

**THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY OF THE ECOLE DE FRANÇAIS
MODERNE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LAUSANNE**

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The Ecole de français moderne, a section of the Faculté des Lettres reserved for non-francophone students, became interested in the new methods and techniques of instruction as soon as the first tape recorders appeared. At the end of 1961 the school was equipped, on an experimental basis, with a small language laboratory that was soon completed so as to become a 24-booth installation.

So it has been ten years and more that we have been using a language laboratory and during this period of time the opinions passed on this tool have been rather varied. First there was the period of euphoria: the LL was going to furnish models that it would suffice to imitate in order to acquire a rapid mastery of the language and, above all, a perfect pronunciation. Soon it was necessary to sing a different tune: the suggested models were (often) excellent but imitation remained quite imperfect. It was in corrective phonetics that the failure was most evident and we had to agree that, used thoughtlessly, the LL was doing more harm than good. We then changed our tactics: we rushed wholeheartedly into the practice of morphosyntactic structural exercises, elaborated according to rigorously rigid schemas. We were counting on the idea that, thanks to the acquisition—assured by the LL—of grammatical automatisms, the student could subsequently generate new structures by himself. And then came Chomsky, sowing doubt on the real efficacy of exercises intended to create a sort of conditioned reflex. Once again, we had to proceed with agonizing reappraisals! The fallout from the Chomskian bomb had as an effect the restoration of the credit of corrective phonetic exercises; such that by a curious circle of events, we come round again, in the present state of research, to the opinion that it is in the phonetic area that the LL, used judiciously, can be the most certainly effective.

To what degree have these changing opinions affected our activity? As a matter of fact, we have not led to burn what we had once adored, for we have never had a taste for rigidly systematic exercises. (Is that by natural prudence or to satisfy that taste for the golden mean that is dear to the Vaudois people? . . .). The materials that we have built up over the course of the last ten years have not, it seems, suffered too much from the shifts of wind in the linguistic sky. It has always appeared to us that absolute systematization provokes mono-

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tony and boredom, and we have always thought that a boring tape is a bad tape, whatever may be the linguistic theory that underlies it.

Circumstances, the needs of the moment, the previous training that we had received, all that led us to devote our principal effort to the preparation of phonetic tapes. Our very first tapes, produced by our handicraft (and how!), were phonetic tapes. Redone four times, they now form a collection of 25 tapes that we have just finished. This series, intended for our first-semester students, deals with the principal characteristics of French phonetics, in an order determined by the role played by these traits in the functioning of the language. Within each tape, we forced ourselves to follow a sequence that was at one and the same time phonetic, grammatical, and lexical (the first exercises of each tape use only the *Vocabulaire fondamental* of the first and second levels). This lets us combine the advantages of collective work and individual work: at each session in the LL all students begin the same tape but each one goes as far as he can go. The weakest students will not go beyond the middle of the tape (in spite of that, they will have covered the essential part of the lesson); the more advanced ones will go as far as the end of the tape, at which point more or less marginal phonetic problems are dealt with and more difficult lexical items and grammatical structures are introduced. In order to seriate the problems, we have "frozen" everything that has to do with the diction level, by adopting throughout our exercises the variant corresponding to the level of careful conversation. So we do not do reading exercises with our first-semester students. It is in their second semester that our students, departing from this fixed norm, as it were, learn by phonetic transcription and phonetic dictation to discover the multiple variants connected with diction level, with geographical or social milieu, or again with individual particularities. They learn to read a literary text, that is, to find the equivalence between a written text and its oral rendering. So one could say that in the first semester we work with *langue* and in the second semester with *discours*. On the other hand, work in the LL is absolutely integrated into the rest of the instruction in phonetics given in class, everything being based on a *Manuel de phonétique française*, just finished, conceived as a function of the LL.

