

Claude Duneton,
Chroniqueur
at *Le Figaro*

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By

Mary Munro-Hill

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I DEDICATE THIS BOOK TO MY HUSBAND, THOMAS PETER HILL,
MY PARENTS, JOHN AND JOAN MUNRO,
AND MY LIFELONG FRIENDS, MARGUERITE CANEL,
JEAN AND THÉRÈSE GUILHEM,
AND MICHÈLE GAY.



CLAUDE DUNETON AND MARY MUNRO-HILL
RUE DE DUNKERQUE, PARIS, JULY 1994
TAKEN BY THOMAS PETER HILL © MARY MUNRO-HILL

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PREFACE

CLAUDE DUNETON, *CHRONIQUEUR AT LE FIGARO*

It was in July 1994 that I first had the pleasure of meeting Claude Duneton. We had been corresponding for some months following the completion of my doctoral thesis on Aristide (Maurice Chapelan), in which he had shown particular interest, since he was at the time seriously considering a proposal from *Le Figaro* that he should become *chroniqueur du langage* at the newspaper, writing a weekly language article for its literary supplement.

Duneton had in fact already started to contribute a regular *rubrique langagière* for *Le Figaro littéraire* in April of that year, though only on a temporary basis, since he was asking himself, as a man of distinctly anti-establishment leanings, who had been—and was still—a fervent communist and *soixante-huitard*, whether he could in all conscience work for a right-wing publication, with whose politics he could not possibly sympathise. We discussed this ethical question at some length at our first meeting, during which I assured him that Maurice Chapelan, in all his forty-odd years as *critique littéraire* and then as resident *chroniqueur du langage* at *Le Figaro* from April 1961 to his death in March 1992, had never once felt obliged to express or defend any political opinion in his writing.

After careful consideration Claude subsequently signed a contract with *Le Figaro* and became the newspaper's resident grammarian, Aristide's successor, until his work was cruelly curtailed in 2010 by a disabling stroke.

Following our initial meeting, when I had given Claude a copy of my PhD thesis, he honoured both Aristide and me on 4 November 1994 in a charming and sensitive *chronique*, entitled *Cher Aristide*, the closing paragraph of which I am pleased to reproduce here:

L'auteur britannique avoue avoir voulu « servir à immortaliser Aristide of Le Figaro ». Belle fidélité de la part de Mrs Munro [sic], correspondante et lectrice assidue de Maurice Chapelan, qu'elle connaissait en personne, et qui la cita plusieurs fois dans ses chroniques. En ces journées de

remembrance et d'affectueux salut, auquel je m'associe, il y a de la douceur, cher Aristide, dans cet épais volume érudit : c'est le plus beau des chrysanthèmes !

My husband Peter and I visited Claude in his vast apartment in the rue de Compiègne, not far from the Gare du Nord, where I immediately felt at home, as there were books and papers strewn everywhere. His desk was overflowing and the floor was littered with documents. There was evidence of much work in progress: indeed, Claude was at the time putting the finishing touches to the second part of his *magnum opus* on the history of French song, *Histoire de la chanson française*, the magnificent result of many years of exhaustive research, eventually published in 1998 in two volumes by the Éditions du Seuil.

Claude had been—and still was—an admirer of *le grand écrivain* Alexandre Vialatte, who for twenty years had written a weekly *chronique* for *La Montagne*. Vialatte had invariably closed his articles with the words: « Et c'est ainsi qu'Allah est grand », a custom imitated from time to time by Duneton, who offered his interpretation of those ritualistic words in his article *Allah et Alex* on 14 January 2010: « C'est ainsi que les choses adviennent, nous n'y pouvons rien », a vague expression of fatalism and resignation. He adds:

Il m'est donc arrivé, au cours de ces dernières années, de terminer un article par cette chute fameuse, par respect pour le grand chroniqueur mort (en 1971).

He was undeterred by the misplaced recriminations of some of his readers—who, incidentally, were not Muslims, Christians or Jews—who accused him of taking the name of Allah in vain.

In his opinion, the greatest living *chroniqueur de langue française* was Pierre Foglia, columnist at *La Presse*, Montréal. Duneton saw in Foglia a worthy successor to Vialatte, whom he had held in the highest possible esteem.

