

When Dictionaries Disagree: Notes on Neologisms and Linguistic Method

by Jonathan Beck

FOR STUDENTS—AND TEACHERS—of French who seek to understand linguistic facts and generalizations (“data” and regularity in the treatment of data) rather than just memorizing rules and lists, it is useful to consider the merits of an empirical approach to the facts of language use; such an approach can serve as a powerful supplement, and corrective, to the traditional procedures of prescriptivism, and to the embarrassing inadequacies of its “grammatical explanations.” To illustrate this principle, we can take an example of variation (or “grammatical instability”) in current Standard French, an example less interesting in itself than for the uncertainties and disagreements it points to among native speakers, as well as among dictionaries. What can these uncertainties and disagreements tell us about theories of grammar and the practice of teaching?

Here is the example: If “word processing” in French is *traitement de texte*, what is the term for “word processor”? Official publications on word control in France (Magnant 292) tell us that a “word processor” meaning “software program telling the machine how to do wordprocessing” should be called a *texteur*, in distinction to the machine itself; but what the machine itself should be called is unclear, according to recent, authoritative dictionaries.¹ Should it be called *machine à traitement de texte* (Oxford-Hachette 1994)? Or *machine de traitement de texte* (Collins-Robert 1993)?² The governmental agency competent to decide has as yet refrained from ruling, syntax being harder to overrule than lexicon.

Native speakers of French are similarly divided on the issue. When asked which of the two expressions they would use, some of my informants responded, without hesitation and with complete assurance, *machine à traitement de texte*, no question about it (like *moulin à café*).³

Others responded, without hesitation and with equal assurance, *machine de traitement de texte* (like *machine de bureau*).⁴ Still others (a minority) confessed they were not sure.⁵ Those who were sure could usually cite examples of what they took to be proof for their position. They had seen it in print or heard it used. But this is precisely the problem with *machine*

à or *de traitement de texte*: both are in print, and both are used. In such cases, analogy proves nothing. To take another example, a fishing pole in French is a *canne à pêche*, but a fishing net is a *filet de pêche* and a fishing line is a *ligne de pêche*. Pole, net, and line all belong, as does the TV set (*appareil de télévision*), the coffee grinder (*moulin à café*), various pumps (*pompe à incendie, pompe de bicyclette*), musical instruments (*instruments de musique*), and the wordprocessing machine (*machine à/de traitement de texte*), to the same semantic category: "tool or device used for X" or "for the purpose of X." If both are possible, which is correct?

The following remarks are principally concerned with method. My discussion is intended to illustrate how any student of language can deal more productively with a question like the present one (which is correct, X or Y?) the way a linguist would—analytically, descriptively—rather than prescriptively, in the dogmatic, right-or-wrong way we were all taught—often mistaught—in school. Nonlinguists generally proceed by reflex or reflection (reflex: X is either right or wrong, look it up; reflection: I say X, but maybe I am wrong); both these procedures assume there is a right and wrong way of saying something, or at least in any given situation a "better" way. Instead of asking what people ought to say, the linguist asks, instead, what it is that people actually do say, and what factors make particular utterances possible and meaningful. In the French wordprocessing case, neither X nor Y (*à* or *de*) is wrong or right. At least not yet. Both are consistent with ingrained patterns of word formation for expressions of this type, patterns which can overlap and thus conflict. So if neither is wrong, on what basis would it make sense to say that X is "better" than Y, or in some way preferable? Approaching the issue with questions like this is what is known as thinking as a linguist (or thinking like a linguist if you prefer): you proceed by drawing systematically on linguistic knowledge you already have (or can readily tap), to arrive at a principled hypothesis, account, or explanation with respect to a problem like the one at issue here, then test it out on further data, refining where necessary.

Anyone can create a new word, like *wordprocessing*. But to survive, even cutting-edge neologisms referring to advanced technology must also follow ancient rules of mental *traitement de texte* that speakers of a language carry around in their neural *texteurs*. In the present translation example, the conflicting dictionary entries *machine à traitement de texte* and *machine de traitement de texte* present us, in principle, with three possibilities: 1. *à* is acceptable and *de* is not; 2. the inverse; 3. either is acceptable. How do you decide?

