

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY  
OF NEWFOUNDLAND  
OCCASIONAL PAPERS  
IN LINGUISTICS  
Volume 2

*Proceedings of the 33rd Atlantic Provinces Linguistics Association  
Memorial University of Newfoundland*

Sara Johanson, Evan Hazenberg and Suzanne Power  
Editors

Paul De Decker  
Faculty Supervisor

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND  
ST. JOHN'S  
2011

Memorial University of Newfoundland  
Occasional Student Papers in Linguistics  
c/o Department of Linguistics  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, NL Canada A1B 3X9  
<http://www.mun.ca/linguist>

Copyright © 2011



# **Auxiliary Selection in 16th Century French: Imposing Norms in the Face of Language Change**

DOUGLAS L. RIDEOUT

## **1. Introduction**

Auxiliary selection- the choice of *être* or *avoir* - in the conjugation of certain intransitive verbs (i.e. *tomber*) in French has garnered limited attention in the linguistic literature. On the rare occasion when the topic is addressed, authors usually take one of two approaches. The majority of studies on auxiliary selection in French focus on a description of auxiliary use in modern, regional dialects of French, such as Canale *et al.* (1978) on Ontario French, Sankoff and Thibault (1980) on Montreal French, Russo and Roberts (1999) on Vermont French, Willis (2000) on Ottawa-Hull French and Balcom (2008) on New Brunswick Acadian French. The other approach focuses on the “Unaccusative Hypothesis” (Legendre and Sorace 2003, Bentley and Eythorsson 2003). This hypothesis is applied to a cross section of European languages with French sometimes being cited as one language example among others. What is even more rarely addressed, and what is vitally missing in the linguistic literature, is auxiliary selection as seen from a historical perspective.

Historical information on auxiliary selection is not totally nonexistent, but no comprehensive study of the historical nature of auxiliary selection has been done for French. Willis (2000) did address this question briefly, but his main focus was on the contemporary Ottawa-Hull regional dialect so the scope of his historical information is limited. It includes some references for the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but focuses mainly on the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Tailleux (2007) studied auxiliary selection in 18<sup>th</sup> century French, but her study was not a description of auxiliary use in this time period. Her objective, rather, was the application of the “Unaccusative Hypothesis” to 18<sup>th</sup> century French. Other sources of historical information on auxiliary selection in French are found in works dealing with the history of the French language (i.e. Fournier 1998, Tritten 1999). These works do provide some information on auxiliary selection in a historical context, but again this grammatical point, when addressed, remains very limited.

In this article, I propose to start filling in this linguistic gap by looking at auxiliary selection in 16<sup>th</sup> century French. More precisely, I will look at i) the state of auxiliary selection - whether it was stable or in transition, and ii) how auxiliary selection was perceived and analysed by early grammarians in their first efforts to standardise the French language.

## 2. Auxiliary Selection in Contemporary Normative French

In normative French, the conjugation of compound verb forms (*passé composé*, *plus-que-parfait*, etc.) generally require the use of the auxiliary *avoir*, but a limited number of intransitive verbs,<sup>1</sup> or verbs used intransitively,<sup>2</sup> and reflexive verbs<sup>3</sup> require the auxiliary *être*.

- (1) a. Je suis arrivé.  
b. Il est descendu.  
c. Je me suis promené.

However, it is fairly common to encounter the non-standard use of the auxiliary *avoir* with these same verbs, especially in spoken French.

- (2) a. J'ai resté.  
b. J'ai tombé.  
c. J'ai déjà allé.  
d. Je m'ai dit.

In studies on contemporary French dialects (Canale *et al.* 1978, Sankoff and Thibault 1980, etc.), this non-standard use of the auxiliary *avoir* is frequently attested. These studies show that there is a trend in many dialects of French to favour the use of *avoir* where normative French requires the auxiliary *être*, and not the contrary. *Avoir* appears to be replacing *être* in the conjugation of compound verb forms.

## 3. Diachronic Trends

The trend toward the increased use of *avoir* in the conjugation of compound verb forms in French is not restricted to the contemporary language (cf. Leeman-Bouix 1994: 111, Brunot 1936: 472-473, Nyrop 1930: 212). According to Grevisse (1993: 1179), certain intransitive verbs that take *être* in standard French are often conjugated with *avoir*. He states that this is due to archaic literary forms or the imitation of popular local vernaculars. The use of the term 'archaic literary forms' leads us to believe that the use of the auxiliary *avoir* was fairly frequent in days of yore, an observation also confirmed by both Fournier and Dauzat. Working on Classical French (17<sup>th</sup> century French), Natalie Fournier observes the use of both auxiliaries when conjugating such intransitive verbs as *apparaître*, *cesser*, *choir*, *courir*, *croître*, *déchoir*, *demeurer*, *descendre*, *disparaître*, *entrer*, *monter*, *partir*, *rentrer*, *rester*, *retourner*, *sortir* and *tomber* (1998: 256-260). Dauzat (1930: 447) also describes this trend, saying:

---

<sup>1</sup> i.e. *Aller*, *Arriver*, *Devenir*, *Entrer*, *Mourir*, *Naître*, *Partir*, *Rester*, *Tomber*, *Venir*, *Revenir*.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. *Descendre*, *Monter*, *Passer*, *Rentrer*, *Retourner*, *Sortir*.

