is taken as authoritative:

> Il est nécessaire qu'avant que nous puissions dire un mot bien usité et recevable, que la langue gagne d'entrée ou par longue fréquentation la faveur de l'oreille du peuple, *du peuple, dis-je, qui a quelque peu de sens et jugement.*' (Meigret, *Réponse à Des Autels*, p. 24, quoted in Hausman, 1980, p. 189; emphasis added)
> [It is necessary before we can call a word well-used and acceptable, that the tongue earn immediately or through long familiarity the favour of the ear of the people – *the people that is, who have some modicum of sense and judgement*]

> Car l'Ecriture n'a point de preeminance par sus la parole, quand les choses sont pressuposees pareilhes. *J'antan quand la parole vient des hommes de jugemant et de savoer*, e qui et non seulement demenee antre eus, mes aussi premeditee…. (Peletier, 1966 [1555], p. 30; emphasis added)
> [For writing has no preeminence over speech, assuming all other things to be equal. I mean when speech comes from men of judgement and knowledge, and when it is not just thrown about between them, but also premeditated]

> Mais je doute si nostre langage (*j'enten tousjours de celuy qui veut demourer en sa pureté*) peut faire son proufit de certains mots qu'il trouve en quelque dialecte, et desquels il ha encore les dérivez. (Estienne, 1896 [1579], p. 181; emphasis added)
> [But I doubt whether our language (*I mean always that of someone who wants to remain in its purity*) can benefit from certain words found in some dialect, of which it already has the derived forms.]

> At the same time usage (*as long as you look for it where it should be sought; I will tell you more in the work prefaced to this book*), will be a sort of touchstone for you, which you can use to distinguish the true from the false among the precepts of those who have written grammatical institutes. (Estienne, 1999 [1582], p. 199; emphasis added)

> A Frenchman, a real Frenchman, brought up among those who speak purely… (Estienne, 1999 [1582], p. 191)

As Ramus makes clear in his grammars, what matters is not usage *tout court,* but only "vrai usage", *true* usage (1562, p. 125-6), or "lusaige du langaige receu & approuve" – "received *and approved* usage" (1572, p. 125). Humanist appeals to usage are thus not at all evidence of an objective, descriptivist conception of grammar. Rather, they function as the point of entry into a normed hierarchy of linguistic expertise, centred on the authority of the grammarian himself.

4 Language as an artefact

Humanist grammatical activity was conducted in the shadow of an ancient tradition
that emphasized the man-made nature of language. In the first treatise dedicated to
the "defence" of French, the *Discours comme une langue vulgaire se peut
perpétuer* (1548), Jacques de Beaune reflected standard understanding in counting
language as among the things "inventées par les hommes" (Longeon, 1989, p. 131).
Various medieval scholars had considered Latin to be the invention of grammarians
(see Thurot, 1868, p. 122ff, Mazzocco, 1993, p. 164ff and Bourgain, 2005, p. 29):
in John of Salisbury's words, "grammar [synonymous with Latin in this period] has
developed to some extent, and indeed mainly, as an invention of man"
(*Metalogicon* 1.14; 1962, p. 39). Similar observations can be found in Egidio
Romano and elsewhere.[6] Latin contrasted in this respect with the vernacular, seen
by Dante as a pure product of imitation that involved *no* conscious instruction:

> I call "vernacular language" that which infants acquire from those around them
> when they first begin to distinguish sounds; or, to put it more succinctly, I declare
> that vernacular language is that which we learn without any formal instruction,
> by imitating our nurses (Dante, 1996, I.2-3)

The widespread description of language as an *arbitrary* and hence *conventional*
human accomplishment could easily give rise to the interpretation that it was the
deliberate, conscious creation of human artificers. Already in the thirteenth
century, Albertus Magnus stated that "voice" is "artificial and conventional" (Book
IV, question 7; 2008, p. 159-60). Characterizing language as "artificial" allows it to
be seen as the result of an "artificer". In French grammarians, there are many
passages where this straightforwardly artefactualist interpretation is natural. A
character in Peletier du Mans' 1555 *Dialogue*, for instance, refers to the "multitude
de gans doctes" who "ont fet leur Langue" – the "multitude of learned men who
have made the French language" (1966 [1555], p. 59). Meigret often talks of
grammatical categories – genders (1980 [1550], p. 37), pronouns (1980 [1550],
p. 49), the participle (1980 [1550], p. 98) – as "invented", though he does not
specify by whom. Ramus refers to the "premier Grammarien des Francoys", who
invented French writing (1572, p. 17). Charles Bovelles' declaration that "the uses
of sounds and names, from which the fabric of language and speech is made, had no
other origin than the spontaneous and various judgement of men" (1973 [1533], p. 3)

