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The Language of Advertising: A Barometer of Linguistic Change

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Ever since the middle of the last century, when the term *le franglais* first came into use, the increasing influence of English on French usage has been noticed, analyzed—and deplored. The French language today is viewed as being under siege, and even, by some, as having lost the battle for survival: two recent publications bear the telling titles *A la Recherche du français perdu* and *La Mort du français*.

In the numerous discussions on the subject, whether they have taken the form of statements from the Académie française, decrees by the French government or articles in the press, the main focus of concern has been vocabulary. However, it seems to us that changes are taking place at the level of syntax which could have an even more radical effect on the evolution of the French language.

Our research has centered on the language of advertising. The linguistic choices made by writers of advertisements highlight current trends and also, it can safely be assumed, reinforce them. Indeed, *la publicité* has been identified as one of the main culprits in the dissemination of what is variously called *le charabia*, *le jargon* and *le sabir atlantique*.

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40 Rene Etiemble, *Parlez-vous franglais?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) 48. Although it was Etiemble who popularized the word with his *Parlez-vous franglais?* in 1964, he credits Maurice Rat with having coined it in 1959.


42 See, e.g., Maurice Rat’s definition of *le franglais* cited in *le Petit Robert* (and cf. n.1 above); Philippe Vandel, *Le Dico français/français* (Eds. Clattès, 1992); and innumerable articles in the press. Etiemble does, however, devote a whole chapter to grammar.

43 See, e.g., Etiemble, 189, 289–90; Dutourd, *passim*; Vandel, *passim*. 
Please note that our examples are all from print advertisements, as distinct from television or radio. Our principal sources were *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Paris Match*, *Le Figaro Magazine*, *Le Point*, *Capital*, *Elle* and *Marie-Claire*, but we also looked at a variety of other magazines.

Before leaving the topic of vocabulary, we should note that it is certainly true that this is the area in which the influence of English is most evident. Today’s advertisements makes blatant use of words borrowed straight from English: 44 (*le look*, *le challenge*, *non-stop*, *le design*, *standard...*). Also, many other words which, not so long ago, were “faux amis” are now being used with their English meaning (*l’opportunité*, *le trafic*, *la texture*, *le délai*). 45 However, what is more to the point in the present discussion is that the process of word derivation has become far more flexible—that is, more like English. 46 This is seen in the proliferation of prefixes, as in *super-osé*, *ultra-tendance*, *extra-autonomie*, *anti-vieillissement*—and even *anti-coup du lapin*(!), and also in a far greater freedom in suffixation than formerly: *confidentialité*, *traîabilité*, *minimiser*, *joignable*. Even recent loan words are used to derive new forms: thus *le lifting*, itself a *franglais* word, has given *lifté*, and (to the outrage of certain *académiciens*) 47 *positif* has been made into a verb in the slogan: “Avec Carrefour, je positive!”

Whereas it is possible to isolate individual words, to catalogue them and to suggest more “authentically French” substitutes, shifts in grammatical structures are harder to pinpoint. Rather than setting off an alarm bell, they induce in the reader a vague unease: something is not quite right, but what? We were reminded of the kind of sentences we get from our better students, who, although they may no longer make basic

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44 In fact a lot of advertisements in French magazines are now entirely in English, sometimes (but not always) with a French translation, in considerably smaller print, at the bottom of the page.

45 It is amusing to note that one recent arrival, the word *fragrance*, which might appear to be an anglicism, was originally a French word, imported into English after the Norman conquest. This is an example of “two-way” borrowing. Another example is *portable*, which Jean Dutourd condemns as an unnecessary doublet of *portatif* but which has actually been in the language longer. While on the subject of “faux amis,” let us point out that there are still plenty of them out there to trap the unsuspecting. Last year, Carrefour announced a new bicycle with a seat containing silicone gel. The ad began with the words: “Le confort, c’est très important pour un vélo de balade.” The company had proudly named their new model “Ballad 900.”


mistakes, have not yet managed to stop “thinking in English.” In a few extreme cases we were even led to wonder if the copy had not been written in English first and then translated.

Leaving aside such phrases as the ubiquitous pas de problème, which is a word for word translation of the English phrase, we have selected certain areas in which we see French syntax being undermined: namely verb tense and mood, preposition and conjunction usage, the formation and placement of adjectives and adverbs, sentence structure, and word order.