At first glance Claude Duneton and his immediate predecessor at *Le Figaro*, Maurice Aristide Chapelan, could scarcely have been more different from each other in background and temperament, yet they had much in common: they both enthusiastically contributed weekly articles on the French language for the same newspaper, Aristide for just over thirty years and Claude for sixteen; each experienced success in the literary world, both of them versatile and prolific writers in several genres and each receiving prestigious prizes from *l'Académie française*. As well

as writing and translating, they had both been engaged in the world of theatre and cinema.

As a child in the early years of the twentieth century, Maurice Chapelan had been seriously ill with asthma, for which there were then none of the miracle-cures we know today; Claude Duneton, too, was seriously ill in childhood, an apparent misfortune at the time but one which would change the course of his life, since lengthy hospitalisation in Paris would give him a grounding in the French language. Explaining why he was linguistically different from the other six-year-old children starting school at Lagleygeolle in 1941, some of whom spoke nothing other than *l'occitan*, usually termed *patois*, Claude tells us (Duneton 1973: 11):

Parce qu'à deux ans une maladie grave m'avait valu un long séjour dans un hôpital à Paris. J'avais donc par hasard appris à parler français en premier lieu et mes parents avaient continué sur cette lancée.

It is perhaps not surprising, in view of my earlier book, *Aristide of Le Figaro* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), that I should wish to draw comparisons here and there, and point out differences, too, between the two French *chroniqueurs* I have known. Aristide and his articles had evolved over the years, as one of his correspondents remarked (4 January 1985): « Il est vrai que vous avez gagné en humour ce que vous semblez avoir perdu en sévérité ». Whereas his earlier articles, appearing under the heading *Usage et grammaire*, had been scholarly and serious, his later contributions, bearing from early in 1986 the more appropriate title of *Divertissements grammaticaux*, were, although still scholarly, rather more light-hearted and entertaining. Indeed, of his own *chroniques*, even those of his earlier days at *Le Figaro*, Aristide wrote (Chapelan 1977: 61):

J'enfile volontiers la venelle sous le moindre prétexte langagier, et mes chroniques sont des flâneries qui m'amused, avant d'amuser, du moins me l'écrivent-ils, la plupart de mes lecteurs. Ce délayage n'en contient pas moins, à chaque fois, l'élucidation d'un point de vocabulaire ou de syntaxe, qu'il rend ainsi plus agréable d'avalier. J'espère même que de la sorte l'efficacité en est plus grande.

Duneton's *chroniques*, on the other hand, although certainly containing more than a trace of humour, were from the beginning academic and didactic, as befits a former schoolmaster, and remained so until the end, as we shall see. Unlike Aristide, Claude tended more often than not to adhere to one subject at a time, although he, too, occasionally enjoyed wandering off the point.

In my book on Aristide, I posed this question, among others: why are there now relatively few dedicated *chroniqueurs du langage* in the French press? I wondered at the time whether their gradual decline in number reflected a general loss of interest in correct usage or whether André Gide had been right in his opinion that Maurice Grevisse, with his seminal work on French grammar, *Le Bon Usage*, had rendered the *chroniqueurs du langage* redundant.

I have since concluded that the many French grammar pages to be found on the Internet—including the *Langue française* section of *Culture* in the electronic version of *Le Figaro*, a leader in the field, with its *forum*—have assumed the role of those writers who, like Claude Duneton and Maurice Aristide Chapelan before him, dealt with readers' linguistic uncertainties in their weekly columns, as they covered various aspects of the language.

Aristide may accordingly have been mistaken (9 January 1989) in his assumption that anyone like him, a newspaper-grammarians, would have a job for life, *ressemblant dans [mon] boulot aux médecins, aux pharmaciens et aux marchands d'armes... Aucun risque. Dieu merci !*

There may now be fewer weekly *chroniques du langage* in the French press, but a quick search on the Internet reveals the vast number of sites intended for native French speakers who are unsure of their grammar and wish to increase their understanding of the mechanics of the language in order to improve their linguistic skills, both spoken and written. It is clear that the desire to be reminded of forgotten rules of grammar is as strong now as ever it was, certainly among Internet users, *les internautes*, though the press in general has almost ceased employing resident weekly *chroniqueurs du langage*. In the case of the online edition of *Le Figaro* there is now a daily forum under the page *Langue française* in the *Culture* section, mentioned above, inviting readers to submit their queries. The forum is managed by several journalists. It is more than a little surprising to see the kind of very elementary questions posed by readers.