To make an informed decision, you have to start with two assumptions: a. you know what the object in question is (in this case what a wordprocessor does, what it is for), and b. you have reliable intuitions in general about current usage of the language in question (in this case

"standard French"—i.e., excluding particularities of regional or dialect usage). Whichever of the three choices you make (*à*, *de*, or either) will necessarily involve decisions (although you are not aware of them as decisions since they are not consciously thought out) involving overlap among what people in linguistics and cognitive sciences often call "levels of representation." The "levels" in this spatial metaphor are understood to be interconnected sets of linguistic features whereby a limited number of potentially meaningful speech-sounds are combined by speakers of a language into potentially infinite numbers of word-forms and meaning-bearing sequences.

Neologisms work because speakers automatically sort out linguistic data into categories on the basis of the interrelated feature-sets referred to above: *phonemic* and *phonetic* (e.g., \pm voice in *bain* vs. *pain*, and *abrupt* [abrypt] vs. *absolu* [apsoly]) and *phonological* (rule-bound sound distinctions that occur under specifiable conditions); *morphological* (*bon* vs. *bonne*, but not (yet?) *écrivain*/*écrivaine*); *syntactic* (*peut-être faut-il partir*/*il faut peut-être partir*); *semantic* (e.g., literal versus figurative meanings of words or expressions, like *machine*). Problems in grammar often straddle more than one of these "levels"; and, as we will see, our inquiry here will involve all the above levels from phonetic to semantic, though we will focus primarily on the morphological, syntactic, and semantic levels.

The sequence *machine à/de traitement de texte*, which can be described at the morphosyntactic level as N-prep.-N, resembles, at that same level, the sequences *machine de bureau* and *machine à vapeur*, which we can abbreviate *N-de-N* and *N-à-N* respectively. However, *machine de bureau* and *machine à vapeur* are unlikely to be the first, or even among the first, that come to mind when a speaker of French is confronted with the choice between *machine à traitement de texte* and *machine de traitement de texte*. Rather, most speakers spontaneously think first of analogous formations of the type *machine à écrire* or *machine à calculer*, in which the analogy is semantic, not morphological; indeed the morphological structure *N-à-V* is entirely different from the two nominal options (*N-à-N*) presented by the competing couple in our example. So, is a *traitement-de-texte-machine* more like a *machine à écrire* and a *machine à calculer* than it is like a *machine de bureau* or a *machine à vapeur*? Obviously it is. Does this mean that analogies at the semantic level are in some sense stronger than those at the levels of morphology (N versus V) and syntax (*à* versus *de*)?

Before going further, let us assume that all we can say for sure at this point—we have verified it empirically—is that we do in fact have these two levels to take into consideration: semantic and morphosyntactic. We can also assume that they are interconnected, and that a priori neither takes precedence over the other in determining the choice between *à* and *de*. Starting, then, from these two categories, we can represent our modicum of initial data as follows:

Figure 1

proposed/disputed		1.	N-à-N	machine à traitement de texte ?
		2.	N-de-N	machine de traitement de texte ?
established		1a.	N-à-N	machine à vapeur, moulin à café
		2a.	N-de-N	machine de bureau, appareil de télévision
		3a.	N-à-V	machine à écrire, machine à calculer

Fig. 1 represents, below the dotted line, what we know, forms we know are established. 1. and 1a. correspond on the morphosyntactic level (both have the form *N-à-N*), as do 2. and 2a. (*N-de-N*); but neither pair corresponds on the semantic level whereas 1. and 2. both correspond to 3a. semantically (a wordprocessor is both a typewriter and calculator) but not morphosyntactically. Where do we go from there? It looks like neither a purely semantic account, nor a purely morphosyntactic account will do.

We can advance a step by adding to our grid some further data that we already know about forms in these categories, namely inadmissible alternates, what you can not say (or would not say). These forms are in italics in Fig. 2:

Figure 2

proposed/disputed		1.	N-à-N	machine à traitement de texte ?
		2.	N-de-N	machine de traitement de texte ?
inadmissible		1a.	N-à-N	<i>*machine à écriture, *machine à calcul</i>
		2a.	N-de-N	<i>*machine d'écriture, *machine de calcul</i>
		(3a.	N-à-V	machine à écrire)
		3b.	N-de-V	<i>*machine d'écrire, *machine de calculer</i>

These additional items drawn from already known data (we did not have to look them up) reveal some powerful reflexes in the language (or, more accurately, among speakers of the language), forms it resists or refuses. Why these reflexes of resistance? The "why" is a bigger question than we need at this point in the discussion; it is enough to know that some forms are allowed and others are not (and some are allowed but not actualized), and at this point we should limit ourselves to an attempt to characterize their differences.