**Verb Tenses**

Let us begin with a startling case: the use of the passé composé instead of the present after depuis: “Depuis plus de 10 ans, notre fondation [Fondation France Telecom] a choisi de favoriser l’expression humaine.” [Le Point, 5 mai 2000]; “Le juste prix que But a inventé depuis plus de 10 ans, c’est bien plus qu’une mode, c’est un engagement.” This structure parallels the English use of the present perfect after the preposition “for.” If it catches on, French will have lost an important nuance: the distinction between a completed past action and an action (or state) begun in the past and continuing into the present.

Equally unsettling is the use of an unattached present participle, clearly mirroring English usage, as in “Deux formules tout compris, incluant l’assistance et les communications téléphoniques internet.” Whereas “including” has become a preposition in English, the French incluant remains a present participle and, as such, is incorrectly used in the absence of a finite verb. (It should be pointed out, moreover, that incluant is of course redundant, since it follows on the heels of tout compris. The writers apparently felt that the succinct past participle was inadequate to convey their meaning.) A second example (from an ad by E.D.F. after the storms of December 1999) reads as follows: “une partie du réseau électrique français a été endommagé, privant d’électricité au plus fort de la crise 3,4 millions de foyers.” Here the participle has no subject, since the main verb is in the passive voice. Although this is acceptable in English, in French the compound relative ce qui and a subordinate verb are called for.

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48 It is only fair to note that when France Telecom ran their ad again two weeks later, the passé composé had been replaced by the present: Depuis 8 ans, notre Fondation soutient [sic] ceux qui comme Marc vivent dans l’autisme (Paris Match of 18 mai 2000). Did someone point out the anglicism to the writers?
Another change in the use of verb tenses can be seen in: “Aujourd’hui vous empruntez, mais si demain votre situation change?” (= “What if your situation changes?”) We groaned as we thought of the hours we have spent trying to teach students that a supposition introduced by si calls for the imparfait! A similar slippage appears to be taking place in the use of the future tense: “Le jour où vous devrez juger de l’état d’un carburateur comme celui-ci, il y a une chose que vous devez savoir: ce n’est pas un carburateur.” The use of the present tense is standard in the equivalent English, but French usage calls for the future in both clauses: “il y a une chose que vous devrez savoir.” (We return later to the use of the verb devoir, which is itself an anglicism.)

VERB MOOD

It is striking that the use of the infinitive in instructions to the general public is being superseded by the more direct imperative form. It is still possible to find examples of the infinitive (“voir détail de cette offre en point de vente”), but one is far more likely to find the imperative: “ téléphonez au .”, “demandez vite votre documentation gratuite.” The admonition against alcohol abuse at the bottom of liquor ads now reads “Consommez [or “Sachez consommer”] avec modération” rather than “A consommer avec modération.”

In this switch from the infinitive to the imperative (which we have also noted in recipes and directions for use on pharmaceutical and other products), it seems to us, once again, that a nuance is being lost. The use of the infinitive, in its elegant detachment, combines the qualities of both a recommendation and a general statement. By contrast, the imperative seems brash and intrusive. Indeed, its use is part of a wider tendency to “personalize” advertising, which Jean Dutourd identifies as “une imitation de l’américain” and to which he takes vehement exception: “Je suis las d’être constamment pris à partie par la publicité ... Les voitures sont devenues ‘votre voiture’ même si je préfère la bicyclette, le journal ‘votre journal’ même si j’en achète un autre, le charcutier ‘votre traiteur’ même si je suis végétarien.”

It is also the infinitive which is the victim in sentences such as the following: “Même si le réseau est encombré, vous voulez quand même votre impression le plus rapidement possible” (= you want your print job as quickly as possible.”) In the past, the French equivalent of this would

49Dutourd, 75–76.
have been “vous voulez obtenir/recevoir votre impression le plus rapidement possible.” Similarly, the structure “Pour plus d’informations, appelez le ...” comes straight from the English: “for more information, call ...” Traditional French usage does not allow a preposition to carry this kind of weight, but requires what Jean Paul Vinay and Jean Darbelnet, in their *Stylistique comparée du français et de l’anglais*, call “étoffement” of the preposition (“supplementation” in English).50 The examples given by Vinay and Darbelnet, taken from literature, may appear old-fashioned and quaint in the present context, but are nonetheless illustrative: “he stopped at the desk for his mail” = il s’arrêta au bureau *pour prendre* son courrier; to call for a cab = téléphoner *pour faire venir* un taxi.