The World Wide Web seems to have taken the place not only of encyclopaedias but of all kinds of manuals covering almost every subject under the sun. It is possible to study the most arcane of matters—some free of charge—*en ligne*. As people all over the world are now able to read their newspapers on their laptops, tablet and smart-phones, it is only to be expected that printed papers and journals are gradually disappearing: *France-Soir* and *La Tribune* are available only *en version numérique*, just as *The Independent* in the United Kingdom is now a solely electronic publication. On the other hand, when *liseuses*, such as the famous *Kindle* and the less well-known *Nook* and *Kobo*, first came on the scene and

rapidly gained thousands of customers, many people feared the imminent demise of the printed book, but, contrary to their anticipation, the latest statistics indicate that traditional printed books are now regaining their popularity and fewer people are using electronic readers.

Since Claude's death I have made a study of his *chroniques du langage*, all of which bear the entirely appropriate title *Le plaisir des mots*, clearly illustrating his passion for words above all other aspects of the French language. Although his articles deal occasionally with the same questions treated by Aristide and his *confrères*, Claude's emphasis is far more often on words and their history than on actual grammar.

As Aristide had done in 1989 with his *La langue française dans tous ses débats* (François Bourin), covering the period 1961 to 1988, Duneton published a collection of his articles, *Au plaisir des mots* (Balland, 2004), whose second edition appeared as *Au plaisir des mots : les meilleures chroniques* (Denoël, 2005), encompassing the decade 1994 to 2004.

After Maurice Chapelan's death in March 1992 it was two years before a permanent grammarian was found to replace him. The well-known writer, Paul Guth, took over the column for a few months, calling his article *L'Art d'écrire*, but as his *chroniques* were concerned distinctly more with literature than with language *Le Figaro* did not engage him as Aristide's successor.

In April 1994 Claude took over the column, temporarily, as we have seen, and now, in 2018, six years after his death, *Le Figaro* is still reproducing his *chroniques* in its electronic paper, under the heading *Langue française*, with this comment:

Retrouvez les chroniques de Claude Duneton (1935-2012) chaque semaine. Écrivain, comédien et grand défenseur de la langue française, il tenait avec gourmandise la rubrique *Le plaisir des mots* dans les pages du *Figaro littéraire*.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all I acknowledge my deep debt of gratitude to the late Claude Duneton himself, not only for his willingness to meet me on several occasions but also for his hospitality and for his generosity in giving me copies of his books.

As well as expressing my gratitude to Claude, I must thank his daughter, Noémie, who in that same spirit of kindness has given me invaluable help, supplying biographical details and photographs of Claude, which I have used in this work.

My parents, too, I must thank, albeit belatedly, for the sacrifices they made when I was at school, and later at university, to enable me to make annual visits to France.

I am also greatly indebted to the staff of Cambridge Scholars Publishing, whose assistance has made the preparation of this book such a pleasure.

INTRODUCTION

CLAUDE DUNETON : *L'HOMME ET L'ŒUVRE*



CLAUDE DUNETON IN 1945
© ARCHIVES FAMILLE DUNETON

Claude Duneton was born in the village of Lagleygeolle (La Gleisòla in *occitan*) in Corrèze on Sunday 21 April—Easter Day—1935, into a peasant family. He had a hard childhood during the Occupation. His father had been severely affected by his experiences in the First World War at Verdun and had returned home in 1918 to discover that his wife had died of influenza in the pandemic. Claude's mother, therefore, was his father's second wife, much younger than he and a rather ill-tempered woman. In an

interview with Thierry Gandillot of *L'Express*, published on 20 December 2004, Claude described his mother as « mauvaise avec tout le monde ».

His early life at school is vividly depicted in his best-known work, *Parler croquant* (Stock, 1973); *l'occitan* was spoken at home by all in Lagleygeolle, with the exception of Claude and both his parents, who had worked in Paris for a while and therefore spoke standard French. *L'occitan* was banned, however, from the class-room, and Claude's fellow-pupils were forced to lead a double life, speaking *une langue étrangère*, a truly foreign language, *le français*, in class, and their normal tongue, *la langue d'oc*, *l'occitan* or *le patois*, as they called it, outside school. Claude's own position was most unusual, in that he spoke French both at home and in class but *l'occitan* when in the company of his friends.



