COMMON MISTAKES IN OUR FRENCH TEXTBOOKS

I. ON SO-CALLED DIRECT-METHOD EXERCISES

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DIRECT-METHOD exercises have become a fixture in the newer French grammars as well as in readers and editions of texts. To what extent they are a habit of the classroom is problematical. Students generally report that all the books they have read in high school had direct-method exercises; many, however, admit that their teacher never paid any attention to the questions in French listed at the end of a play or novel. It would seem, therefore, that one certain effect of the institution has been to increase the shortage of printing paper. Yet there are other teachers, and many of them, who make excellent use of the questions in French, and the results they obtain amply justify the institution. Whether used or not, the direct-method exercise is a fact, a printed fact, and as such it is fit subject for a critical examination. The present article will occasionally quote a grammar or "French Course," but in the main it considers the editions of well known French texts.

In the first place, having attained the dignity of a necessary feature, the direct-method exercise is liable to share the fate of all things necessary. It has the endorsement of the superintendent and the ambitious teacher. The publisher demands it of the editor because the other fellows are selling it; it makes a good "talking point" for the salesman. The "trade" insists on having it, and the trade gets it in large quantities. As a result, it is largely done in a perfunctory, haphazard, careless, slipshod way. The editor, too often, complies with the letter, rather than the spirit, of the requirement; his heart is not in it; he lacks enthusiasm, he even lacks sincerity. Too often he draws up a list of monotonous, uninteresting questions that sometimes make one wonder if the editor uses his own book: "Qui est. . .? Qui fait. . .? Que fait-il? Où. . .? Quand. . .?" To be sure, such questions are legitimate, they are useful and necessary. They compel the student to read his text and read it over until he understands

it in a way. But is there no other method, even with beginners, of reading a text to advantage? A well known New York teacher has been insisting for some time that the student change the tenses, and the persons, and pronouns, and possessives. The latest editor of *Colomba* offers the following suggestion: "Vous êtes la femme Madeleine Pietri; racontez ce que vous avez vu, ce que vous avez entendu, ce que vous avez fait." The practice should be more common. How many teachers remember that a text can be acted and that to act a text is the best way of understanding it? How many make their questions "direct" to the point where they become a part and expression of the pupil's own life? Let us take the ever popular *Abbé Constantin*. The thing and the rage now is the "interesting" book. Why not the interesting question? It is possible to frame a question that will direct one student to say to the other: "Quand vous aurez vingt ans, on demandera votre main pour un jeune exilé qui. . . On demandera votre main pour un jeune prince qui. . . On demandera votre main. . ." nearly a whole page with many grammatical problems. If the passage has been memorized, the exercise will embody the best features of correct teaching. (Chapter V.)

There is fancy and zest in the preceding suggestion. The following passage, taken from the same novel (Chap. III,) is both shorter and more in line with real conditions: "Ma soeur et moi, nous parlons français, avec un peu d'accent, sans doute, et avec certaines formules américaines, mais enfin de manière à dire à peu près tout ce que nous voulons dire." The sentence has several idioms and can be turned in many ways: "Ma soeur et ma cousine parlent. . . Vous parlez. . . Mon grand-père et ma grand-mère, qui sont morts, parlaient. . . Si vous continuez à bien travailler, vous parlerez. . . Si j'avais la bonne fortune de passer une année en France, je parlerais. . . Si nous pouvions aller passer six mois seulement en France, nous parlerions. . ." The picture of Jean's simple tastes can be utilized in the same effective manner: "Il s'était laissé conduire, une dizaine de fois peut-être. . ." (Chap. IV.) Many other passages, in fact, practically every sequence of verbs, can be dramatized to great advantage, and the pupils will learn their verbs and pronouns.

Some readers may object that in doing this work we would drift too far away from our programs, that we have the regents'

