XI.—ON FRENCH HOMONYMS. By PROF. CASSAL.

IN Etymological researches, the learner is forcibly struck by the vast amount of very common Latin words which did not pass into French. Thus, for the substantives—

urbs	we have	ville	humerus	„	épaule
pagus	„	canton or village	vir	„	homme
vicus	„	village	mulier	„	femme
lucus	„	bois, forêt	puer	„	enfant
lignum	„	bois	ovis	„	brebis
os, oris	„	bouche	felis	„	chat
gena	„	joue	fama	„	renommée
crus	„	jambe	ira	„	colère
calx	„	talon	culpa	„	faute, etc.

For the adjectives—

pulcher	„	beau	felix	„	heureux
parvus	„	petit	ultimus	„	dernier
magnus	„	grand	amens	„	fou, etc.

For the verbs—

ferre	„	porter	docere	„	enseigner
fieri	„	devenir	vocare	„	appeler
tangere	„	toucher	odisse	„	haïr
frangere	„	briser	temnere	„	mépriser
torrere	„	rôtir	loqui	„	parler
timere	„	craindre	ire	„	aller, etc.
capere	„	prendre			

A no less great number of words have undergone changes, for which there does not seem to exist an adequate reason. Thus we might, at first sight, be tempted to consider as capricious: the diphthongation of the radical vowel in “fièvre, vierge, fier, hier, je viens, je tiens;” the hardly justifiable diminutival suffix in “soleil, taureau, oiseau, tableau, sommeil, nouveau;” the suffix in “semblable (*similis*

gives *semble*), âge (*ætas* gives *été*), neige (*nix* gives *nef*);” and the still deeper alteration seen in “poids = pensum, refuser = recusare, sage = sapius, selon = secundum, pèlerin = peregrinus, orme = ulmus, craindre = tremere, etc.”

Now, there are cases where the change has been made, or the word lost, so obviously because some other word had already the same form, that it occurred naturally to me that, when words have not been accepted in our language, or have entered it only upon condition of a change of garb, or have fallen into disuse, it must be due mainly to the existence of some *homonym*; so that it might be stated, as a rule, “that *homonymy* is one of the principal causes of the loss of words, and of the extraordinary alterations they undergo.”¹ Thus—

pulcher,	would have given	poulre,	pouldre,	poudre,	like	pulves
aetas,	„	été,	„	aestas	&	status
nix,	„	nef,	„	navis		
docere,	„	duire,	„	ducere		
capere,	„	choir,	„	cadere		
temnere,	„	tendre,	„	tendere		
tangere	„	taindre	„	tingere	(teindre).	

An enquiry into the ways in which the French language treated homonyms, and especially into the means it used to avoid them, will justify the proposed rule.

Homonyms, according to French grammarians, are of three kinds—(1) words whose spelling and pronunciation are the same, as “somme = summa and somnus, louer = laudare and locare; (2) words whose spelling is the same, but the pronunciation of which differs, as “fier (to confide), fier (ferus); content, ils content; vis (a screw, vitis), je vis (vivo, vidi);” (3) words, the spelling of which is different, but which are pronounced alike, as “chêne, chaîne; ancre, encre; poids (pensum), poix (pix), pois (pisum).”

We call *paronyms*, words which are neither spelled nor pronounced absolutely alike, but the pronunciation of which has a certain similarity, which often leads foreigners to

¹ I have just been reminded of the fact that Diez, in his remarkable work “Grammatik der Romanischen Sprachen,” has already anticipated this theory on the effects of homonymy.

misunderstand them. Such are “fondre, fonder ; recouvrer, recouvrir ; croissant, croisant.” They offer great difficulties, especially where their only difference consists in a long or short vowel, as is “voix, voie ; foi, foie ; roux, roue ; hais, haie.”

We have no homonyms which differ only in the place of the tonic accents, as “gállant and gallánt ; to cónjure and to conjúre ; gebét and gébet ;” since such homonyms as “négligent, ils négligent ; couvent, ils couvent” are clearly not examples of this sort.

The cause of the production of many homonyms must be sought in our peculiar way of making our derivations. It lies principally in two well-known laws of etymology, viz. (1) the falling out of a middle mute consonant, or law of contraction, as we see it in “dire, faire, nue, naïf (*nativus*), cruel ;” (2) the law which causes every ending which has no tonic accent to become mute, as in “múndus, témplum, rósa” (undoubtedly also “ámo, ámas, ámant”), or to disappear altogether, as in “punctum, point ; passus, pas ; venio, je viens.”