CLAUDE DUNETON IN 1948
© ARCHIVES FAMILLE DUNETON

Shortly before Claude suffered his stroke, he had engaged in a highly personal conversation with his good friend and fellow-author, Jacques Cassabois, in which he had spoken freely of his early life; I have been

privileged to receive from Claude's daughter, Noémie, what is in effect a transcript of that exchange, as Jacques had carefully noted it all at the time.

On 23 March 2010, Claude and Jacques had returned to the Hôtel de Flandres in Compiègne, where Claude was appearing in a production of Raymond Depardon's *La ferme du Garet*. He and Jacques, who had come expressly to see the performance that evening, had retired for the night, quite weary after the play and the ensuing civic reception, but were both up and about before six o'clock the next morning, refreshed. As they waited for their breakfast they started to chat about wide-ranging matters and Claude suddenly introduced the topic of fate, *la destinée*, sharing with Jacques many details of how significant a role it had played in his early life. Since Jacques had noted it so accurately at the time, he was able to pass on to Claude's children the whole of that precious conversation, which he addressed simply to *Philippe, Olivier, Louise et Noémie* with this introduction:

On s'intéresse rarement à l'enfance de ses parents, et puis, un jour, quand la curiosité nous vient, ils ne peuvent plus nous répondre...J'ai écrit ce texte à partir des notes, consignées immédiatement après une conversation avec Claude, en pensant à ses enfants, à qui je dédie ces lignes.

The conversation, so conscientiously recorded in writing by Jacques, more than adequately corroborates the less detailed interviews Claude had given previously, especially that granted to Thierry Gandillot in December 2004. Claude had recounted how he was sent by his father to be trained as a fitter at the *Centre d'Apprentissage* at Brive but his academic ability had soon become evident and his masters realised that such a clever boy was in the wrong place.

His attachment to his linguistic roots would remain with him throughout his life: he who had acquired a perfect mastery of French language and literature would always remember the *parler* of his *village natal* and would unceasingly champion *l'occitan* and all other regional and minority languages.

In his review of *Au plaisir des mots*, Thierry Gandillot of *L'Express* included an interview with Claude, conducted shortly after the publication of the first edition of his collection of *chroniques*. During that interview Claude had spoken of his lifelong passion for language and had answered many questions Thierry had posed, including why the French as a nation are so fascinated by their native tongue. The conversation had turned inevitably to Claude's childhood. He had reflected on his early linguistic experiences at Lagleygeolle, describing them as confusing and uncomfortable for him, as he had fallen between two stools: although surrounded by the familiar

sounds of *l'occitan* he had spoken French (an alien language to the other children in his community, though not to him) both at home with his parents and, of course, at school. This initial confusion awakened in him a curiosity about language *per se* and would eventually develop into a love which would claim all his attention and dictate his path for the rest of his life. He explained to Gandillot the process involved in this evolution, remarking how all one's life one tries to answer the questions of childhood:

Ma curiosité vient de là. Toute sa vie, on tente de résoudre les questions qu'on s'est posées entre 2 et 5 ans. La fascination vient aussi de l'inquiétude face à une langue imposée par les élites.

One wonders why Claude, who had been taken to Paris as a child of two, did not mention during the interview the significance of his long stays in hospital there, where he had first encountered standard French.

Despite a difficult start in life, acquainted with both poverty and illness, Claude would succeed in all he did. Having been made to leave school when his parents could no longer afford to keep him there, he eventually returned at the age of sixteen and was placed *en cinquième* with pupils three years younger. He was very soon promoted to a more appropriate year and came top of the class before moving on to the prestigious Lycée Henri-IV in Paris, for which he received a grant, much to the relief of his father. On paper, the Dunetons seemed quite well-off, as they owned land, but in reality they were very poor.

As he wished to become a teacher, Claude trained from 1952 to 1954 at the *École Normale* at Tulle, his main ambition in those days being to return to Lagleygeolle as a respected schoolmaster and to live in a house with running water, having had more than his fair share, he felt, of bucket-filling. In order to qualify as a secondary school teacher, Claude attended the *École Normale* at Clermont-Ferrand. His first post was at the *Collège* at Meyssac, five kilometres from Lagleygeolle. His teaching subject was English, which he loved.