In the two candidates *machine à/de traitement de texte*, the syntax of the complement is a given: i.e., the STARTING POINT is an NP, *le traitement de texte*. What would happen if we tried substituting for this NP its corresponding VP, viz., *traiter le texte*, "to wordprocess [a text]"? There is nothing wrong with this VP—e.g., *il va falloir traiter le texte russe qu'on nous a donné avec un logiciel spécial* is a perfectly acceptable sentence (we are going to have to use a special program to wordprocess the Russian text they gave us); it is simply that speakers do not seem to be using that form

in the NP slot for wordprocessor—that is, no N-à-V candidate (*machine à traiter le texte*) has happened to emerge in the dictionaries, although such a term would have had analogical support (cf. *machine à laver la vaisselle* or *machine à laver le linge* and so forth). So if, as here, the syntactic variable is given (in this case an NP complement, nonnegotiable), what range of options exists in the admissible combinations of the variables: preposition *à* or *de* + NP or + VP? The only way to answer that question is the obvious way, as basic as experimental reasoning itself: you put all these combinations in the form of a table and see what results come out. To do that here, we need more data. You could think up some examples, or look them up, in a dictionary or reference grammar. Grévisse, for example(s), is a good place to start. At first sight, the organization of the data there may look hardly less random than personal introspection, offering as it does an abundance of apparently disparate categories. Thus with rooms: *salle de séjour* versus *salle à manger* (but we know that **salle à séjourner* is inadmissible); *salle de bains* and *salle d'attente* versus *salle à manger* and *chambre à coucher* (for sleeping), but also *chambre d'ami* and *chambre de bonne* (for sleeping). And *sac de couchage* (also for sleeping) versus *sac à main* and *bonnet de nuit* (also for sleeping). And so forth. Is all this really as chaotic as it looks?

No. On closer inspection, all the examples above (and others which you can easily add) turn out to be reducible to a few basic categories. As you looked at the various examples, you would soon come to two basic generalizations:

1. Complements with *à* and *de* in French express a wide variety of relations, principally *possession* (*ce livre est à moi, celui de Paul est là-haut* [this book is mine, Paul's (lit. the one of Paul) is up there]); and *characterization* (of various types: attributes, components, ingredients, manner, means, spatial notions such as origin, location, direction, destination, cause, purpose, and so forth).
2. In some complement structures, *à* and *de* in modern French have no meaning at all, while others retain traces, more or less apparent, of the original directional semantics (literal and figurative) of the Latin prepositions of which they are the distant continuors: *de* ("from"), *ad* ("toward"), and *ab* ("away from"). Here synchronic semantic analysis encounters historical phonetics.⁶

For the task at hand, an exhaustive classification of *à* and *de* complements is unnecessary; we can readily distinguish basic categories that are relevant ("purpose" is) from those that are not ("possession" is not). As you collect and sort examples into groups, it becomes clear that many examples that initially looked different are in reality more similar than dissimilar (the way you might sort beige, bone, and buff into a category

"closer to white" than to yellow, red, or blue). In a similar way, *all* the examples above may appear to you to belong to a single category—characterization—and our *machine à/de traitement de texte*, a device for the purpose of wordprocessing, would then appear as a member, along with a large number of the other examples cited above, of a single subcategory, which we could call by the French word *destination* since (unlike the English cognate) it nicely divides into two basic subcategories reflecting the word's semantic evolution from Latin to Romance as a deverbal from 1. abstract telic *destinare* ("determine one's fate, lot, end in life") to 2. the concrete locative sense of destination as a physical place. Thus it follows at this point (at least in my analysis—yours might be slightly different) that our examples above fall into three subdivisions of the semantic class *destination* as

- 1a. *telic* (destination-purpose),
- 1b. *locative* (destination-place), and
- 1c. *containers* (combination of 1a. and 1b.),

which shade off into neighboring categories of characterization such as

- 2a. *attributes or components* and
- 2b. *manner or means*.

Following is a brief discussion of each of these subdivisions. My analysis is not exhaustive, and will no doubt coincide—but also conflict—with others. Bear in mind that the focus here is on a method, an approach, and that linguistic accounts of this type can always be improved upon. Depending on who wants to explain what to whom, and for what purpose, this account of prepositional complementation could be simplified or elaborated; my purpose in these remarks has been to illustrate, for (advanced) students interested in French and linguistics, the procedures used in a type of analysis that aims to be both adequate and parsimonious (what scientists call "elegant").