<sup>3</sup> i.e. *Se promener*.

“Mais très anciennement une tendance [...] a entraîné les intransitifs à prendre l’auxiliaire *avoir*. Le mouvement a atteint les réfléchis dès le Moyen Âge, toutefois à titre exceptionnel [...]; la réaction, surtout littéraire l’a enrayé dans cette direction, mais la langue populaire actuelle est revenue à la charge.”

This observation merits two comments. First, the trend to prefer *avoir* to *être* appears to have existed from early on in the history of French. Second, there would appear to be a conscious counter-movement, especially in the literary realm, to prevent the spread of the use of *avoir* and maintain the use of *être*.

This diachronic trend toward *avoir* is not restricted to the French language, but is part of a larger Romance language trend. The *être / avoir* alternation still exists or has existed in other Romance languages and the preference for *avoir* is clearly attested. Beyond French, modern Italian, Occitan, Sardinian and Rheto-Romance still use both *être* and *avoir* when conjugating certain intransitive verbs.

Other Romance languages, such as Catalan, Portuguese, Spanish, Romanian as well as Picard and Wallon have lost the alternation for intransitive verbs. For Spanish, the loss of the use of *ser* ‘être’ in the conjugation of intransitive verbs occurred toward the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Green 1988: 102, Vincent 1988: 57). Penny (2000) attributes this loss to dialect mixing and analogical levelling during the *Reconquista* in 15<sup>th</sup> century Spain. Auger (2003), in her description of the Picard language, states explicitly that one characteristic that distinguishes Picard from French is the general use of *avoir* for the conjugation of intransitive verbs as well as for reflexive verbs. Hendschel (2001) notes a similar trend for Wallon where the auxiliary *avu* ‘avoir’ is used in all compound verb forms, including with verbs for which standard French requires *être*. He adds that the use of the auxiliary *esse* ‘être’ is found at times, but that such a construction is a Gallicism - an influence of French - and is generally considered an error (2001).

Diachronically, for Romance languages that have maintained the *être / avoir* alternation, *avoir* is the auxiliary of choice in non-standard varieties. For the other Romance languages that have lost this alternation, it is always in favour of the use of *avoir*. In non-standard varieties of French, we observe a preference for the use of *avoir*. If we consider Picard and Wallon as regional dialects of French rather than independent languages, we see that the use of *avoir* has been generalised, or almost totally generalised, as the auxiliary of choice for the conjugation of intransitive and reflexive / pronominal verbs.

## 4.0 The 16<sup>th</sup> Century

### 4.1 French in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century

The beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century signals a major turning point in the history and evolution of the French language. The language starts the 16<sup>th</sup> Century radically changed compared to the structure it had in the Middle Ages, but without yet achieving its modern form. During this century the vernacular, especially Francien - the variety of French spoken in the Île-de-France region - takes on more and more the role of a national language, replacing Latin in most, if not all, administrative, scientific, legal and literary texts. It is also the period where we see the first efforts to codify and standardise the language, as well as the publication of the first grammars of the French language.

The grammars published during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century can be classified in one of two categories. Due to the growing importance of France in Europe, the language was expanding outside her borders and many foreign nationals and the elite were interested in learning French. Thus, many grammars were written and published to teach the language. John Palsgrave (1530a) and Gilles du Wes (1532), for example, both produced grammars of the French language to help them teach the language at the English court. Other authors took more of an academic approach when writing their grammars, arguing and debating what constitutes proper French and what models of French should be used in the standardisation process (i.e. Meigret 1550 and Ramus 1562, 1572).

French grammar during the Renaissance is marked by two significant factors. The first factor is regional and social variation. At this time period, the language varied widely, not only from one region to another, but also between social classes within the same region. With such linguistic variation, one would expect also to see, and one indeed does see, variation in the *être / avoir* alternation (See §5.1). The second factor is the lack of agreement on what constitutes proper French (i.e. the norm) and how to establish it. This debate will be carried on through the century and well into the following century before being settled, though not necessarily always being accepted (See §5.2).

For a diversified language still in transition, creating a standard posed some monumental challenges.