In 1971 Duneton and his family (his first wife Germaine and their two sons) moved from Corrèze to the *région parisienne*. Claude was sent to Fontainebleau in 1971 and to Savigny-sur-Orge in 1972, where he remained as a *professeur d'anglais* until leaving the teaching profession.

According to his close friend, fellow-*Corrézien* and contemporary, Jean Meyssignac, who himself is a *chroniqueur* at *France-Catholique*, Claude's childhood was made all the more difficult by his serious illness, a dislocation of both hips, a condition that would affect not only his childhood but the rest of his life, as he would always walk with a limp and would never be able to take part in sports:

Les Duneton étaient pauvres et Claude est né handicapé. [...] Mère et fils partirent à Paris pour des opérations et de longs séjours dans les hôpitaux. C'est là qu'il apprit à parler. C'est pourquoi ce pur sujet de la Vicomté de Turenne parlait avec un fond d'accent parisien.

Jean might have added at this point that it was not simply a slight Parisian accent that Claude had acquired but, more importantly, a familiarity with the standard French language, thanks to his long periods in hospital—the only possible advantage of his childhood illness.

As the condition had been overlooked at his birth, when it might have been treated in a relatively simple manner at home, it became necessary for him to make frequent visits to Paris for surgical treatment, starting in early childhood. The dysplasia had prevented Claude from learning to walk properly. His parents had noticed that he was waddling rather than walking and it was then that their family doctor had diagnosed the problem. Noémie tells me that despite undergoing several operations, both during his childhood and in later life, the condition had left him with permanent problems. As well as the many early operations, he underwent further surgery on his hips in 1968 and even as late as 1989. He also had a stent fitted in 1997, to relieve the cardiac problems which would, sad to relate, eventually return with greater severity.

Claude had married for the first time in the early 1960s and had his two sons by Germaine, who was also a teacher: Philippe in 1961 and Olivier in 1963. In 1987 Claude's daughter, Louise, was born, to be followed in 1990 by his youngest child, Noémie. The girls' mother, whom Claude married in 1990, is the writer, radio *réalisatrice*, journalist and magazine-editor, Isabelle Yhuel (who kept the name of her first husband). Although his two marriages ended in divorce, Claude remained on good terms with both Germaine and Isabelle.

Germaine and he separated around the time that Claude was embracing his writing career, when his life was changing dramatically. His preoccupation with his work had made him rather difficult to live with and led to tensions between the couple. As far as his separation from Isabelle was concerned, it was, conversely, her professional life that was evolving and unsettling Claude, who found the situation difficult to handle. Nevertheless, intimate relationships were important to him and he had other women in his life, of whom he remained fond, keeping in touch with them long after their relationships had ended. Claude was a kind and loving man, whose warmth, humour and sincerity were much appreciated by his friends and family.

Duneton was a gifted, prolific and passionate writer, but of all the many genres he mastered during his long career it was his weekly *chronique du*

langage for *Le Figaro littéraire* that brought him the greatest pleasure and satisfaction, the work to which he was naturally most attached, since words were his true *métier* and his primary concern: *les mots*, their meaning, their use, their history, their etymology. The hundreds of *chroniques* he wrote for *Le Figaro* bear this out most eloquently.

His first foray into the world of the *rubrique langagière* in the press had in fact taken place many years earlier. Following the resounding success of his *Parler croquant* in 1973, he was invited by the magazine *Elle* to write a regular *chronique du langage*. This invitation he accepted with alacrity, and he happily wrote those language articles for four or five years. The experience would serve as an invaluable preparation for his sixteen years as resident *chroniqueur* at *Le Figaro littéraire*.

Claude was never more at home and never happier than when he was writing his *chroniques*. With an etymological dictionary in one hand and a pen in the other, surrounded by his many works of reference, Claude truly enjoyed his work. He took his linguistic writing seriously, researching it thoroughly and painstakingly, and he was so committed to his position as *chroniqueur* at *Le Figaro littéraire* that he always had a few articles ready in advance, « *pour le cas où...* ». The title of his articles, *Le plaisir des mots*, was perfectly fitting, since his study of words as *chroniqueur* brought him infinite joy and delight.