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6 Egidio Romano (d. 1316): "Philosophers, seeing that no vernacular language was complete and
perfect, and that neither things' real nature, nor human ways, nor the paths of the stars, nor the
other things about which they wanted to debate, could be expressed in them, invented their own
language, which is called Latin, or the lettered language; and they made it so broad and
copious, that in it everyone could adequately express their own concepts" (*De Regimine
Principium Libri III* (Rome: Apud Bartholomeum Zannettum, 1607), p. 304, quoted in
Mazzocco (1993, p. 167)

was characteristically ambiguous: it could be read both as a statement about the arbitrariness of the sign, or as one about the artificiality of language as a human product. The key term, *arbitrium*, does not connote "arbitrariness": it means the judgement, opinion or *arbitration* of an authority (cf. Gessner, 2009 [1551], p. 105).

If language is largely the conventional product of human ingenuity, its conventions must be acquired. In line with the close link between reason and instruction characteristic of their age, Renaissance thinkers often emphasized the role of learning in the assimilation of the mother-tongue's conventions. As Roger Bacon had observed in the *Opus Tertium*, if one's mother tongue was natural, it wouldn't have to be learnt (see Bourgain, 2005, p. 36 for discussion). Erasmus reasoned along similar lines in *De Pueris* (1966 [1541], p. 491), contrasting humans with insects: bees don't learn to build hives or collect pollen, and ants don't learn to make piles, he noted, "but man cannot eat, walk or talk unless he is taught".

Belief in the invented nature of Latin had implications for the way in which scholars thought acquisition of Latin and the vernacular differed. At the end of the 14th century, Henry de Crissey contrasted the informal transmission of the vernacular languages with the explicit instruction in Latin dispensed through schools (Thurot, 1868, p. 131). The theme of the artificiality of language was also reflected in the Humanist debate about the language of the ancient Romans, centred on the question of whether the masses had spoken Latin or a different, vernacular language (Tavoni, 1982). The Italian tradition of vernacular grammar that starts with Alberti is a product of the belief that Latin was the language of the ancient Roman population generally – a belief that deemphasized the view of Latin as an invented code, and highlighted its essential parity with the spoken vernaculars, of which it was seen simply as a refinement. However, the strength of the belief in the invented, artificial status of Latin, and in the consequent role of school education in transmitting it, was far from entirely banished, and persists in some essential lines of thought that guided the project of vernacular grammatization. Lorenzo Valla addressed the following critique to the claim that Latin had been acquired naturally in antiquity:

> If only I could speak properly grammatically, without any grammatical knowledge of causes or reasons!… What are you going to say? Either grammar is an art, and was handed down by savants, not nurses; or it's not an art, even though everyone acknowledges that it is (*Apologus* II, p. 271, quoted by Mazzocco, 1993, p. 73)

Whereas Latin was the conscious product of grammatical reasoning, the vernaculars were purely natural − and, accordingly, unstable and irregular (cf. Fortunio, 2001 [1516], §9, p. 4-5). The fact that vernaculars were learned did not exempt them from the corruption and tendency to degenerate that characterized all human things:

> Every day, the failings of human lips mutilate, vary and corrupt the people's
> disordered idioms; so much so that a very small geographical distance instantly
> changes the character of any popular language, and causes an alteration in the
> lips of ignorant men (Bovelles, 1973 [1533], p. 3)

Dante saw the vernacular, on ancient lines, as that which "we learn without any formal instruction, by imitating our nurses" (Dante, 1996, I.2-3). The vernacular was, indeed, a *non*-language (see Tavoni, 1984, p. 93): for Romolo Amaseo (1489–1552), it is not only "polluted and contaminated", it even "cannot deservedly claim the name of language" (cited by Zurhausen-Bamberg, 1996, p. 8).