#### 4.2 16<sup>th</sup> Century Grammarians

For the Renaissance period, 15 grammars, written by twelve different authors, were analysed. They are:

John Palsgrave (1530) *Lesclarcissement de la langue françoise*.

Jacques Dubois or Sylvius (1531) *Grammatica Latino-Gallica*.

Gilles du Wes (1532) *An Introductione for to lerne to rede, to pronounce, and speke Frenche trewly*.

Louis Meigret (1550) *Le tretté de la grammere françoese*.

Jean Pillot (1550, 1561) *Gallicae Linguae Institutio: Latino Sermones Conscripta*.

Robert Estienne (1557) *Traicté de la grammaire françoise*.

Gabriel Meurier (1557) *La grammaire françoise*.

Jean Garnier (1558) *Institutio Gallicae Linguae*.

Gérard du Vivier (1566) *Grammaire françoise* et (1568) *Briefve institution de la langue françoise expliquée en aleman*.

Pierre de la Ramée or Ramus (1562) *Gramere* et (1572) *Grammaire*.

Jean Bosquet (1586) *Elemens ou institutions de la langue françoise*.

Antoine Cauchie (1586) *Grammaire française*.

In the analysis, I attempt to ascertain two points: the model of French the author used for their grammar (regional and / or social) and their treatment of the *être / avoir* alternation in the conjugation of intransitive verbs.

## 5. Grammatical Analysis

### 5.1 Regional and Social Variation

The most obvious contrast between regional varieties of French during this period comes when comparing the grammars of John Palsgrave (1530a) and Gilles Du Wes (1532). Not only were both grammars published two years apart, but the authors knew each other personally and both taught French as a second language at the English court at the same time.

Palsgrave was an English scholar who had pursued his studies in science in Paris where he also learnt French (*HLF* II: 126). In this grammar, he states his preference for the French spoken between the Seine and the Loire. At the same time, given his position as the tutor of Mary, the sister of Henry VIII of England, accompanying both her as well as Henry VIII on several sojourns at the Parisian Court, Palsgrave would have needed “to acquire a command of French that was not only grammatically correct and lexically comprehensive, but also socially and situationally adequate and appropriate” (Stein 1997: 347). Palsgrave was aware of dialectal differences in French, but dismissed teaching them, saying that teaching such variation would only confuse the learner (Stein 1997: 113, 116 and 123).

The main critique of Palsgrave’s model of French comes from F. Brunot who observes that Palsgrave’s French is based too much on the written form, on books of which several were already considered old at that time (*HLF* II: 126). Consequently, one must wonder how closely his variety resembled the spoken language at that time.

Gilles du Wes was Palsgrave’s rival at the Court of Henry VIII and was the tutor of the king’s daughter, Mary Tudor. What distinguishes du Wes from his rival is that du Wes was a native speaker of French from the Picardy region. His grammar was thus based on his “*connaissance naturelle*” (Demaizière 1983: 127), not on literary sources. In other words, for du Wes, actual usage took precedence.

By comparing these two grammars, one observes several dichotomies characteristic of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There is regional dichotomy (i.e. Parisian region versus the Picardy region), social dichotomy (i.e. general usage versus socially acceptable usage) and code dichotomy (i.e. the written versus the spoken form). The impact of these dichotomies is also seen with regards to the *être / avoir* alternation (see §6) for Palsgrave recognizes the alternation while du Wes does not.



For du Wes, there is no alternation; his dialect of French, from the Picardy region, had already generalised the use of the auxiliary *avoir* for all intransitive and reflexive / pronominal verbs.<sup>4</sup>

Another area where regional variation becomes apparent is the attacks launched against certain period grammarians based on regional origins. These critiques emanate mainly from Henri and Robert Estienne. Robert Estienne criticizes Meigret for his reformed spelling and Jacques Dubois for his picardisms which, according to him, inhibit learners from acquiring mastery of the French language (1557: 3). Henri Estienne criticizes Garnier as one of the authors of whom one must be wary since he is not from the Île-de-France region, having thus a French that is unique to himself (Cullière in Garnier 1558: xxiv). Henri Estienne gives examples of reprehensible French from such authors. He does not identify these ‘authors to avoid,’ but according to Louis Clément (cited by Demaizière in Cauchie 1586: 20), they are Jean Pillot, Jean Garnier, Gérard du Vivier and Antoine Cauchie. In fact, Robert Estienne is not only the first person to publish a grammatical treatise explicitly identifying the Parisian region as the only legitimate variety of French, but he also promotes, as will be seen in the following section, a specific social milieu as representing proper French (Trudeau 1992: 86).