He told me on more than one occasion: *J'adore écrire dans les journaux*. In the preface to his collection of articles, *Au plaisir des mots* (2005: 11), he explains why he so enjoys writing his *chroniques*:

Le partage presque immédiat avec des lecteurs et des lectrices du contenu d'un article m'offre une compensation à l'effort solitaire de l'écriture « au long cours » qui est celle d'un livre. C'est comme entretenir une conversation, une causette imaginaire où j'ai le temps, cependant, de limer ma réplique ; moi qui, au naturel, ai l'esprit de l'escalier, je me donne là l'illusion de la vivacité !

Many of his readers wrote to him, commenting on his articles, asking him questions and suggesting topics for him to treat, from which Claude frequently chose items to cover in his *chroniques*; in turn he wrote letters, sometimes to his English friends, asking for advice and seeking information. Some such letters he occasionally addressed to me, in response to which I recommended on one occasion Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and on another *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*.



CLAUDE DUNETON CHRISTMAS 2009 © JEAN TIGÉ

Having left his apartment at 2 rue de Compiègne in 1999, Claude divided his time from the early 2000s between his house in Corrèze, originally that of his grandparents, and his pied-à-terre in Paris, *au XV^e*. His early life in Lagleygeolle, as both child and man, would lead to one of his most important works, *Le Monument* (Balland, 2010), « roman vrai », a true story.

In 2010 tragedy struck, when Claude suffered a debilitating stroke, a cruel blow, which brought his writing career to a premature end. He was in hospital in Lille when that terrible event took place. He had suffered a series of mini-strokes, transient ischaemic attacks, and was awaiting cardiac surgery, which he had opted to have performed in Lille, as his doctor son Olivier practised there and knew the surgeons concerned. When Claude had his stroke he was actually about to be discharged from the hospital for a few days, pending the scheduled surgery, so that he could organise his *Figaro littéraire* articles and have a few in hand ready for publication.

Noémie tells me that the stroke paralysed her father down his right-hand side and made it impossible for him to form words. However, he understood everything, and his family came gradually to understand him. Although communication was very difficult it was not completely absent, but Claude could no longer read and write, and this made life especially hard for him. He died in a residential home in Lille on 21 March 2012, one month short of his seventy-seventh birthday.

Many warm obituaries appeared in the press, among which was that of Jean-Claude Raspiengeas in *La Croix* on 22 March:

L'écrivain truculent, l'acteur de composition, le philologue de la langue populaire est mort mercredi 21 mars à Lille, à 77 ans, loin de Lagleygeolle, son village de Corrèze. Il espérait que la mort viendrait le saisir chez lui, à Lagleygeolle, son village natal de Corrèze, « le plus tard possible ».

Le Figaro wrote, also on 22 March:

Notre ami Claude Duneton s'est éteint mercredi 21 mars, à l'âge de 77 ans. Chroniqueur au *Figaro littéraire* depuis une dizaine d'années, sa rubrique *Au plaisir des mots* faisait la joie des lecteurs, qui ne manquaient pas de le lui dire chaque semaine.

Most of the obituaries made the same mistakes, stating his age at death as seventy-seven, when it was in fact seventy-six, and giving the title of his *chronique* as *Au plaisir des mots*, which was the title of his published collection of articles, the *chronique* itself being *Le plaisir des mots*. The latter was a surprising slip on the part of *Le Figaro*, the very publication for which Claude had written for sixteen years, although the reporter unfortunately reduced his time at the newspaper to *une dizaine d'années*. These mistakes are unfortunate and disappointing.

Claude himself had spoken movingly of his end, during an extended interview with Raspiengeas, which the journalist reproduced, in a much fuller obituary of Claude, in *La Croix* on 23 March 2012:

Imaginant sa fin et son repos éternel à Lagleygeolle, en terre occitane, Claude Duneton avait exprimé un souhait : « Que quelqu'un sache encore me regretter d'une parole fraternelle : lou pauré téchou ! » Lou pauré téchou—le pauvre petit...

CHAPTER ONE

FIDÈLES LECTEURS

Ce qui me soutient c'est le courrier, les réactions généralement aimables, serviables, d'un public cultivé qui me propose des réponses et m'apporte quelquefois des précisions essentielles.