1a. *Telic* (destination-purpose)

i. In this category (examples below) either preposition, *à* or *de*, encodes purpose and is semantically equivalent to "for the purpose of X" ("*objet* qui a été fait pour X," "*dont l'emploi est X*"). Like certain examples we will see below (1a.ii. where the preposition is irrelevant), but unlike others (1c. and 2a. where the choice between *à* and *de* does encode a semantic opposition), in this category French has used the *à/de* opposition, elsewhere meaning-bearing but here semantically empty, to grammaticalize *only a morphological distinction*: *à* + VERB complement versus *de* + NOUN complement; in other words, there is no semantic contrast in the following items, only a morphological one.

N-p-V	N-p-N
machine à écrire	appareil de télévision
machine à calculer	instrument de musique
machine à laver le linge	pompe de bicyclette

Not only objects, but also people are found in this category when considered from the perspective of instrumentality: *un homme à tout faire*, *une femme de ménage* (a.k.a. *femme de journée* in France but *femme à journée* in Belgium [Grévisse 349.a.4.]).

ii. Not only is the distinction between *à* and *de* semantically empty in the preceding examples contrasting N and V complements; it is also empty *within* the morphological class of N complements: i.e., objects within this semantic class (destination-purpose) complementize either with *de* or *à*, with no effect on meaning. Otherwise put, two nouns conjoined by a preposition are called lexicalized compounds when the choice of preposition is arbitrary.⁷

N-de-N	N-à-N
papier d'emballage	papier à lettres
pompe de bicyclette	pompe à incendie
brosse de peinture	brosse à dents

1b. *Locative (destination-location)*

As in 1a. above, the opposition available in the language between the prepositions *à* and *de*—again, sometimes semanticized, sometimes not—here grammaticalizes only a syntactic distinction (the same as above: *à* + VP, *de* + NP):

salle à manger	salle de bains
chambre à coucher	chambre d'hôtel

In this group, however (rooms for the purpose of X/location for the activity of X), the locative-telic distinction breaks down, or rather the two categories overlap to such an extent that the distinction is of little use. Same with entities such as *maison de jeunes* or *école de filles*: which is semantically prior, place or purpose?

1c. For *containers* and *recipients*, the semantic opposition locative vs. telic (destination-location versus destination-purpose) has become grammaticalized by choice of preposition: *de* semanticized for contents, *à* for purpose:

verre de vin	verre à vin
tasse de thé	tasse à thé
pot d'eau	pot à eau

pot de fleurs	pot à fleurs
boîte d'outils	une boîte à outils
(also: panier, corbeil, etc.)	

Grévisse-Gosse treats as an exception containers which are normally thrown away when empty, in which cases one finds *de*: *un vieux paquet de cigarettes vide* (an empty old cigarette pack), *pas grand'chose dans cette boîte de biscuits* (not much in this cookie box), etc. But from the perspective of our analysis, these items are consistent with the idea of grammaticalized category distinctions: an empty recipient does not cross categories and lose the logico-semantic feature "contents" if its former contents happen no longer to be there (349.b.).

2a. *Attributes/components*. At a point somewhat more remote from the original semantic core of *destination*, the *à/de* distinction has also been grammaticalized to mark degrees of association, or more or less complete integration (intended destination) in the distinction between, on the one hand, *à* with attributes (*la fille aux cheveux blonds* [the girl with blond hair], *l'homme au gilet* [the man in the vest], where *à* = *avec* ["with"] and denotes a distinguishing part in the characterization of an entity), vs. *de*, on the other hand, denoting matter or material integral to its characterization: *cheminée de marbre* (marble fireplace [mantel]), *statue de plâtre* (plaster statue). This distinction is most visible in contrasts of the type *une tarte aux fraises* and *une compote de fraises* (the former "made principally with strawberries," the latter "made entirely [or almost entirely] from strawberries").