Regional and social variation can be further attested in the auxiliary used to conjugate the verb *être*. The verb *être*, according to standard contemporary French, is conjugated with *avoir*, however this verb is at times conjugated with itself in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (*HLF* II: 365). Gougenheim (1973: 120) seconds this observation and cites examples from authors such as Nicolas de Troyes, Noël du Fail and Maurice Scève. For Nicolas de Troyes and Noël du Fail, Gougenheim describes this particular usage as a construction of *la langue populaire*, particularly in the more southern parts of France.<sup>5</sup> As for Maurice Scève, Gougenheim ascribes this use of the auxiliary *être* to Italian; it is an Italianism.<sup>6</sup>

Grammarians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Garnier 1558, Bosquet 1586, Cauchie 1586) also noted and tried to correct this usage. These grammarians recommended avoiding this error, but their comments are vague as to whom they are directed. One must ask if this error was frequent among non-native speakers learning the language or if it was a popular, local variety that is not recognized as belonging to the newly emerging norm.

## 5.2 Models of Usage

The debate over a norm for the French language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century turns around two major dichotomies: i) a *modèle savant* or academic model versus a spontaneous norm and ii) general usage model versus approved usage.

The major proponent of an academic model is Dubois (1531). His model becomes clearly visible through his goal of restoring the French language to its original form (Trudeau 1992: 31), a pure state somewhere between Latin and the mosaic of dialects. Dubois thus favours the cross-dialectal characteristics of French that most resemble Latin. Meigret (1550) and de la Ramée (1562, 1572) could also be classified as proposing an academic model, but from a different point

---

<sup>4</sup> Auger (2003) and Henschel (2001) also note the generalisation of *avoir* in the contemporary language(s) spoken in this region (see § 3.0).

<sup>5</sup> Dauzat (1930: 300), states the *être* is conjugated with itself in the languages of Midi (Provençal, Italian, Gascon, etc.).

<sup>6</sup> The use of *essere* in Italian is more frequent than in French, and Italians conjugate *essere* with itself.

of view. Dubois tries to relate French back to Latin, but Meigret and de la Ramée believe in the independence of French from Latin, that the classical languages - Latin and Greek - have no authority over French. They do, however, promote abstract models based on common usage. Meigret describes his model as a *langage courtisan*, which is not geographically associated with any particular region nor social class, and he acknowledges and accepts a certain level of dialectal variation. De la Ramée calls his model *l'usage vrai* which is an abstract model of common usage, but a usage that is not corrupted by scholars. Contrary to Meigret, de la Ramée does locate his model in the Parisian region, but does not associate it with any social context or class.

Palsgrave (1530a) represents the other end of the dichotomy, choosing and promoting a specific dialect of French as his model and ignoring, or rejecting, dialectal diversity. As seen above, Palsgrave identifies the French spoken between the Seine and the Loire as the most acceptable variety, to which he does tend to favour certain social constraints. R. Estienne (1557) is another author who opts for a spontaneous norm, but whose model is much more precise. He not only favours French as it is spoken in Paris, but the French spoken in certain social circles (see below).

The other dichotomy is common usage versus approved usage. As discussed above, Dubois, Meigret and de la Ramée all incarnate a preference for 'common usage' to various degrees, even if their 'common usage' models are somewhat abstract and academic in nature. The strongest proponent, however, of real common usage is du Wes (1532), who based his grammar on his *connaissance naturelle*. This common usage is highlighted in his use of auxiliary verbs where *avoir* has been generalised as the only auxiliary verb used in compound verb forms.

As early as 1530, in Palsgrave's grammar, one sees the initial stages of a growing importance given to an approved usage. Palsgrave is aware of the importance given to the French spoken in the Île-de-France region, and within this region to a certain socially accepted variety of French, the variety he later tries to teach in his grammar. And with Pillot (1550, 1561), the teaching of Parisian French, especially that of the Court, becomes even more important. When describing two different verb forms, Pillot suggests that learners can learn when to use each form by listening to those with good knowledge of the language rather than through rules (1561: 103-104). If Pillot bases his teaching on actual usage, it is not just any usage. According to Brunot, Pillot strictly promotes the French used at Court (*HLF* II: 147). It is, however, with R. Estienne (1557) that an author comes out explicitly, for the first time, in favour of a specifically approved social variety of French. For R. Estienne, it is royal and state institutions in Paris and 'certain' authors that set the norm.

Over the course of the century, the scope of this debate will be narrowed and a specific model of French will start to emerge and to be recognized as the norm. This new model will be a spontaneous and socially approved norm. It will be based on the social and political elite of Paris, and diverging quite significantly from the language of the common people outside this limited social circle. This model will come to dominate the grammars of the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and will be confirmed and crowned supreme in 1647 with the publication of Vaugelas' *Remarques sur la langue françois*.

### **5.3 Latin Grammatical Model and Verb Conjugation**

With the emancipation of the French language in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the only model of grammatical analysis available was the model for Classical Latin. It is therefore not surprising that period grammarians would requisition and apply it to French. The use, however, of the Latin model on French is problematic, and two major problems become clearly visible when attempting to deal with the *être / avoir* alternation.