The fact that the vernacular was acquired in earliest childhood was highly significant for perceptions of its irrational nature. According to Nebrija, until the age of seven children were not even capable of receiving training in the disciplines (1981 [1509], p. 116-8). The fact that a child of seven had already mastered their own vernacular was a sign that whatever capacity enabled children to speak their mother tongue was not the same as the capacity engaged in the learning of Latin, a language no one any longer spoke natively: the latter was the result of rational instruction, while the vernacular was the chaotic product of natural imitative tendencies.

The vernacular was often assimilated to the domain of the natural. Dubois tells us that he wrote his grammar:

> to awaken the minds of our contemporaries, so that, briefly interrupting their
> frenetic investigation of exotic languages, at least in their spare hours, they learn
> the rationale of their own language, so as not to continually pour out, like
> magpies or starlings, the things they have heard from their parents but never
> reflected on, never judged, never understood, although it is shameful for a man to
> appear a foreigner in his native language (1998 [1531], a v rᵒ − a v vᵒ)

Animals, indeed, were sometimes thought to have their own languages in the sixteenth century (e.g. Gessner, 2009 [1551], p. 4; Rotta, 1909, p. 97), a view with ancient precedent (Porphyry, *De Abstinentia*; see also Labarrière, 2004, p. 58).

Tavoni comments that when Bruni "thought of 'Latin', (or rather, in his own words, *latina ac litterata lingua*) he thought of a product indissolubly linked with the *ars grammatica* that had produced it" (1982, p. 249). Language therefore needed to be subjected to the same regulatory constraints as other mundane creations in order to be restored to its true nature. The grammarian's job was accordingly to transform the vernacular *into* something worthy of the name "language".

5 GRAMMARIANS AS LANGUAGE-CONSTRUCTORS

If vernaculars were corrupt, irregular and, in a certain sense, *non-linguistic*, then the grammarian's essential task was neither to describe them as such, nor to prescribe which linguistic choices from within the existing repertoire would

constitute correct speech. It was, instead, to *supply* the norms of correctness that would transform the spoken vernacular dialects into languages worthy of the name, and fix them in such a way as to make them immune from the ubiquitous processes of linguistic change (Kibbee, 1990). This amounted to *establishing* a language that did not yet exist. "Grammatization", to use Auroux's (1994) term, was therefore an activity that *created* languages in the sense in which Humanists understood that concept.

The idea that the vernaculars needed to be cultivated or "illustrated" so that they could be worthy rivals of Latin as mediums of artistic and learned expression was, of course, ubiquitous in Humanism (see Weber, 1987 and chapter 5 of Auroux, 1992), and it is attested throughout non-grammatical Humanist writings. The artefactualism of Renaissance grammar was therefore nothing other than the translation into grammar writing of well documented attitudes found elsewhere, whether in literature or in more technical fields like printing and spelling reform – all of these domains intimately linked with, and not always distinct from what we would think of as grammar "proper" (cf. Catach, 1968; see Bierbach & Pellat, 2006, p. 229 on R. Estienne).

The close identity between grammar – the analysis of language structure in all its aspects – and literature also played a large part in sustaining artefactualist ideas. *Langue* was ambiguous in French between the grammatical structure of a given vernacular, and canonical textual production in it. This can be seen, for instance, in chapter seven of du Bellay's *Deffence* (2001 [1549]), where what is at stake, despite the use of the word *langue*, is how French is enriched by its *literary texts*. Similarly, Henri Estienne (1896 [1579], p. 203, 237 and *passim*) adduces proverbs as examples of the richness of the French "language". Just as the French language *in the sense of textual production* was straightforwardly open to cultivation and enrichment through the activities of authors, so too was it – this time in the grammatical sense – seen as open to cultivation by grammarians. For us, it is obvious that a writer inherently transforms the state of literature through the mere act of publishing a book, whereas a grammarian does not change the state of the language by writing a grammar of it. Whether or not this was also obvious to Humanists as a matter of *fact*, the artefactualist ideology or fiction led them to assimilate the two activities in a way we find incoherent.