—Claude Duneton, *Au plaisir des mots : les meilleures chroniques*, Denoël, 2005, page 12.

All *chroniqueurs du langage* owe much to their readers for their valued contributions to discussions, and Claude is no exception. He dedicates his anthology *À mes fidèles lecteurs* and often mentions them by name. A reader may sometimes challenge the stated opinion of the *chroniqueur*, as was the case in September 2003, when Claude quoted from a letter he had received from a correspondent, Marcel Guibert, from La Varenne-Saint-Hilaire, who had served in the army during the Second World War and wished to provide authentic and convincing information in the quarrel between those affirming the expression *au temps pour moi*, deriving from military terminology, and those supporting the phrase *autant pour moi*, the only acceptable form, according to Claude.

The argument had begun many years earlier, in *Le Figaro littéraire* of 14 September 1995, when Claude had asserted that *au temps* was *la fausse graphie*. In his collection of articles (2005: 15) he writes:

Ce qui est réjouissant dans une chronique de très longue durée c'est...le radotage ! Je veux dire par là les sujets qui reviennent périodiquement, avec la constance de l'idée fixe, particulièrement lorsqu'on a oublié avoir déjà parlé de la chose.

Referring to the articles he had written on the subject since September 1995, he commented, not without humour, on 18 December 2003, that at this rate they ran the risk of creating two camps in France: *les « autantistes » et les « autempestifs »*. He went on to say, making abundantly clear the fact that he disagreed wholeheartedly with the grammarians quoted:

J'ai reçu de fiévreuses protestations à la suite de mes remarques sur l'erreur sémantique qui consiste à vouloir écrire « au temps pour moi » la locution « autant pour moi ». On a brandi le Dictionnaire d'orthographe d'André Jouette, on m'a menacé du Grevisse [...]

On another matter—a further instance of *radotage*—far removed from the military context of the foregoing, though attracting equally belligerent arguments, Claude criticises (2005: 23) the false etymology, *aberration courante*, of the word *croque-mort*. The common misconception is that *le croque-mort*, the undertaker's assistant, was the person whose task it was to bite the big toe of a corpse in order to ensure that the deceased was well and truly dead before nailing down the lid of the coffin.

Claude has certainly dealt with this etymological misunderstanding before, for we read (2005: 127):

D'où vient notre croque-mort ? Le mot apparaît pour la première fois dans l'écrit en 1788. Or, à cette époque, le français familier connaît un autre sens de « croquer » que celui de « broyer avec les dents », un sens parallèle, sans doute issu du même étymon : « croc », qui est « voler, subtiliser, dérober », etc. Cette acception était déjà tout à fait bien établie au XV^e siècle, comme le prouve ce passage des chroniques de Louis XI : « Il aperçut sur le bord de la cuve un très beau diamant qu'elle avait osté de son doigt : si le croqua si souplement qu'il ne fut d'âme aperçu » (in Littré).

Whether or not this paragraph casts any light on the meaning or derivation of *croque-mort* is debatable. Surely Claude does not wish us to see in this compound noun an allusion to body-snatching...

It should be pointed out that the two articles on the subject of *croque-mort* appear in the wrong order in the anthology, destroying the chronology. Returning to the subject, he refers obliquely to the eighteenth-century date previously mentioned:

On nage évidemment en plein délire—vous avez eu connaissance d'un métier pareil au XVIII^e siècle ? Cependant l'explication plaît par son apparence « rationnelle ». Le mot vient d'un vieux sens de croquer qui est « frapper », comme dans « croque-note » ; le croque-mort est celui qui cloue le cercueil, et semble ainsi donner des coups au pauvre mort en partance. C'est une plaisanterie de corbillard !

One senses here both Claude's final word on the subject and his amused incredulity as he writes, his light touch of humour being much in evidence. We note, too, that he supplies information about the verb *croquer* not provided in his earlier *chronique*, although, as he does not wish to shock his

fidèles lecteurs, he refrains from speaking indelicately about the meaning of the verb provided in *Le Dictionnaire comique* of 1752 by Philibert Le Roux, who gives it the sense of « attraper, duper », with the following example borrowed from the Italian theatre:

C'est que la plupart sont des goulus, qui ne veulent de femmes que pour eux : ils ont beau faire, on en *croquera* toujours quelques-unes à leur barbe.