The first problem deals with the mask that a Latin model applies to the French language. With such a mask, the true nature of French grammar is often hidden or deformed and the use of *être* and *avoir* in the conjugation of compound verb forms is a good example. Since this grammatical point did not exist in Classical Latin, when analysing French using a Latin model, a grammarian's attention would not necessarily have been drawn to this new and different grammatical behaviour. Grammarians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century were focused more on other areas of the French language, such as the discrepancy between spelling and pronunciation. The dominance of certain 'burning issues' in the language assigns other interesting grammatical issues, like auxiliary selection in the conjugation of compound verb forms, to the background, if not to total oblivion.

In the analytical model for Latin, verbs are classified as active, passive, neuter or deponent. Using this model for French then sends grammarians of French looking for the same sort of verbs, whether they exist or not in French. Here lies the second problem - the inability to clearly distinguish grammatical notions such as voice from the concept of conjugation. In Classical Latin, the passive voice is expressed morphologically through the verb's desinence (*amo* 'I love', *amor*, 'I am loved'). This morphological characteristic of the Latin verb gives rise to the concept of a *passive verb* which is conjugated. In French, the passive voice is expressed syntactically (*être* + past participle), not through the verb's morphology. Although many 16<sup>th</sup> century grammarians (i.e. Palsgrave 1530a: 348 and 508, Dubois 1531: 331 and 350) acknowledge that there is no 'passive verb' as such in French, the French passive voice is still described and illustrated as a **conjugation** of the verb. R. Estienne (1557), for example, qualifies the *être* + past participle structure as a passive verb, and the detailed conjugation that he provides for the passive verb *aimé* clearly shows that he perceives it as a conjugated verb (78-82). Bosquet (1586), also, treats the passive voice as a conjugation of the verb, stating that "[I]on ne pourra faillir de **conjuguer** toutes sortes de verbes personnels, tant actifs, que passifs, avec la discrétion, et faveur de ces deux auxiliaires [*être* et *avoir*]" (98) (emphasis added) and sets out the full conjugation of the passive verb *aimé* (108-110).

Over the course of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, grammatical voice starts to be distinguished from the conjugation of the verb. From a grammatical concept that is morphologically marked on the verb in Classical Latin, it will become a syntactic structure independent of conjugation in French. Yet, during this time period, the grammatical voice is still closely linked to the conjugation of the verb. If the passive voice is expressed with the auxiliary *être*, this would lead to confusion when one speaks of auxiliary selection in the **conjugation** of verbs in 16<sup>th</sup> century grammars.

#### 5.4 Verb Structure and Transitivity

Another characteristic of Renaissance French is flexibility in a verb's transitivity; a single verb is often used transitively, intransitively and pronominally. Such movement is not unknown in contemporary French, but was much more frequent in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and this had an influence on auxiliary selection in compound verb forms.

The syntactic structure for verbs in the 16<sup>th</sup> century had not yet been solidly established and when a verb is at times used transitively and at other times intransitively, a difference in meaning is often “*délicate à saisir*” (HLF II: 436). What is important is the recurrence of this flexibility and its impact on auxiliary selection.

The auxiliary *avoir* is always used with transitive verbs, but when the verb is used in an intransitive context, *être* is sometimes attested. The change in auxiliary, in a specific context, sometimes leads to confusion. Dauzat (1930: 447) states that:

“[I]orsqu’un même verbe s’emploie tantôt transitivement, tantôt intransitivement, les deux constructions *il a monté la côte* et *il est monté sur la côte* arrivent à se contaminer dans la langue populaire pour donner *il a monté*.”

The use of both auxiliaries without any clear nuance in meaning leads to a possible contamination and ends in uncertainty or a hesitation in auxiliary selection.

One sees a similar situation with verbs that are used both intransitively and pronominally. At the end of the Middle Age (14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries), there was a tendency to add the pronoun *se* to intransitive verbs (HLF II: 435). This led to an increased number of reflexive verbs in French. The trend slowed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and, at some point, stopped. For certain verbs, the trend even reversed, but not all pronominal verbs regained their intransitive form (HLF II: 435). When an intransitive verb, conjugated with *avoir*, begins to be used pronominally, is it conjugated with *être* or does it maintain the use of *avoir*? Likewise, if a pronominal verb regains its intransitive form, will it still be conjugated with the same auxiliary as in its pronominal form?

Incertitude is also seen when a verb has a transitive and pronominal use. Transitive verbs are conjugated with *avoir* while pronominal verbs take *être*. Yet, the use of *avoir* in compound verb forms of pronominal verbs is attested, such as *Je m’ai lavé* (Nyrop: 1930, 212-213). This type of example is not rare and continues to be found in compound verb forms in popular contemporary French (Kukenheim 1967: 65). However, after the Middle Ages, this use of *avoir* disappeared from the written, literary language (Nyrop 1930: 215).