When Humanists spoke of "illustrating" French, they had in mind a process that would bring about a qualitative change in its nature. French would be "put into art" by their efforts – a fundamental transformation from a natural to an artificial condition, obscured by their use of the term "language" for both the input and output states. In line with the "cultivation" metaphor commonly used, the transformation was like the one that domesticated savage nature (see Du Bellay, 2001 [1549], p. 80-1).

Humanists were also, of course, motivated by pride in the *current* state of their vernacular language and literature, which they saw as already worthy of comparison with the achievements of the ancients (e.g. Peletier, 1966 [1555], p. 75). What was lacking, however, was an effort to *codify* the vernaculars so that the continuity of the vernacular literary tradition could be secured.

Grammar in the Renaissance was not a genre that welcomed extended theoretical disquisitions on guiding ideas. Its unity as a discourse lay as much in its dependence on – and, usually, reproduction of – the categories and expository mode of the traditional Latin models as in any explicitly thematized theoretical orientation. The artefactualist understanding of grammar was not, therefore, self-consciously evoked by grammar writers to any great extent, any more than a prescriptive or descriptive one. Nevertheless, grammarians often speak of their role in *constituting* a fixed and grammatical version of their language. In 1529, Tory had called for the intervention of a savant to bring order to French. Etienne Dolet was one of many others to voice a similar sentiment (cf. Du Bellay, 2001 [1549], p. 96-7):

> Je sais que quand on voulut réduire la langue grecque et latine en art, cela ne fut absolu par un homme, mais par plusieurs. Ce qui se fera pareillement en la langue française; et peu à peu, par le moyen et travail des gens doctes, elle pourra être réduite en telle perfection que les langues dessus dites. (quoted in Margolin, 2007, p. 542)
>
> [I know that when people wanted to reduce Greek and Latin to art, it was absolutely not the work of one man, but of several. It will be the same in French; and little by little, through the intermediary and labour of learned men, it will be able to be reduced to the same kind of perfection as the above-named languages.]

In the preface to his 1557 grammar, Robert Estienne invites others to do better than he has in codifying French, and issues a highly telling admonition to spelling reformers. They must not, he says, change either the most common spelling, or the "pronunciation and way of speaking":

> Que si en tout nous ne contentons les lecteurs, principalement ceulx qui veulent que l'escripture suyve sa pronontiation, nous n'en voulons pourtant debatre avec eulx, ains les prions qu'en paix ils mettent peine de mieulx faire, sans changer la plus commune escripture, pronontiation, et maniere de parler conforme au langage de nos plus anciens bien exercez en notre dicte langue. (Estienne, 2003 [1557], p. 4)
>
> [If all up we do not satisfy our readers, principally those who want writing to follow pronunciation, we nevertheless have no wish to debate with them, but ask them to peacefully try to do better, without altering the most common writing, pronunciation, and way of speaking that conforms to the language of our ancestors, who were well versed in our language.]

These words make it clear that it is principally the *language itself* which Estienne envisages as the object of humanist linguistic activities, and he talks as if it were subject to the grammarian's direct influence – an entirely artefactualist fiction.

Ramus's two French grammars, often treated as the bastions of Renaissance descriptivism, in fact contain numerous traces of an artefactualist ideology. The 1562 version praises earlier grammarians "en se c'ilz se sont eforce de nou' donner se, pour coe nou' manifion' la langue grece et latine, s'et a dire la loe de bien parler [in that by their efforts they gave us the thing for which we magnify Greek and Latin, namely the law of correct speech]" (p. 5). The *grammarians*, that is, *give* speakers a *grammar*. Just after the introduction of the "Ramist letters" *j* and *v* in Ramus' 1572 grammatical dialogue (Catach, 1968, p. 130-2), the student encourages his teacher to go further: "poursuivez d'enrichir & embellir nostre langue de telle richesse, & de telle beaulté, & nous declaires les consonnes muettes [go on and enrich and ornament our language with such richness and beauty, and declare to us the voiceless consonants]" (p. 28). To a modern sensibility, this is a peculiar phrasing, since it seems to presuppose that the very act of grammatical analysis had direct consequences on the language itself. This is, clearly, very far from a descriptive understanding of the grammarian's business. Later, the teacher character responds in these terms to the student's request to turn to syntactic matters:

> P. Je le feray tres volontiers, mais entant que je pourray & scauray. Car en ceste partie de Grãmaire les enseignements sont jusques la profitables, quils explicquent lusaige du langaige receu & approuve, non quils en puisset bastir aucun par soy, & par nouveaulx exemples.' (1572, p. 124-5)
> [T[eacher]: I will do so very willingly, as far as I can. For in this part of Grammar, instruction is beneficial to the extent that it explains the usage of received and approved language, not that it can build any by itself or by new examples.]

