

Abstract

Lexical innovations. Diffusion dynamics of identitary neologisms

Alena Polická, Masaryk University, 2018, 355 pages.

The present habilitation thesis aims to outline current research trends concerning the substandard level of the French language. The work combines a sociolinguistic perspective with a lexicological one in order to identify not only in what way and how fast lexical innovations are spreading, but also what attitudes to lexical innovation the speakers themselves usually adopt, or what attitudes the linguists and the creators of reference dictionaries should take towards neologisms.

Neologisms are understood here as the result of an act of individual or societal creation that gives rise to a feeling of newness. While that feeling is strictly subjective, it is often shared by members of the similar age group or by people from a similar sociocultural background. To describe this situation, the thesis proposes the term “identitary neologism”, which is defined as a substandard item in the lexicon that connotes modernity, expressivity and, above all, a sense of group belonging. The excessive usage of such expressions in communication among peers allows the researcher not only to identify them relatively quickly but also discover their frequent polysemic uses and semantic instability (or graphic instability, as far as the written mode is concerned).

The work consists of two theoretical chapters, entitled *Sociolinguistics of Innovation* and *History of lexical innovation in France*, and five case studies.

The introductory part of the first chapter (pp. 13-38) is conceived in an interdisciplinary manner in order to discuss the concept of temporality in language in terms of philosophy, sociology, classical structuralist linguistics and economics. The second part of the first chapter (pp. 39-80) outlines so-called “sociolinguistics of innovation”, focusing on Gabriel Tarde’s sociological theory of imitation and Everett Rogers’s economic theory of diffusion of innovation. Those approaches make it possible to name the various stages in the dissemination of neologisms, as well as the various types of speakers’ behaviour towards them. The chapter also presents a detailed account of the debate about the causes of linguistic change, which was very much alive in French linguistics from the middle of the nineteenth until approximately the

middle of the twentieth century. The ideas of several of the classic authors (Darmesteter, Bréal, Meillet, Vendryes, etc.) are placed in the context of relevant contemporary ideas about language (e.g. seeing language as a natural organism), the spread of linguistic changes (the wave theory) and the role of the society in the formation of new lexical items.

The second theoretical chapter, entitled *History of lexical innovation in France* (pp. 81-133), documents the attitudes of French scholars to newly created words from the period of classicism until the 1990s, when important laws were passed in order to “defend” the French language. The efforts to regulate the French language and its vocabulary were most pronounced during the period of classicism, fading into the background during the French Revolution. However, after the industrial revolution – marked by France’s retreat from the world stage and by a distinct fascination with the Anglophone environment – the French linguistic protectionism was back on the scene. French dictionaries published during that time follow such attitudes; and the changed attitude is clearly evident in the lexicographic treatment of neologisms, i.e. the most visible kind of language change – the lexicon.

As regards the five case studies, attention is first given to the unsystematic conception of expressivity in French dictionaries. The theoretical roots are analysed in a study entitled *Labelling and Expressiveness in French Lexicography* (pp. 137-179). Using the sample of 50 socially symptomatic words, the evolution of expressiveness labelling in *Le Petit Robert* and *Le Petit Larousse* dictionaries is observed over the past 40 years. The label *pop.* (populaire, ‘folk’) is gradually disappearing in favour of such labels as *fam.* and *arg.*, which describe the appropriate context of use on the one hand and the sociolectal origin of a lexeme on the other. The transformation into the labelling of expressiveness seems to be linked to a change in sociolinguistic conceptualisation; the lexicographers used to see substandard words as symptomatic of a particular social group, whereas today they see them more as symptomatic of a particular discourse.

The second case study, entitled *From Meta-lexicography to Meta-sociolectography and Lexicometry: neology in dictionaries and in the corpus of rap lyrics* (pp. 180-209), discusses the issue of what criteria French lexicographers use to include a new word in the general vocabulary. The main goal is to show that French dictionaries are still very resistant to the inclusion of neologisms, mainly those coming from stigmatized parts of population.

The third case study, *Rap in Sociolexicological Research* (pp. 210-243), aims to validate hypotheses on the emergence and diffusion of identity neologisms through sociolinguistic

analysis of four items largely used by young French, *bolos*, *sisi*, *bicrave* and *werss*. Proposing the hypothesis of so-called ‘neologisms of authority’, it is suggested that with the increase of a speaker’s prestige, the probability of the diffusion of his or her verbal creation increases. This assumption is tested and verified on two sets of data – texts by rap singers with extensive media exposure and a questionnaire survey carried out among French students.

The fourth case study, titled *Circulation of lexical innovation in suburban youth and in rap: a case of territorial appropriation in the Val-de-Marne department* (pp. 244-275), analyses how youth identity is constructed thanks to the sense of belonging to their territory. Using examples from rap song lyrics, it is shown how such identification occurs in discourse. The official numerical designation of the rapper's home department often appears, read in numerical order (i.e. 94 as “neuf-quatre”, nine-four).

The last case study, *Longitudinal research on the diffusion of neologism bol(l)os(s/se)* (pp. 276-311), summarizes a decade of sociolinguistic research that is based on a series of questionnaires to test the diffusion and the semantic change of the word *bolos* among the young in France at different times and places. The word could be considered as an ideal example of the category of identity neologisms.