The loss of the use of *avoir* with pronominal verbs in ‘literary’ language leads one to assume that limiting this particular usage came from an external, non-linguistic influence on the language; a conscious decision to favour one auxiliary over the other.

## 5.5 Reflexive Pronoun *SE* and Auxiliary Selection

Another characteristic of French in the 16<sup>th</sup> century affecting auxiliary selection is the syntactic placing of the reflexive pronoun *se*. Like other aspects of French during this period, flexibility is common and variation is encountered as illustrated in the following example:

- (3) a. Il veut se lever.  
b. Il se veut lever.

*Vouloir* is normally conjugated with *avoir*, but when the reflexive pronoun is positioned in front of *vouloir*, either auxiliary could be found. Gougenheim (1973: 120) notes this particular behaviour and provides these examples from 16<sup>th</sup> century French:

- (4) a. Il s'est voulu lever.  
 b. Il s'a voulu lever.

The apparent ability of one verb 'to impose' a specific auxiliary on another verb is not restricted to reflexive / pronominal verbs. When the verbs *pouvoir*, *vouloir* and *oser* are used in a compound verb form, they are often found conjugated with the preferred auxiliary of the infinitive that follows. Gougenheim (1973: 120) identifies this phenomenon, saying that "ils **peuvent** prendre cet auxiliaire [*être*]" (emphasis added) and he illustrates his comments with an example taken from the literary work *Garganuta*:

- (5) Depuis ce temps caphart quiconques n'est auzé entrer en mes terres.

Two points are worth noting here. First, it is the infinitive that dictates the auxiliary to be used. Second, the infinitive, as Gougenheim shows, does not always nor does it regularly select the auxiliary.

## 6. Être and Avoir Alternation in 16<sup>th</sup> Century French

### 6.1 Verbs Conjugated with *Avoir*

The verbs that form their compound verb forms with *avoir* are almost always identified as *verbes actifs*. The definition of *verbe actif* however varies from author to author. Dubois, Meigret, de la Ramée and Cauchie define it as a transitive verb with a direct object complement whereas Palsgrave and Bosquet define it as the active voice and contrast it with the *verbe passif* (the passive voice).

The definition of this term will have an impact on auxiliary selection. If the term is used to identify a transitive verb with a direct object complement, then the link between this type of verb and the auxiliary *avoir* is accurate without exception. However, if the term is defined in relation to grammatical voice, as being the active voice, then the link between the active verb and the auxiliary *avoir* is weakened due to the many exceptions (i.e. reflexive / pronominal verbs, certain intransitive verbs).

### 6.2 Verbs Conjugated with *Être*

Grammars from the 16<sup>th</sup> century associate the use of the auxiliary *être* with three different types of verbs: reflexive / pronominal verbs, *verbes passifs* and *verbes neutres*.

With the exception of du Wes who generalised the use of the auxiliary *avoir* for all compound verb forms, period authors recognize the use of *être* when conjugating reflexive / pronominal verbs. Nevertheless, despite this official recognition, *avoir* is sometimes used in the conjugation of this type of verb. This use, though, is stigmatised as erroneous, dialectal or belonging to 'popular language'.

The auxiliary *être* is also associated with the *verbe passif*, or the passive voice. All grammarians, when addressing the issue of the passive in French, concur that *être* is the only auxiliary allowed.

The term *verbe neutre* is used by many, but not all, authors. Those authors who treat the *verbe actif* as the active voice (i.e. Palsgrave) do not recognize a *verbe neutre*, whereas those authors who define the *verbe actif* as a transitive verb with a direct object complement (i.e. Dubois) define the *verbe neutre* as an intransitive verb. Through the examples authors give for *verbes neutres*, there is an association with the auxiliary *être*, but whether all *verbes neutres* are conjugated with *être*, or only a sub-class of them, is not clearly expressed.

### 6.3 Verbs Conjugated with Both Auxiliaries

Amongst all the 16<sup>th</sup> century grammarians consulted, only two make reference to verbs being conjugated with both auxiliaries. Palsgrave (1530b) identifies *advenir* as a verb that is conjugated with both auxiliaries, but specifies that auxiliary selection is structurally based: when used in an impersonal structure, it is conjugated with *avoir*, but *être* when it signifies ‘passion’ (LII V<sup>o</sup> - LIII I<sup>o</sup>). There is another verb, *venir*, which Palsgrave also conjugates with both auxiliaries in his lists of verbs: *Iay venu en avant, Je suis venu en hault*. Since Palsgrave is not a native speaker, we cannot be sure that this verb is conjugated with both auxiliaries or if Palsgrave made an error.