This process of simplification is quite literally taking place before our eyes. In the same issue of *Le Nouvel Observateur* we found both of the following: “Pour obtenir de plus amples informations ... appeler dès à présent...” and “*pour plus d’informations* sur Médecins du Monde appeler le ...” Other examples are: “Pour un air plus pur, retenir sa respiration jusqu’à obtention d’une [Alfa] 806 HDI; “Un nouvel avant-rasage électrique *pour plus de douceur*”; “sa climatisation automatique, son accoudoir arrière *pour plus de confort.*”

Incidentally, the last two slogans illustrate another pervasive anglicism. One frequently finds “encore” or “toujours” before such a comparative—an obvious calque of that cliche of English language advertisements “even more” or “still more”: “les nouveaux fauteuils [de Singapore Airlines] offrent encore plus de confort pour travailler ou se reposer”; “ils ont compris que pour profiter pleinement de l’Internet (sic) vous aviez besoin de toujours plus de simplicité, d’assistance et de formules avantageuses.” In all these phrases it is the use of the comparative itself that is problematic. The question that would have sprung to mind for a French reader in the past is “more than what?” Vinay and Darbelnet give examples, many of them drawn precisely from advertising, indicating that an implicit comparison in English is to be rendered by the positive in French. Thus “to be better informed” becomes “pour être bien renseigné” and “milder” cigarettes simply “douces”, just

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50Vinay and Darbelnet, 110.
as the equivalent of “the upper Rhine” is “le haut Rhin” and “sooner or later” is rendered “tôt ou tard.”

Returning to shifts in the use of verb mood, we note a tendency for the verb falloir to be replaced by devoir or avoir besoin de (our first example, startlingly, uses both of these in one sentence): “dans le monde hostile et stressant du travail, vous devez obtenir tous les avantages dont vous avez besoin”; “vous devez bouger la tête ou éloigner cette page pour trouver l’image nette? Il s’agit tout simplement d’une évolution naturelle de la vue que l’on appelle presbytie.” Once again, it is noticeable that the preferred structure is simpler (an infinitive being substituted for a verb in the subjunctive), and also closer to the English equivalent (“to have to,” “to need.”)

PREPOSITIONS AND CONJUNCTIONS

Given the ease with which franglais nouns and verbs are being absorbed into French, it is not surprising to find that the less obtrusive preposition, notoriously a stumbling-block for translation between the two languages, should also be undergoing the influence of English. Etiemble pointed out multiple examples: à la main (“at hand”) instead of sous la main, changer pour instead of échanger contre, etc. We can add to his list the use of au monde (in place of du monde) after a superlative: “le processeur [sic] le plus performant au monde”, “le break le plus réputé au monde.” Thus yet another rule consecrated by the grammar books bites the dust!

We noted in the previous section that greater autonomy is being given to the preposition within the sentence. This trend can lead to awkwardness and even to lack of clarity. The sentence: “Vous pouvez profiter chaque jour de la mer et du sable fin, du lever au coucher du soleil” is bothersome because of the attempt to give the preposition de the prominence that it can have in English (“from sunrise to sunset”), whereas it appears initially to depend on the verb profiter.

In the next example the combination of verb and preposition is decidedly not “French,” bringing to mind a mistranslation that one finds frequently in student compositions (“j’ai déménagé à New York” for “I

51 Vinay and Darbelnet, 128–9.
52 Etiemble, 213–214. Although he deals at length with the overuse of the superlative, it is noticeable that all his examples use du monde. This, then, is a recent development, showing the continued progress of le franglais.
moved to New York.”) “Baronnes, comtesses et autres dames se déplaçaient très volontier chez Boni de Castellane pour prendre livraison de son fameux champagne.” The wording accompanies a sepia photo of an empty horse-drawn carriage in front of an elegant residence, at night time. While the implication is perfectly clear thanks to the image, the expression se déplacer chez (qqn) does not bear analysis.