2b. *Manner or means*. Finally, another slot in the category "complement of characterization," similar to the "attribution/association" slot above (2a.), is the adverbial qualifier of manner or means, semantically equivalent to *qui fonctionne par/avec X* (an entity which functions by, with, by means of X); expressions of this type are constructed *only* with *à*:

machine à vapeur
bateau à voile
chariot à roulettes
bombe à retardement
arme à feu, arme à implosion
stylo à bille, stylo à cartouche
moulin à vent, moulin à cylindres, etc.
instruments à cordes, à percussion, à vent
pompe à eau, pompe à huile, pompe à essence (d'un moteur à explosion)

In striking contrast to the semantic (sub)class *destination-purpose* (1a. above), items in group 2b. here such as *moulin à vent* which encode man-

ner or means of *moulinage* (*moulin* < MOLA ModFr. *meule* "mill," "grinder"), have the same morphosyntactic form (N-à-N)—but as noted above, not the same semantics!—as the category constituted on the basis of the *object* of the process (in this case, that which is subjected to *moulinage*, hence *moulin à café*, *moulin à poivre*, *moulin à légumes*, *moulin à huile*, etc.). We can therefore formulate the following generalization: In the semantic category "machine/device" where M is any machine, tool, or device for the purpose of X, what is determinative is the morphology of the complement in the sequence N-prep-complem.:

- i. VERBS complementize with *à*, but not with *de*:

machine à écrire

fer à repasser

- ii. NOUNS complementize with *à* or *de*:

canne à pêche

ligne de pêche

papier à lettres

papier d'emballage

We can now summarize the data (incomplete, but suggestive) as follows: In prepositional complementation in French, i.e., constructions of the type

N + *à* or *de* + noun

N + *à* + verb (infinitive)

the choice of preposition may be determined by a grammaticalized distinction which is either

- a. syntactic and morphological (*de* + noun, *à* + verb) but which has no semantic effect on the head-noun; i.e., the function of the head-noun in the compound is the same irrespective of the type of complement (noun or verb) and irrespective of the (empty) preposition:

une chambre d'hôtel, *une chambre de bonne*, *chambre d'ami*, even a *sac de couchage* is in each case a place for sleeping, but so too is *une chambre à coucher*; or

- b. semantic, in which case the function of the head-noun in the compound word *does* change according to preposition

une tasse de café ("cup of coffee") vs. *une tasse à café* (coffee cup); or else

- c. both semantic and morphosyntactic, as in *un sac à main*, *un sac à dos* vs. *un sac de couchage*:

(here the objects are all bags, but in each of the three examples their *purpose* is different, as is the *location* of the bag (with respect to parts of the body) in the first two examples with *à* (the category is articles of clothing or clothing-accessories, where *à* is equivalent to *qui est porté à l'endroit de*) as opposed to *de* in the third

example, from a different category (*qui a été fait pour X* [1b. above]).

So is it a *machine à traitement de texte* or a *machine de traitement de texte*? Since this item is a noun belonging to the semantic class "destination-purpose" and more precisely to the subclass "tool or device for X" or "for the purpose of X"; and since we have observed that items in this class complementize on the basis of the morphosyntax of the complement (verbs complementize with *à* only, nouns with either *à* or *de* when semantically empty), we are led to the conclusion that both forms are deeply ingrained in the patterns of word formation in French, and that they overlap like *papier à lettres* and *papier d'emballage*, *canne à pêche* and *filet de pêche*.

Finally, with respect to native-speaker judgments about the neologisms *machine à traitement de texte* and *machine de traitement de texte*, both have support among native-speaker informants. Moreover, although some native speakers may tell you one is right and the other is wrong, such preferences, strong as they may be, turn out to be founded on considerations mostly extrinsic to the grammar.⁸ To the contrary, the analysis sketched here suggests that the applicable morphosyntactic and semantic data on complements in French provide no grounds for disqualifying either of these two expressions currently attested, albeit confusedly, by the dictionaries. Students should be made aware that even in highly standardized languages like French and English there still exists a wide range of acceptable variability, and teachers should be prepared to help students distinguish between acceptable and nonacceptable variation.