Meigret (1550) is the other grammarian to identify a verb which can be conjugated with both auxiliaries. In fact, he is the first grammarian to explicitly point out an *être / avoir* alternation for a verb. Preferring current usage over scholarly usage, Meigret often accepts variation in grammatical forms. For the verb *passer*, he notes that usage allows for the use of both auxiliaries (*J’ai passé* and *Je suis passé*) without any distinction or nuance of meaning between the two structures (HLF II 141).

## 7. Conclusion

There are several conclusions / observations that can be made concerning auxiliary selection in 16<sup>th</sup> century French.

The language in this period was still unstable and changing fast, with a wide range of regional and social variation. This instability and variation is reflected not only in the critiques levelled against certain grammarians for their regionalisms (i.e. picardisms), but also in the *être / avoir* alternation. French is not exempt from the Romance language trend of replacing *être* with *avoir* in compound verb forms, and within 16<sup>th</sup> century French, some dialects were further along in this linguistic change than others. While the *être / avoir* alternation still existed in the Parisian dialect, the alternation had been lost in the north and north-eastern regions. In these dialects, *avoir* had already been generalised to become the only auxiliary used in compound verb forms.

In social terms, the 16<sup>th</sup> century also marks the growing importance of the Parisian region, and in the search for a norm, not only does the Parisian dialect start to dominate even more other French dialects, but a socio-politico-literary class starts to set the standard for the Parisian region. One consequence of this trend is a wider and wider discrepancy between the emerging standard and how the masses actually used the language. We have seen this discrepancy in auxiliary selection where a counter movement in the literary realm took efforts to stop certain linguistic

variations from gaining a foothold in the language. Among these stigmatised grammatical forms is the use of *avoir* in the conjugation of reflexive / pronominal verbs. Being a socially based norm, a degree of conscious effort seems to have been made to control and shape what the norm was. On the question of auxiliary verb selection in compound verb forms, given the social movements of the time period, what other non-linguistic influences were there. Did Italian and Gascon, two Romance languages with a more frequent use of the auxiliary *être*, play any role? More research on the social context is needed.

In the efforts of period grammarians to understand and to fix the rules of the language, especially for the *être* / *avoir* alternation, we have seen how they were hindered in their understanding due to their use of an analytical model based on Classical Latin and an inability to clearly distinguish grammatical voice from the conjugation of verbs. Nevertheless, over the century, there was a growing awareness of the role of auxiliaries, especially in the conjugation of a sub-group of intransitive verbs.

Despite the establishment of a norm, the trend toward replacing *être* with *avoir* will continue into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, while even more effort will be made to prevent people from conjugating verbs like *tomber* with *avoir*.

## References

- AUGER, JULIE. 2003. The development of a literary standard: the case of Picard in Vimeu-Ponthieu, France. *When Languages Collide*, ed. Brian D. Joseph *et al.*, 141-164. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- BALCOM, PATRICIA. 2008. On the learning of auxiliary use in the referential variety by speakers of New Brunswick Acadian French. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics* 53.1: 7-34.
- BENTLEY, DELIA and THORHALLUR EYTHORSSON. 2003. Auxiliary selection and the semantics of unaccusativity. *Lingua* 114: 447-471.
- BOSQUET, JEAN. 1586. *Elemens ou institutions de la langue française*. Annotated by Colette Demaizière. Paris: Champion (2005).
- BRUNOT, FERDINAND. 1936. *La pensée et la langue*. 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Paris: Masson.
- BRUNOT, FERDINAND. 1967. *Histoire de la langue française: le XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Vol. II. Paris: Libraire Armand Colin.
- CANALE, MICHAEL, RAYMOND MOUGEON and MONIQUE BÉLANGER. 1978. Analogical levelling of the auxiliary *être* in Ontarian French. *Contemporary Studies in Romance Linguistics*, ed. Margarita Suñer, 41-61. Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- CAUCHIE, ANTOINE. 1586. *Grammaire française*. Translation and notes by Colette Demaizière. Paris: H. Champion (2001).
- DAUZAT, ALBERT. 1930. *Histoire de la langue française*. Paris: Payot.
- DEMAIZIÈRE, COLETTE. 1983. *La grammaire française au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: les grammairiens Picards*. V.1 and 2. Paris: Didier Érudition.
- DU VIVIER, GÉRARD. 1566. *Grammaire française*. Translation and notes by Brigitte Hébert. Paris: H. Champion (2006).
- DU VIVIER, GÉRARD. 1568. *Briefve institution de la langue française expliquée en aleman*. Translation and notes by Brigitte Hébert. Paris: H. Champion (2006).
- DU WES, GILES. 1532. *An Introductione for to learne, to rede, to pronounce and to speke French trewly*. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints (1972).
- DUBOIS, JACQUES. 1531. *Grammatica Latino-Gallica*. Translation and notes by Colette Demaizière. Paris: H. Champion (1998).