Like prepositions, certain conjunctions, too, are achieving greater autonomy within the sentence. “Rappelez-vous quand votre imagination vous emmenait partout” duplicates the English structure “remember when,” where an antecedent l’époque or le moment and the relative pronoun où should have been inserted. Similar examples are “Voyez comment recevoir gratuitement cet ouvrage de valeur” and “Sachez quand travailler seul ou en équipe.”

ADJECTIVES

It has always been possible, of course, to create an effect by changing the normal position of an adjective: “ce très pratique sac reporter” could be construed as a stylistic choice. However, in numerous cases where an adjective is found preceding its noun it seems to be simply the result of “thinking in English,” for example in les prochaines 24 heures; les premiers cinq; la gastronomie est d’une exceptionnelle qualité; and of course le top niveau.

Another development is the juxtaposition of two nouns with the second one taking on the function of an invariable adjective: des lampes design, l’aspect nature des matériaux, un sac reporter (quoted above), l’effet lifting, une envie très tendance. This was one of the constructions that Etienne pointed out in 1966 as being “inhabituelles,” but as Henriette Walter commented some 25 years later, “Ce procédé de formation par juxtaposition s’est aujourd’hui tellement généralisé que seuls les puristes les plus sourcilleux sont choqués par la pause café, le problème vaisselle, la fiche cuisine ou le match retour.”53 While the examples cited by Walter have a prosody which does not jar the ear, some of those we came across are becoming quite cumbersome: une croisière version culture, l’activité jeunesse des cellules, un système mains-libres, des batteries rechargeables extra-autonomie and, most startling of all [for a brand of mascara] une brosse double effet peigne.

A parallel development is that of the extended use of relational adjectives. In 1958 Vinay and Darbelnet commented that French was less apt than English to form relational adjectives, although it seemed to be evolving in that direction.\(^5\) Our research corroborates this perception. Examples are: *nouveau concept automobile, l’interprétation automobile, un nouvel avant-rasage électrique*.

Finally, what are we to make of the word *Nouveau!* in advertisements and on packaging? Obviously inspired by the American “New!,” this form of the adjective is used even when the product designated turns out to be a feminine noun, as in: “Nouveau! Centrale d’alarme Daitem totalement sans fil ... Si les assurances l’ont agrée, ce n’est pas par hasard.” *Nouveau* thus becomes genderless, as in English. Is it conceivable that at some time in the future the distinction between masculine and feminine will blur? Certainly a large number of mistakes in the gender of nouns are currently being made in the media.\(^5\)

**Adverbs**

Both the formation and the position of adverbs are evolving in ways that narrow the gap between the two languages. To begin with, there is a widespread use of an adjective as an adverb (a trend which is deplored by English, as well as by French, purists): *Voyez grand* and *Pensez global* call to mind the slogan for Apple, “think different,” which was to be seen on billboards all over Paris a couple of years ago. Other examples are: “On ne peut pas faire plus court, alors nous faisons plus agréable” (from Nippon Airways), and “Monoprix nous a fait retrouver le plaisir de manger savoureux.”

Other cases of calques of adverbial phrases popular in English advertising jargon are: “efficacité prouvée cliniquement”; “exceptionnellement pour 1971 francs par mois”; “principalement dû à”; and especially “pour ... F seulement” (“for only ... F”), which is found in abundance. And we have even found an example of what can only be termed a split infinitive(!): “le site permet à des milliers de visiteurs *de, simultanément, regarder* les derniers scores, aller voir ce qui se passe sur les courts avec des angles de vue différents et même acheter des produits portant la griffe Roland-Garros.”

\(^5\)Vinay and Darbelnet, 124.

\(^5\)See, e.g., Pastre, *passim.*
The injunction “Aussi contactez vite 9 Télécom” also strikes an odd note. Since aussi here has the function of introducing a consequence, it could be said to be correctly placed at the beginning of the sentence. However, whereas this construction used to be found only in formal discourse and required the inversion of the verb with its subject, it is here followed by an imperative. This is obviously a word for word translation of “So call quickly.” Similarly, we noticed jamais plus (“never again”) and pas même (“not even”) in place of the established word order plus jamais and même pas.