Ramus limits the analysis of syntax to the explanation of the "received and approved" linguistic usage; and he denies that it is possible to "build" any new grammatical elements. By implication, then, "building" usage was precisely the role of the *earlier* parts of the book. Later again, the teacher makes very clear that he envisages French as the product of the cumulative activity of the learned:

> Or jusques icy je vous ay declaire les Rudimens de nostre langue Francoyse, lesquels (comme jespere) seront amendes petit a petit, accreus & augmentes par lestude & diligence des bons & scavans esprits Francoys, qui saddonneront de plus en plus a aorner & embellir leur patrie... (1572, p. 209-10)
> [Up to here I have declared to you the rudiments of our French language, which (I hope) will be corrected little by little, increased and augmented by the study and attention of fine and learned French minds, who will devote themselves more and more to ornamenting and embellishing their country...]

Meigret, likewise, shares the artefactualist conception, as evidenced by the passage (1980 [1550], p. 101-2) already quoted in section 3 above. Even if, in Meigret's conception, the members of the educated public are the final arbiters, it is

the grammarian himself who suggests linguistic forms for their consideration. An illustration of this is given in (1980 [1550], p. 95-6), where Meigret suggests "forging" another tense category – a particularly clear example of the way that morphology could be envisaged as originating in the grammarian before being submitted to the public at large. Elsewhere (1980 [1550], p. 36), Meigret comments of *furibonde* and *moribonde* that "l'usage de bien parler ne les a bien encore reçus [proper usage has not yet accepted them]" – as though he anticipated that their admission into his book might be the imprimatur needed to effect their adoption. Similarly, Dubois tells readers to ignore their own sense of French and accustom themselves to "imitate the art" by making the past participle agree with its object (1998 [1531], p. 124). The grammatical art comes first and usage follows: this instance captures *in nuce* the subordination of prescriptivism, directed at use, to artefactualism, directed at grammar itself, in Renaissance French grammatical ideology.

CONCLUSION

I have stressed that artefactualism was not the only ideology present in Renaissance grammatical texts. Artefactualism is, however, preferable as a characterization of sixteenth-century French grammars' underlying motivation since it allows us to explain the presence of *both* apparently descriptive, and clearly prescriptive elements within them. The descriptive elements arise from the grammarians' codification of aspects of a particular sociolect, but these are never simply "described" – that is, taken without question as authoritative evidence for the true state of the language – but *always* require the grammarian's ratification. The prescriptive elements arise as a straightforward consequence of artefactualism: if one wants to constitute a *grammar*, one wants the correct forms to enter *use*.

In the absence of an overarching artefactualist conception, however, descriptive and prescriptive elements can only be seen as the embodiment of two entirely contradictory motivations in Renaissance grammatization. Seeing artefactualism as the centre of gravity for grammatical activity, however, has the advantage of rendering the texts theoretically intelligible, allowing them to appear as unified, and not just as hybrids of two quite opposed tendencies.

From that point of view, a final remark becomes possible. The hybrid descriptive/ prescriptive characterization of Renaissance grammar that has been in the ascendant among modern interpreters serves an obvious ideological purpose: it legitimates the practice of modern "scientific" (descriptive) linguistics, which can only emerge favourably from a comparison with its supposedly basically incoherent ancestor. A whig history of the discipline is thereby served, in which the

ideological settings of contemporary linguistics emerge as the coherent and unified heirs of their confused, hybrid predecessors. If the current arguments are accepted, the transition from Renaissance to more modern grammars is much less continuous than usually presented, and contemporary scholars should hesitate to assume that the familiar descriptive/prescriptive contrast necessarily applies to the earliest period of their discipline's history.

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