- ESTIENNE, ROBERT. 1557. *Traicté de la grammaire françoise*. Annotated by Colette Demaizière. Paris: H. Champion (2003).
- FOURNIER, NATALIE. 1998. *Grammaire du français classique*. Paris: Belin.
- GARNIER, JEAN. 1558. *Institutio Gallicae Linguae*. Introduction, translation and notes by Alain Cullière. Paris: H. Champion (2006).
- GOUGENHEIM, GEORGES. 1973. *Grammaire de la langue du seizième siècle*. Paris: A. et J. Picard.
- GREEN, JOHN N.. 1988. Spanish. *The Romance Languages*. Ed. Martin Harris and Nigel Vincent. London: Croom Helm.
- GREVISSE, MAURICE. 1993. *Le bon usage: grammaire française*. 13<sup>th</sup> edition. Revised by André Goosse. Paris: Duculot.
- HENDSCHEL, LORINT. 2001. *Grammaire wallonne en ligne*. Retrieved November 1, 2009, from <http://users.skynet.be/lorint/croejh/node75.html>.
- KUKENHEIM, LOUIS. 1967. *Grammaire historique de la langue française*. Leiden: Universitaire Pers Leiden.
- LA RAMÉE, PIERRE DE. 1562. *Gramere*. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints (1972).
- LA RAMÉE, PIERRE DE. 1572. *Grammaire*. Annotated by Colette Demaizière. Paris: H. Champion.
- LEEMAN-BOUIX, DANIELLE. 1994. *Grammaire du verbe français, des forms au sens: modes, aspects, temps, auxiliaries*. Paris: Nathan.
- LEGENBRE, GÉRALDINE and ANTONELLA SORACE. 2003 Auxiliaires et intransitivité en français et dans les langues romanes. *Les langues romanes: problèmes de la phrase simple*, ed. Danièle Godard, 185-233. CNRS Éditions.
- MEIGRET, LOUIS. 1550. *Le tretté de la grammaire françoise*. Meston: The Scolar Press (1969).
- MEURIER, GABRIEL. 1557. *La grammaire françoise: contenant plusieurs belles reigles propres et necessaires pour ceulx qui desirent apprendre ladicte langue*. Annotated by Colette Demaizière. Paris: H. Champion.
- NYROP, KRISTOFFER. 1930. *Grammaire historique de la langue française*. Tome 6. Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, Nordisk Forlag.
- PALSGRAVE, JOHN. 1530a. *Lesclarcissement de la langue françoise*. Translation and notes by Susan Baddeley. Paris: H. Champion (2003).
- PALSGRAVE, JOHN. 1530b. *Lesclarcissement de la langue françoise*. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints (1972).
- PENNY, RALPH. 2000. *Variation and Change in Spanish*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- PILLOT, JEAN. 1550. *Gallicae Linguae Institutio: latino sermone conscripta*. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints (1972).
- PILLOT, JEAN. 1561. *Institution de la langue française = Gallicae Linguae Institutio*. Introduction, translation and notes by Bernard Colombat. Paris: H. Champion (2003).
- RUSSO, MARIJKE and JULIE ROBERTS. 1999. Linguistic change in endangered dialects: the case of alternation between 'avoir' and être in Vermont French. *Language Variation and Change* 11: 311-345. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- SANKOFF, G. and P. THIBAUT. 1980. The alternance between the auxiliaries *avoir* and *être* in Montréal French. *The Social Life of Languages*, ed. By G. Sankoff, 311-345. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- STEIN, GABRIELE. 1997. *John Palsgrave as Renaissance Linguist: A Pioneer in Vernacular Language description*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- TAILLEUR, SANDRINE. 2007. *Avoir et Être: une ancienne rivalité? Étude de la sélection de l'auxiliaire de parfait en français classique*. M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa.
- TRITTER, JEAN-LOUIS. 1999. *Histoire de la langue française*. Paris: Ellipses
- TRUDEAU, DANIELLE. 1992. *Les inventeurs du bon usage (1529-1647)*. Paris: Édition de minuit.
- VAUGELAS, CLAUDE FAVRE DE. 1647. *Remarques sur la langue françoise*. Geneva: Slatkine Reprints (2000).
- VINCENT, NIGEL. 1988. Latin. *The Romance Languages*. Ed. Martin Harris and Nigel Vincent. London: Croom Helm.



WILLIS, LAUREN A. 2000. *Être ou ne plus être: Auxiliary Alternation in Ottawa-Hull French*. M.A. thesis, University of Ottawa.