We also notice an expansion of the use of the adverb juste, which has become an exact equivalent of the English “just.” First, it is found with the meaning of “only,” as in “Personne ne sait comment les cerfs trouvent la source où l’eau est la plus pure. Nous savons juste que nous faisons la même chose” (= we only know that...) and “Alors, juste une question: qu’attendez-vous pour prendre la vie côté Verso?”56

Secondly, it is used to refer to the recent past: “Je viens juste d’acheter le journal.” It would appear that venir de is no longer perceived as strong enough to carry the meaning “to have just.” Our curiosity piqued, we checked in the Oxford/Hachette dictionary published in 1994. Sure enough all the translations that are provided for “to have just” contain the word juste, whereas a generation ago, in the Robert & Collins dictionary (1977), venir de sufficed.57

**Sentence Structure**

Two apparently contradictory tendencies coexist in the language of advertising. On the one hand one finds a turgid and pompous style which exemplifies what has been called “l’hexagonal.”58 This is the style which has been excoriated by so many grammarians as being “le contraire même de l’esprit de notre langue,”59 and whose main characteristics are

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56 Other examples are: “Que vous deviez capturer une image pour l’intégrer à une présentation capitale, ou juste l’envoyer à un vieux copain...”; “Jamais vous ne posséderez complètement une Patek Philippe. Vous en serez juste le gardien pour les générations futures.”

57 Here are the examples given in the Oxford/Hachette dictionary: “she’s just arrived” = elle vient juste d’arriver; “I’m just back” = je viens juste de rentrer; “it has just been varnished” = ça vient juste d’être verni.

58 *L’Hexagonal tel qu’on le parle*: title of a 1970 work by Robert Beauvais (see Bibliography)

59 Dutourd, 207.
“la laideur et la prétention.” 60 One example of this overblown prose will suffice. “La beauté de l’orme ou du hêtre massif, traités à l’huile de lin et à la cire, exhale l’aspect nature des matériaux. L’élégante pureté des lignes, fruit de l’imaginaire d’artistes créateurs, confère une vision esthétique à la fonctionnalité des pièces composant nos collections, et transcende la qualité des matières. Tout votre environnement, de la salle à manger au salon, de la bibliothèque en passant par le bureau, du séjour jusqu’au couché [sic], respire la tranquille élégance des lignes et la beauté à la fois paisible, brute, intemporelle des matériaux nature.”

On the other hand there is a widespread preference, just as in English language advertising in recent years, for a jaunty telegraphic style consisting entirely of fragments, especially interrogative fragments, where pronoun subjects and/or verbs are omitted.

Existe en version 6 ou 7 places. Toyota Picnic 7 places.
Diorlift. Le fond de teint défatigant. Allie confort et protection.
Estompe visiblement les signes de fatigue et les ridules.
Difficile parfois de rétrograder. Pas de problème.
Il faut plus qu’un solide esprit de famille pour bien aider ses proches. Une banque.
Aujourd’hui plusieurs banques se réunissent sous un même toit.
Le vôtre.
Gencives irritées? Essayez l’effet Méridol.
Chute de cheveux? Nouveau Forticéa shampooing stimulant.
Besoin de sécurité? Offrez-vous la meilleure des protections.

Obviously this second style stems from the need to ensure that the message is immediately accessible and easy to remember. Complex sentences, which might require a second or two to be fully understood, are banned. As a result a whole new system of punctuation has evolved: what used to be termed a subordinate clause is now found standing alone: 61

e.g.

61 These grammatically incomplete utterances have been called “phrases dépendantes.” James Grieve, Dictionary of Contemporary French Connectors (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 382–386.

YoYo Ma, violoncelliste, célèbre dans le monde entier, est de ce fait un éternel voyageur. Qui doit quelquefois choisir de n’emporter avec lui qu’un seul de ses instruments préférés...[mais ne se sépare jamais de sa Rolex]

**WORD ORDER**

The most obvious changes in word order occur in the position of adjectives and adverbs that we pointed out earlier. We have also been struck by a new tendency to begin a sentence with a subordinate clause introduced by *parce que*:

Parce que rien ne remplace l’efficacité d’une alarme pour faire fuir les cambrioleurs, choisissez l’alarme Daitem D14000.
Parce que les choses que l’on fait soi-même n’ont pas de prix, 431 Bricomarché vous propose le bricolage et le jardinage moins chers.
Parce que tout le monde a le droit d’être à la mode, 117 Vêtemarché propose la mode moins chère.
Parce qu’il est normal de pouvoir connaître l’origine et la nature de ce que l’on consomme, Carrefour travaille en permanence à maîtriser la traçabilité de ses produits.