In the second part of each of our tapes, we have therefore introduced a lexical corpus situated beyond FF-1 and FF-2. We would have liked to base our choices on more solid criteria than simple "linguistic sense." We thought of going through a certain number of contemporary works in order to try to get out of them a high-frequency vocabulary, corresponding to the lexicon a student needs in order to

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give an impromptu expose of a literary or general nature. At that time we entered into contract with the *Centre des calculs électroniques of the Ecole polytechnique fédérale* of Lausanne: the first thirty pages of *La Modification* by Michel Butor were put onto punched cards and we succeeded in getting interesting results concerning the frequency of occurrence of certain lexical elements. We took advantage of the occasion to have our investigation cover some phonetic points: frequency of vocalic chaining, inventory of unstable E's. But for these data to have some value, the research had to cover an extended corpus. Since the choice of this corpus and its transference into punched-card form represented an amount of work beyond our capabilities, we turned to the *Centres français d'investigation du langage* to ask them if such a job had already been done and whether, the method of payment to be agreed on, these punched cards could be put at our disposal. Unfortunately, we could not get anything corresponding to our needs: we were obliged to abandon a promising project and to continue to base our lexical choices on purely subjective grounds.

We were also led to prepare a certain number of French grammar tapes, but in this area we were content to complete or lengthen, for more advanced students, series of tapes put at our disposal by other centers. We are about to finish a series of tapes on tense concordance, and we intend to prepare next a few tapes on the use of the imperfect and the *passé composé*. We had the good luck to learn that a series of French grammar tapes had been prepared in Zurich, and we found among them two excellent tapes on the subject that interests us. In a spirit of collaboration for which we congratulate each other, the *Centre de diffusion du matériel scolaire* of the Zurich Canton has been good enough to send us these two tapes, which are going to constitute an excellent basis for our own series of tapes. Perhaps this might be once more the place to make an appeal for information and collaboration among the centers producing tapes. But that is a call that has so far aroused only a very few responses

Next to phonetics and grammar, study of the lexicon in itself was also an object of our attention. A task force, directed by J. F. Maire, had a try at putting into practice *semic analysis* according to the R. Gallisson method. That induced us to review many "preconceived notions" on the teaching of the lexicon, both in French as a native language and in French as a foreign language. Setting up the *semic grids*, a delicate operation and one that requires scrupulous preparation, permitted us to become aware of the interest of this method: it reveals how the language functions at the level of the lexicon and assures the passage from passive vocabulary to active vocabulary, which is always so difficult. The "cours de perfectionnement" of the CILA, on

lexical structural exercises, organized in March, 1972, by the *Ecole de français moderne*, has opened new paths to teaching of the lexicon: the wish has been expressed that task forces might investigate various semantic fields, but there again, only a collaboration among the various centers and a division of the tasks could succeed in doing such a considerable body of work. Let us also point out that for several years our students have had the possibility of doing in the LL phonetic or orthographic dictations whose correct version they can later consult. This utilization of our installation, as a library-laboratory, is having more and more success with our students, and each year we enrich the stock of exercises at their disposal.

Of course, our LL is also used by francophone students who come there to study English and German. A certain number of tapes in these two languages have been prepared in collaboration with English and German assistants, but these are scarcely more than auxiliaries to the excellent series of tapes that come from England or from Germany. On the other hand, linguistics students come to the LL for auditory recognition exercises drawn from the articulatory phonetics course of W. A. Smalley, a course intended for prospective ethnologists. Finally, in the very near future, Spanish, Italian, and Russian will also be taught in the LL.

Let us add, moreover, that our LL served for several years as a testing ground for a few classes of the *Gymnase de la Cité*, who thus were able to prepare themselves to use without too much trial and error the two laboratories which that establishment now has.

What is the status of our plans? In the immediate future, to gather together all the presently available documentation on the elements of prosody with an eye to the "cours de perfectionnement" of the CILA that the *Ecole de français moderne* is organizing for March 19-23, 1973; the theme of the course will be the preparation of structural exercises on intonation and accentuation.

Following that, we are going to enter an area that we have neglected up until now: tests, which ought to furnish our students with the means of judging for themselves the value of their work in the LL and thereby give them a better motivation. Then we are thinking of attacking, following the lead of P. Léon, phonostylistic exercises. For us it will be a matter of developing and spreading out over several levels the stock of tapes we already have at our disposal in this area.

On the other hand, the recent creation of a chair of applied linguistics at the University of Lausanne is certainly going to contribute to the assurance of stricter integration of the LL with the instruction of foreign languages.

Finally, in a more distant future, we will have to prepare for our installation in the new buildings of the University at Dorigny, where we hope that everything that has to do with applied linguistics will be grouped together in a single center. But that is another story . . .

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