examinations, and the like. The answer is that we are supposed to teach French and that the more French we teach the better our classes will be, that no official regulation fixes a maximum limit that we must not pass, whereas many books set the minimum limit very low. Returning to the examination of these books, can we discover any indication as to the nature and purposes of the direct-method exercises? Plainly, do we know what we are doing when we use the books? Do their authors know what they are doing? Specifically, is the exercise merely a device intended to help the teacher in checking up the work of his class? Should it be graded, or should a text of medium difficulty be made the subject of the same sort of exercises as an elementary reader or an advanced text? And how should the questions be asked? Orally, by the teacher, or read by the pupil? How should they be answered? Orally, or in writing? From the open book or from memory? In the elaborate language of the French author, or in the natural phrases of a familiar conversation? This is not very clear in the minds of certain people. We hear much in prefaces and directions about "training the ear of the student"; we are told that a given set of stories "may be made the basis for practically endless exercises in conversation." Conversation is the word, and all over the country French classes are conversing. But what is the practice? "*Répétez les questions des juges et les réponses de Jeanne. Donnez les questions des maçons et les réponses de Camille. Répétez ce que le plus âgé des maçons dit à Camille. Décrivez la Corse dans les mots du capitaine Ellis. Décrivez le jeune militaire qu'ils trouvèrent sur le port. Racontez ce que le colonel essaya de donner au jeune homme et les deux avis qu'il en reçut. Décrivez la jeune femme qui entra dans la ville le lendemain, montée sur un cheval de petite taille. Décrivez l'enterrement de la femme du colonel della Rebbia.*" The student is called upon to "quote" from five to fifteen lines of his text. Is that "conversation"? Many questions are not asked in conversational style. The following are long-winded, circumstantial and guarded like the questions put by a lawyer: "Quel pays avait ennuyé la fille du colonel et avait le tort immense de n'avoir pas tous les gibiers possibles? Quelles objections fit le colonel pour irriter l'heureux caprice (ô Musset!) de miss Lydia? De quel sublime poète Orso lit-il un chant après que miss Lydia eut essayé plusieurs sujets

de conversation? Combien d'années se passèrent de cette sorte avant qu'Orso revînt dans son pays pour vendre ses propriétés et vivre après sur le continent?" Why not ask simple questions, questions that a man can pronounce and a child can understand? Why not something on the following order: Qu'est-ce que le colonel Nevil? Où est-il? Il y a longtemps? Il est seul? Où est sa femme? D'où viennent-ils? Et l'Italie leur a beaucoup plu? Non? pourquoi pas? Et où vont-ils maintenant?" These questions are too simple? Try them, and when your students answer them correctly and readily, ask three or four questions at a time and demand that they be answered in a single sentence. But you must always be simple in conversation. You cannot speak as Mérimée writes. Mérimée did not speak as he wrote. The text of *Colomba* was not intended, and in its wording it cannot be used, as a basis for conversation.

And how about the tenses used in these "conversations"? French practice, as regards uses of the past definite, is so poorly presented in many elementary grammars that it would take a long chapter to explain the question. It will be enough to say here, but it must be said with the utmost emphasis, that the French never use the past definite in a conversational way. The same is true of the past anterior, whose auxiliary is in the past definite. There is no need of making a trip to France to verify this statement; we have in printed form several hundred contemporary French comedies; many of these plays were considered good enough to open the doors of the *Académie*; we can read play after play, and whole plays will not offer a single instance of a past definite; the few, very few, past definites that occur here or there all represent something else than plain conversation. On the other hand, when telling a story, the Frenchman will make the affair more vivid by using the present indicative instead of the compound past indefinite. In spite of the misgivings that still prevail in some quarters, a few grammars express a saner view on the subject of the uses of the past definite. At least the view appears in their theory and "rules"; but how difficult it is to break away from certain habits is shown in their exercises. One grammar, for instance, teaches on one page that "in conversational style the past indefinite is used instead of the past definite"; and the opposite page has an exercise entitled "Conversation" and consisting of

six sentences of which four are in the past definite, with no past indefinite at all. A few authors of direct-method exercises whose books are chiefly intended for junior schools, make systematic use of the present indicative and past indefinite, and ignore the past definite entirely; their tone is plainly conversational; they play a simple game and they know the rules of the game. Others, who write for more advanced students, mingle the past definite and past indefinite, and that is legitimate when we consider both the nature of the text on which they base their exercises and the tone of these exercises; but those "who know" never state in their prefaces that the text is followed by a set of "exercises in conversation." Their attitude is correct; their reserve and silence are, perhaps, too correct. In view of present conditions, these authors would confer a favor upon many teachers by telling the lesser element who are also using their books that a succession of questions and answers does not necessarily constitute a conversation, and that any one who wishes to use their books for practice in conversation will have to make over every question that included a past definite. Finally, too many authors have neither the wisdom nor the reserve of those of the second group; their voices are emphatic and loud in favor of conversation and helping the teacher with endless suggestions, while at the same time they introduce droves of past definites and past anteriors and other noble characters, fallen from the grandeur that was theirs in history or fiction, still dressed in their splendid rags, and now running amuck against rhetorical convention and breaking every law of syntax. The mad whirl is too much for even so strong a head as Colomba; the personification of true Corsican tradition is converted to English nationality: "Que fit *miss* Colomba en bonne catholique avant de manger?"