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

APPENDIX

appareil de télévision : television set	panier : basket
arme à feu : firearm	papier à lettres : stationery
arme à implosion : implosive device	papier d'emballage : wrapping paper
	pompe à incendie : fire pump
bateau à voile : sailboat	pompe à eau : water pump
boîte à outils : tool box	pompe à essence : gas pump
boîte d'outils : box of tools	pompe à huile : oil pump
bombe à retardement : time bomb	pompe de bicyclette : bicycle pump
bonnet de nuit : night cap	pot à eau : water pitcher
brosse à dents : toothbrush	pot à fleurs : flower pot
brosse de peinture : paint brush	pot d'eau : pitcher of water
	pot de fleurs : pot (vase) of flowers
chambre à coucher : bedroom	
chambre d'ami : guest room	tarte aux fraises : strawberry pie
chambre d'hôtel : hotel room	tasse à thé : teacup
chambre de bonne : maid's room, guest room	tasse de thé : cup of tea

chariot à roulettes : wheelchair
 compote de fraises : strawberry jam
 corbeil : basket

école de filles : girls school

fer à repasser : iron (for clothes)
 instruments de musique : musical
 instruments

—à cordes : stringed

—à percussion : percussion

—à vent : wind

sac à main : handbag
 sac de couchage : sleeping bag
 salle à manger : dining room
 salle d'attente : waiting room
 salle de bains : bathroom
 salle de séjour : living room
 stylo à bille : ballpoint pen
 stylo à cartouche : cartridge pen

verre à vin : wineglass

verre de vin : glass of wine

machine à calculer : calculator
 machine à écrire : typewriter
 machine à laver la vaisselle : dishwasher
 machine à laver le linge : washing machine
 machine à vapeur : steam-powered machine
 machine de bureau : (piece of) office equipment
 maison de jeunes : youth center
 moteur à explosion : internal combustion engine
 moulin à cylindres : cylinder mill
 moulin à huile : oil press
 moulin à légumes : vegetable grinder, food processor
 moulin à poivre : pepper mill
 moulin à vent : windmill

Notes

¹I am referring to the 1994 *Oxford-Hachette* and the 1993 *Collins-Robert*.

²The entries quoted are from the English-French section of the respective dictionaries. Some of my student-informants pointed out to me, after researching the problem, that in fact the situation is considerably more complicated than the simple contradiction noted here. For in fact, both of the dictionaries cited do give both forms, but with a maximum of confusion. *Collins-Robert* not only contradicts *Oxford-Hachette* in the English-French entry, but contradicts itself from one section to the next, whereas *Oxford-Hachette* has *à* in one section and both prepositions in another, as follows:

	English-French		French-English
<i>Collins-Robert</i>	de		à
<i>Oxford-Hachette</i>	à		à ou de

³A *moulin à café* is a coffee grinder. To keep the text of this discussion relatively unencumbered, a glossary of terms untranslated in the text appears in the Appendix.

⁴This discrepancy raises an important methodological issue about what native speakers can and cannot tell you about their language. Native speakers readily give wrong information if asked (or if they think they are being asked) the wrong questions. In the present inquiry, respondents who volunteered the information "*machine de traitement de texte* is incorrect" were mistaken. The only valid information native speakers are equipped to provide in such instances is whether X or Y is or is not an expression they would use themselves, or whether X or Y is an expression they would consider acceptable if they heard someone else use it—i.e., questions of the type: "Is *machine à traitement de texte* a term you

would use to refer to a word processor?" or "If you heard someone refer to a word processor as *une machine à traitement de texte*, would you find that term odd?" It often happens that your informant will want to infer from questions like this the additional question of whether X or Y is "incorrect" or "ungrammatical" (according to their understanding of grammar); but beware, this inference involves issues beyond the scope of the questions posed to your informants, and often beyond the scope of their knowledge.

⁵An obvious—but by no means simple—correlation exists between the strength of the grip that prescriptive grammar holds on the minds of individual speakers, and the individual's degree of habitual unwillingness to admit to uncertainty in matters of grammar, even inconsequential matters like the one at issue here. And while the institutional prescriptivism of the French is well-known—notorious unto banality, it is merely more blatant than the myriad forms of noninstitutional prescriptivism that exist everywhere. An example close at hand is the self-reinforcing peer pressure of youth culture, which is just as effective as the French Academy and its associated avatars in coercing verbal conformism by defining what are and what are not cool ways of expressing oneself, and by enforcing prestige-regulation (approval or disapproval) among group members according to the degree to which they conform or fail to conform to the prescribed verbal norms of the group.