Whereas sentences beginning with *because* are quite common in English, it used to be unusual to find *parce que* in that position in French.62

**CONCLUSION**

62—En français, certains mots outils commencent rarement une phrase ... Il semble, par exemple, qu’on commence volontiers une phrase par ‘puisque’, mais qu’on hésite à le faire avec ‘parce que’.” Vinay and Darbelnet, 212. A striking exception to this observance occurs in Beaumarchais (in Figaro’s soliloquy in *Le Mariage de Figaro*, V, 3): “Parce que vous êtes un grand seigneur, vous vous croyez un grand génie! Qu’avez-vous fait pour tant de biens? Vous vous êtes donné la peine de naître, et rien de plus ...” The unusual position of the subordinate clause underlines Figaro’s rage, contempt and frustration as he mentally addresses the Count.
The language of advertising illustrates the fact that French is becoming more flexible, not only with respect to the formation of words but also in the ways that words are combined into sentences. It is apparent that, as a result, grammatical categories are being blurred. The phrases *souhaiter la bienvenue à qqn* and *vous êtes le (la) bienvenu(e) chez nous*, have of course been around for a long time, but it is clear that in one case *bienvenue* is a noun and in the other an adjective. On the other hand, in the elliptical “Pour en savoir plus, **bienvenue sur www...**,” just as in the English phrase, it is hard to be sure what the function of the word is.

Not everyone views the new developments with dismay. Anne Judge and Solange Lamothe (a British/French team of linguists) contend that contemporary French is changing in an “exciting way,”63 and Henriette Walter (besides pointing out the inevitability of linguistic change) also suggests that today’s trends are healthy.64 Far more numerous, of course, are those who deplore what they see as a “dégringolade du français,”65 and indeed one is constantly struck by the general shoddiness of the writing in advertisements.66

It would be unfair not to mention that, as we were doing our research, we would sometimes come across advertising slogans which we enjoyed very much. Because of our background, we warmed to those which made humorous use of quotations from France’s literary and historical past:

Heureux qui, comme Sir Thomas Lipton, a fait de beaux voyages.
Rien ne sert de courir, il suffit de s’envoler à point
Mais où est passé le Diesel d’antan?
O combien de marins, combien de capitaines, qui sont partis joyeux... [ad for a car rental company]
Du haut des coteaux de Val de Loire, deux millénaires de bons vins vous contemplant!

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64Walter, 316.
66Besides the structures that we have dealt with, and the proliferation of vague, incorrect or pretentious vocabulary, we have been struck in the course of our research by numerous examples of spelling errors, faulty punctuation, mistakes in agreement, and the misuse of pleonastic *ne.* Perhaps most disturbing are the cases of fuzzy logic, (“le nouveau HR-Joy Machine est tellement surprenant que vous en profiterez au maximum”).
Et la bière créa Loburg.

We also liked slogans that contained word play, or renewed clichés and proverbs in a humorous way. Such were: “Attendre la nuit pour téléphoner moins cher, c’est une histoire à dormir debout”; “Un je t’aime en direct sur AOL, je n’en croyais pas mon ordinateur”; “plus on est de fous, plus les prix baissent.” It seemed to us that there were fewer examples of word play than used to be the case. Henriette Walter cites several amusing puns from the 1980’s: “une moquette qui a une réputation sans taches”; “nougâtez-vous”; “ceints et saufs”; “Synthol, protégez-nous”; “Mettez-vous Martell en tête”; “Hennessy-soit-il”.

We submit that the specific pleasure that is derived from such slogans (which are of course untranslatable) is due to the fact that they are written in “real” French.

In the past we have often used advertisements in French courses, not only to illustrate cultural differences, but to teach grammar in an entertaining way. We cannot help wondering if this will continue to be an effective method. Sentences such as “Je ne porte pas de bijoux. Je les conduis,” and “Merci de voyager en notre compagnie sur U.S. Airways”, rather than alerting our students to subtle grammatical differences, are providing them with calques of English usage that they might easily have come up with themselves.

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67Walter, 312.