Plainly speaking, the direct-method exercise is not incompatible with the use of the past definite, or the past anterior, or any literary form of expression. It has more possibilities than some of its blind admirers can imagine. When practised in the proper spirit, it trains the ear, it teaches pronunciation, it connects the student's eye knowledge with his ear knowledge, it is the best cure of the dumb blackboard system that teaches a language as algebra is taught, it can teach a whole side of the language not ordinarily found in literary works, it is

a speedy way of teaching composition, and since a language is a system of sounds, the direct method is the proper method for teaching a language. The direct-method exercise explains French in French; it begins an *explication*; its full scope is that of the *explication française*. Call it oral composition, call it *explication*, call it what you will; but if you simply churn over the sentences of a French novel, do not call it conversation.

A very small number of new books begin to widen the scope of their exercises. They ask questions about the notes. They ought to be commended. For the notes are the first instruments designed to facilitate the approach to the text. On the notes the editor spends some of his most arduous work and he expects the student to read and assimilate them. And how about the biography of the author? Is it ever made the subject of any questions in the exercises? This indifference for the author, and for the literary value of his work as well, is not calculated to dispel the strange misgivings that are so common on the subject of French literature. In spite of the ever rising flood of cheap, incorrect readers, we still read and some people still edit that pure masterpiece *Colomba*. Yet thousands of pupils read the book every school day in the year without ever suspecting that Mérimée's French and the French of a certain "interesting" reader (with over 100 grammatical errors) are not of the same quality. If we ask questions to make sure that the student will read the text, why not make equally sure, and in the same manner, that he will read the notes and the introduction? This may necessitate a recasting of a number of prefaces and introductions, which also would be a benefit. A series of questions could begin in the following mood: "Quel est l'auteur de ce livre? C'est un auteur vivant? Il y a longtemps qu'il est mort? En quelle année l'ouvrage a-t-il paru? Cela fait combien de temps? C'était avant ou après la guerre de l'Indépendance? Avant ou après la guerre de Sécession? C'est une édition française que nous avons là? Comment s'appelle le monsieur qui l'a annotée? Et ce monsieur est professeur, n'est-ce pas? Où? Quelle est la maison qui édite le livre? Savez-vous pourquoi j'ai choisi cette édition plutôt qu'une autre? Combien a-t-elle de pages? Est-elle complète ou abrégée? Combien lisons-nous de pages par jour? Où en sommes-nous? Combien nous faudra-t-il pour finir l'ouvrage? Est-ce un roman ou une oeuvre his-

torique? Le lexique donne tous les mots faciles, n'est-ce pas? Y-a-t-il dans la leçon d'aujourd'hui des passages difficiles que les notes n'expliquent pas?" Also remember that a French play or novel is built on well defined lines; it has its logical succession of *exposition*, *noeud*, *péripiéties*, *épisodes*, *crise* or *catastrophe*, and *dénouement*. The reproach is often heard that French works of literature are too much ruled by a rigid technique, that they are artificial. Whatever the merits of the criticism from a literary standpoint, this quality of French works is an advantage in the classroom; they are clear, and we should take advantage of the technique when we explain them. Grammars have review lessons, we can also pause at the proper places and ask: "Combien de personnages connaissons-nous jusqu'ici? Quels sont ceux dont nous venons encore de faire la connaissance? Récapitulons tous les efforts qu'a faits Colomba pour obliger Orso à venger son père. Et lui, où en est-il? Ce qui reste en lui du Français. Ce qui a reparu du Corse. Quels sont les deux partis qui divisent Pietranera? Les partisans des della Rebbia. Ceux des Barricini. Et les deux bandits? A quel moment prennent-ils parti? Pour qui? Pourquoi? Quelle différence Mérimée met-il entre le caractère de Brandolaccio et celui de Castriconi? Orso est amoureux de miss Nevil, n'est-ce pas? Depuis quand? Elle le sait? Où et comment l'apprend-elle? Et elle, elle aime Orso? Depuis quand le sait-elle? Qu'est-ce qu'elle aime en lui? Et quel est le rôle du colonel Nevil dans tout cela? Le rôle du préfet?" Is it unusual to find students who have read half a dozen French novels and do not know the French word for "novel"? A certain class in Advanced French had spent about forty hours of actual class work on a volume of selections (277 pages) from Michelet's *Histoire de France*. At the end of the forty hours they had read less than thirty pages, but they were told that they had studied Michelet long enough and that the book was to be discarded for another. In an examination it was shown that they did not know who Michelet was and that most of them were convinced that the 277 pages constituted the whole of his *Histoire de France*. The work complete fills 24 to 28 volumes.