⁶Are the Latin meanings of *ad* and *de* irrelevant here? This question provides a good example of a controversial issue in twentieth-century linguistics, namely: What is the status of *historical* data in linguistic description? For the case in point: Do the Latin origins of *à* and *de* really tell us anything about their behavior in Modern French? Contemporary linguists are likely to say no, having been trained (for good reasons) to be suspicious of historical accounts of grammatical questions of this type. History does not "explain" language, which is why you often hear linguists say "etymology is irrelevant." However, it is important not to take that dictum too literally. The linguist arguing that history explains nothing is apt to point out that children learning French today have no access to, or knowledge of, say, Latin *ad* and *de*. This is true, but only partially true. Children learning French today are, in fact, learning reflexes of Latin, i.e., patterns and regularities in the contemporary language that have, over time, either remained intact, or have in varying degrees been weakened. Such changes may explain nothing, or may explain a great deal, depending on the point in question. This differential or "bumpy" continuity in the evolution of language has led some philosophers to turn the question of "acquisition" around 180°. Instead of talking about a child "acquiring French," they argue that individuals do not acquire language, language acquires individuals. The language is already there. (But on the other hand, it is also constantly changing.) What this means for our discussion is that French would still operate with its historically conditioned reflex clashes (due to conflicting regularities at the levels of morphology, syntax, semantics), whether or not it acquired you as a speaker or me as a speaker. It is in this sense that one can argue that historical factors underlie (though they do not "explain") some features of a given state of a language (French, English, Chinese . . .). And while historical information is not necessary in a synchronic explanation, it is often useful, and especially helpful methodologically in attempts to corroborate a hypothesis or falsify a theory. In particular for *à* and *de* here, one can indeed frame an adequate account of the disparate, contradictory data without recourse to the history of French. A "theme-rheme" account, or "topic-comment," or any other version ("old information–new information") of this basic opposition, lines up nicely with the opposition "*à* 'toward' (forward-looking)" versus "*de* 'from' (backward-looking)" that governs in contemporary French a set of matchings between spatial relationships and cognitive operations. What does it add to know their history? Only this: that without the historical data, one would be hard pressed to sort out the cases of thematic or "forward-looking *à*" from the (unexpectedly) rhematic or "backward-looking *à*"—i.e., an *à* that looks like it is behaving as a *de* (as in *emprunter à*, *retirer à*, *arracher à*, *voler à*, and so forth). So without the historical knowledge of the coalescence of Latin *ad* ("toward") and *ab* ("away from"), the synchronic linguist (in this instance as in others) may have a harder time accounting for apparent oddities of the type *elle lui prend la main* ("she takes his hand") versus *elle lui prend le livre* ("she takes the book from him") or the emer-

gence of a mechanism by which an older *acheter qc à qu* ("to buy st. from so.") is avoided in modern French in favor of an equivalent subclass *acheter qc de qu* (and so forth—there are many such cases, with *prendre* for exemple). So etymology is not *always* irrelevant. But neither is it always useful.

Instead of "preposition," some linguists use the term "operator" in cases like this, in which the semantic distinctions that elsewhere differentiate one preposition from another have been neutralized. We will retain the term "preposition" since in the present discussion *à* and *de* do, at times, contrast semantically. However, if the preposition in the above cases is meaningless (semantically empty), and if it serves no morphosyntactic purpose either (does not distinguish between N versus V complements), then would it not follow that there is no reason for any preposition at all in such cases? It would indeed. Whence such items as *appareil photo* ("camera," formerly *appareil de photo*, or *lave vaisselle* replacing *machine à laver la vaisselle*), *bloc notes* ("note pad," but also *bloc à feuilles détachables*), *papier journal* ("newspaper"), and so forth. Indeed prepositionless complementation is increasingly common in ModFr., especially with so-called *calques*, or translated borrowings, in which the complement structure is simple right or left apposition.

*I.e., considerations which no doubt have sociolinguistic explanations—they are therefore (strictly speaking) not extralinguistic; but such considerations supervene in irregular and conflicting ways which (unless one adopts a radically pragmatic view of language) are extrinsic to the formal features and patterns of the grammar.

Works Cited

- Grévisse. *Le Bon Usage: grammaire française*. Douzième édition refondue par André Goose. Gembloux: Duculot, 1991.
- Magnant, Anne, éd. *Dictionnaire des termes officiels*. Paris: Imprimerie des Journaux officiels, 1994.
- Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary/Dictionnaire Hachette-Oxford. Ed. Marie-Hélène Corréard and Valerie Grundy. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Robert-Collins Dictionnaire français-anglais/Collins-Robert French-English English-French Dictionary. Ed. Beryl T. Atkins et al. New York: Harper-Collins, 1993.