He does not hesitate, however, to speak his mind bluntly here and there, at times with surprising candour, when finding erroneous the opinion of a colleague. In the case under discussion, the etymology of *croque-mort*, Claude tells how his fellow-*chroniqueur*, Jean-Pierre Colignon, having followed all the arguments, had sent him a note to say that he was adhering, *malgré tout*, à « son » *interprétation*... at which Claude, having already dismissed him as being *assez fermé aux arguments intelligents*, compounds the insult by adding, on a note of apparent despair:

Alors comment faire ? Les gens préfèrent le mensonge plutôt que d'avoir à réviser leur opinion.

People are often so strongly attached to what they have been taught, and to their own certainties, that they are reluctant even to consider the possibility of being mistaken. One might argue that there is at least some logic in the belief that the origin of *croque-mort* was to be found in the supposed practice of those who wrapped the bodies of the dead in their shrouds and then bit the big toe of the corpses to verify death. Claude disagrees:

Eh bien non. Ce procédé qui consiste à supposer une pratique, à imaginer une coutume, voire une anecdote, pour tenter d'expliquer l'origine d'un mot, surtout d'une expression, est beaucoup plus fréquent qu'il ne paraît.

He concedes that there is perhaps a natural tendency to fall into such a trap, even among the most sensible and highly educated of people, and continues:

J'ai vu de mes yeux un académicien fameux expliquer la locution « prendre des vessies pour des lanternes » par un fait de société du XVIIe siècle, alors que les prémices de cette expression sont déjà bien attestées dès le XIIIe siècle.

Claude then brings the matter to a close, unequivocally, with a little *humour noir*:

Ajoutons que la société mondaine des années 1780 aimait à jouer bizarrement avec les mots de la mort. Au même moment se créait dans l'entourage du fringant comte d'Artois, futur Charles X, l'expression admirable : « à tombeau ouvert », pour la grande vitesse d'un carrosse. Au fond, l'invention de la guillotine, cinq ou six ans plus tard, fut peut-être l'expression suprême de cette gaieté morbide.

Another of his readers, a certain Monsieur Bazin, has raised the question of the etymology of the informal verb *bossier*, which Claude admits he would never have dreamt of researching had someone not suggested it to him. Eliminating any possible connection with the English “boss”, Claude states that the verb, when used in the sense of *travailler dur*, comes from the Breton and Norman regional expression *bossier du dos*, « *faire le gros dos* ». In the west of France, however, the meaning is *faire des bosses*, as in « *La voiture surchargée bossait de partout* », the latter usage (found in La Varenne) taken from *Robert*. That is not the end of the story, however, since, having once begun to research a word, Claude does not leave his investigation until perfectly satisfied that he has exhausted every etymological possibility. In the case of *bossier* he reports his discovery that at the end of the nineteenth century it meant something entirely different, *en antiphrase* : *rire, bien s’amuser* ! He is intrigued to learn how this could be so. Again his searching bears fruit, for he finds that in the 1850s *une bosse* signified *excès de plaisir ou de débauche*, which in turn derived from an expression used in the late eighteenth century, perhaps arising from the revolutionary period when the people of Paris were starving and *se faire des bosses* or *se donner des bosses* meant having a good meal. Claude considers it possible that this expression alludes to the swollen cheeks of someone with a mouth full of food, one *qui se cale les joues*. He adds humorously: *l’aspect « hamster », si l’on veut* ! In 1799, however, there was a song, Claude discovered, which implied that the rotundity may have referred more to the abdomen than to the cheeks: « *À chaque repas, j’nous f’rons des bosses au ventre* », a ditty reminding one perhaps of the *comptine* popularised by Patrick Topaloff in 1971: « *J’ai bien mangé, j’ai bien bu, j’ai la peau du ventre bien tendue—merci, petit Jésus* ! ».

It is not unusual to find words evolving and eventually assuming a sense very different from their earlier meaning and sometimes directly opposed to their former sense. The verb *se marrer*, for instance, which now means to laugh uproariously, to be in stitches, once signified to be bored. Strangely enough, *se marrer* can still be found with this earlier meaning, when used ironically. A similar case is found in the French adjective *terrible*, which in familiar conversation is—and has been for many decades now—the equivalent of the English informal “fantastic, great, amazing”. Certain