So much for the nature and scope of direct-method exercises. It is with great regret that we add that questions are not always asked in an intelligent way and that too many questions are not

asked in correct French. Too often the editor cuts up his text into a number of slices, then singles out a clause or set of clauses and *in the words* of the text frames a question. The student, on his part must first "catch" the question, then guess to what part of the text it refers, and finally proceed to frame *with the words of the text* a sentence that will answer the question. This mechanical way of preserving the wording of the text leads to strange questions. A passage borrowed from the *Revue bleue* states: "Depuis un siècle, la date de l'ouverture des vacances obéit à une évolution aussi régulière que celle de l'heure du dîner, mais en sens inverse: l'heure du dîner recule toujours, tandis que les vacances commencent toujours plus tôt." We might ask: "Les vacances ont toujours commencé à la même date? Il y a cent ans? Il y a soixante ans? Et aujourd'hui? C'est une véritable évolution, n'est-ce pas?" Instead, the authors ask: "*La date de l'ouverture des vacances* à quoi obéit-elle?" In a book "edited for intensive study" the student is asked: "Qu'y a-t-il dans un départ?" He has but one guess, for Mérimée wrote: "Il y a toujours quelque chose de solennel dans un départ, même quand on se quitte pour peu de temps." Compare the following questions and their texts:

Text: Il n'y a aucun membre ou aucun organe qu'on puisse conserver toujours sain.

Question: Qu'est-ce qu'on ne peut pas conserver toujours sain?

Text: On jouit surtout de la littérature française du XIX^e siècle.

Question: De quoi est-ce qu'on jouit surtout?

Text: Il y avait dans la voix et dans l'attitude de Colomba quelque chose d'imposant et de terrible.

Question: Qu'y avait-il dans sa voix?

Text: Pas un mot de reproche ne s'échappa de ses lèvres. . .

Question: Qu'est-ce qui ne s'échappa pas de ses lèvres?

The direct method presupposes, of course, that the editor understands his text. This is not always the case. Take, for instance, this sentence from Mérimée's *Colomba*: "Leurs fusils, crassés à force de tirer, ne portaient plus, mais les soldats étaient formés sur six rangs, la baïonnette au nez des chevaux, on eût dit un mur." One editor wants to know: "Que faisaient les soldats quand leurs fusils crassés ne portaient plus?" Truly, we don't

know. But the danger is that some student will think he knows. He may read "étaient formés" to mean that "the officers then drew up their men in a new formation," whereas for Mérimée they already were in that formation. Another book has this to say about Auvergne: "Le plateau granitique du centre de la France possède aussi un sol bien pauvre, et les districts montagneux de ce plateau subissent depuis longtemps un exode *temporaire* d'hommes cherchant un emploi dans les centres peuplés." The question on this slightly alters the text, unfortunately not for the better: "Pourquoi y a-t-il *de temps en temps* un exode d'hommes du plateau central?" *Temporaire* means that the exodus is not permanent; the emigrants return to their native province; *de temps en temps* makes the exodus take place at intervals. So there is such a thing, after all, as not being slavish enough to the text.

We must repeat the text, not slavishly, but intelligently and correctly. Intelligent repetition is the fundamental method of all teaching, especially of language teaching. A language is a habit, after all; we have learned our native language by hearing it, *en écoutant chanter les cigales*, and by repeating what we heard. Drills will do what "rules" cannot do, and it would be gratifying, indeed, to find more drill work in some direct-method books. Take the prepositions, for instance. It is more and more the practice of handbooks to give lists of verbs or adjectives that demand this or that preposition before an infinitive. Thus *couvrir* requires *de*, while its English equivalent takes "with." The most effective way to anchor the group *couvert de* in the student's mind is to drill and repeat: "De quoi mon bureau est-il couvert? Et votre pupitre? Cette lampe? Ce livre? Cette lettre? Le parquet de votre chambre? La table de la salle à manger? Les paquets qui viennent de chez l'épicier? Le corps des animaux? Les oiseaux? La terre en hiver? Les arbres en été? Les oreilles des demoiselles?" Instead, an elementary reader teaches this:

Text: ". il insista *pour* le mener jusqu'à sa porte."

Question: "Qu'est-ce qu'il insista *de* faire?"

That question does not repeat enough. On another page the same author repeats too much:

Text: "Jamais on n'avait vu rien de pareil."

Question: "Qu'est-ce qu'on n'avait jamais rien vu?"

The following questions are taken from 14 different books published within the last five or six years:

1. Qui sont venus après les oiseaux?
2. Pourquoi est Paris moins propice à un tel drame?
3. Où était toute la famille réunie?
4. Combien de ces fleuves se jettent-ils dans l'Atlantique?
5. Les soldats indigènes prouvent-ils être bons soldats?
6. Écrivez au tableau les numéros cardinaux de vingt à trente.
7. Que Colomba supplia-t-elle le colonel de faire?
8. Avec quels mots le colonel souhaite-t-il bonsoir à M. della Rebbia?
9. Cherchez des adjectifs, des noms, ou des verbes des mots dans cette histoire.
10. En quelle direction viendrez-vous pour aller à l'école?
11. Quel homme et quels animaux y avaient-ils dans la rue?
12. Qu'est-ce qu'il s'écria? Quand cela s'écria-t-il?
13. Qu'est-ce qui lui échappa de dire?
14. Sont-ils sûrs que ce qu'ils achètent vaille?

The last question appears in the "Key" to a composition book; the others are genuine direct-method exercises and are signed by 15 different authors. It would be necessary to tell a rather long story to explain exactly what is wrong with each question. The first mistake, however, has become so common lately that a few more words will, perhaps, be welcome.

The *qui* question has its proper place in the more elementary courses; even there, it may be overdone. Students will soon call it a "cinch" question and a cynic might state that the number of *qui* questions in a book of intermediate or advanced grade varies inversely as the book's pedagogic value. The easy question easily leads to mistakes. It is bound to lead to endless mistakes in the answers. If I ask: "Qui est-ce qui a écrit *les Misérables*?" the answer is not: "Hugo les a écrits"; but: "*C'est Hugo qui les a écrits.*" This *qui*? calls for an emphatic answer, a statement that might well precede every set of direct-method exercises. The answer to *qui*? must be intelligent and correct (Cf. "Qui vous a donné votre première leçon de français?—C'est vous qui me l'avez donnée." A practical suggestion for verb drill.) The *qui*? itself must be asked correctly. When Loti writes: "Ensuite passèrent des sauterelles," the question cannot be: "Qui sont venus après les oiseaux?" The "rule" may never have been stated in a grammar, but interrogative *qui* (subject) is followed by a third person *singular*. The following questions are not correct:

1. Qui viennent au-devant des voyageurs au besoin?
2. Qui tendirent les mains pour recevoir les aumônes?
3. Qui ont mis les précieuses conquêtes en grave péril?
4. Qui bâtirent le monastère?
5. Qui s'étaient mis d'accord pour ne pas se faire la guerre?
6. Qui sont surprises?
7. Qu'est-ce qui se montraient déjà?

The questions represent seven different textbooks published within five or six years and signed by eight different authors. They are not exceptions, for one book makes the mistake nine times in a few pages. Another makes the mistake three times on one page, a bad example of repetition. It should be noted that Loti's grasshoppers cannot be dignified with a personal *qui*; grammatical etiquette classes "sauterelles" with "things"; the question should be: "Et *qu'est-ce qui* est venu après cela?" The neuter *qu'est-ce qui* also must be followed by a singular; the seventh question should be: "Qu'est-ce qui se montrait déjà?" It remained for an editor of dear old *abbé Constantin* to mistake the objective *que* for the subjective *qu'est-ce qui*, and to make the objective *que* the subject of a third person plural: "Deux grosses larmes se détachèrent des yeux du prêtre."—"Que se détachèrent des yeux du prêtre?"

A young man, a graduate of a college that used to have a good French department, admitted that while teaching French last year in a high school he had used one of the books quoted in this article. When asked if he had not noticed the mistakes, he answered that he had had his doubts at times, but that comparing his modest self with the name of the publisher and the name and official connections of the author, he could not think of questioning the printed statements of the book. He had unlearned some of the French he had been taught in college, he had learned and he had taught a new kind of French.

The years 1918 and 1919 each saw the publication of a direct-method grammar whose French title is not correct. One of the books has from sixty to seventy-five expressions that should be corrected; the other has between 120 and 130 bad spots. Both use French at times to teach French grammar and conduct a class in French. Ungrammatical grammar and improper classroom phrases are common enough in our newer textbooks. The enumeration and correction of this class of errors will require a special article.

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