Instances of the law of contraction producing homonyms—

louer = laudare = locare	moule = modulus = musculus
je vis = vivo = vidi	
je crois = credo = cresco	
cru = crudus = creditus	
	meule = moles or mola = métula
	pis = pectus = pejus

Instances of the law of mute ending producing homonyms—

somme = somnus = summa	palais = palatium = palatum
neuf = novus = novem	
	aune = alnus = ulna

The evil thus produced, increased by the development of the acceptance of words and the change of meaning, thence resulting, necessitated measures to arrest the confusion. The efforts made by the French language with this view deserve to be noticed, since the same means must have been used by other languages also.

Homonyms have, as a rule, *not* been preserved. Those which survive may be classed under three heads. They have been tolerated :—

1. When they were not *homographic*, i.e., when they were similar only in sound, not in spelling. This preservation seems to prove that their pronunciation also was, in the old language, different. Such are “pris, prix; ancre, encre; ris, riz; pois, poids, poix; graisse, Grèce; vis, vice; pouls, pou; sein, seing, sain, saint, ceint; je selle, je scelle, je cèle; sans, sang, cent; vert, ver, vers, verre; cor, corps, etc.”

2. When the gender established a distinction, as in “somme, *m.* = somnus, *f.* = summa; livre, *m.* = liber, *f.* = libra; souris, *m.* = (sub)risus, *f.* = sorex; aune, *m.* = alnus (masc. in French, like all names of trees, though fem. in Latin), *f.* = ulna; poêle, *m.* = pallium, *f.* = patella; vase, *m.* = vasum, *f.* = *Ags* vase (ooze). This is especially the case when one of the nouns designates a person and the other an inanimate object, as “page, = *παίδιον* and pagina.”

3. When they belonged to different parts of speech, in which case a change was evidently considered uncalled for. Such are: “Pis = pectus, pejus; été = status, aestas; vaux = vallis, valles, valeo; puis = possum, postea; vers = versus, (a verse), versus (towards); ris = risus, rideo; sens = sensus, sentio; neuf = novus, novem; pêcher = to fish, the peach-tree; présent = present, a present.” Homonyms of this kind are extremely numerous in French as well as in English: *cf.* the denominatives “je fronde, j’oxyde, je glace, je force, etc.,” and the abstract or concrete substantives borrowed from verbs, as “demande, commande,” etc., etc.

It happened, sometimes, that two of the above-mentioned circumstances protected the homonyms. Ex.: “Voix, je vois; faix, je fais; doigt, il doit; cour, court.”

Besides those three sorts of homonyms which have a right to exist, we have a few, a very few, which nothing helps to distinguish, and which constitute a real nuisance. “Palais = palatum, palatium; meule = metula, moles; marne = margula, Matrona; police = politia, polyptychon (or plural polyptycha); pêche = persica, piscatio; louer = locare, laudare; je vis = vivo, vidi; je suis = sum, sequor; je crois = cresco, credo; nous crûmes = credidimus, crevimus; je pus = potui, pastus sum.”

The means used to avoid other homonyms are of various kinds, the first being evidently the non-acceptation of one of the words, sometimes of both (ex. : “vis, vir, ver ; ros, rus ; ruber, robur”) in the language, or their falling into disuse. Thus the old perfect of “traire,” “je traïs = traxi” has disappeared before “je trahis,” from “trahir.” Likewise—

je pus (paître),	has given way before	je pus (pouvoir) ;
frisant (frire),	„	frisant (friser) ;
houle = olla,	„	houle = swell ;
rein = remus,	„	rein = renes, um ;
veau = vel, }	„	veau = vitellus ;
vau = vallis, }		
voire = verum,	„	voir = videre ;
mur = mus, muris,	„	mur = murus ;
heur = augurium,	„	heure = hora.

Some of the words thus rejected in French have remained in English: “Ost (pron. *o*) = host,” which was used as late as La Fontaine, has disappeared before “os,” “bone.”

In the same way as homonyms have been preserved, because they were of different genders, we have preserved some others, by making them change purposely their original gender. Thus—

le voile = velum ; la voile (= vela, orum) sail ;
 le poste = positum ; la poste, the post-office ;
 le solde = solidum ; la solde, a soldier's pay ;
 le mode = modus ; la mode = fashion ;
 le greffe = graphium ; la greffe = grafting ;
 le moule = modulus ; la moule = musculus ;
 le crêpe = crape ; la crêpe, a sort of cake or fritter ;
 la manche = manica ; le manche = handle ;
 la mémoire = memoria ; le mémoire = a bill ;
 une aigle = aquila (the ensign) ; un aigle = eagle (the bird).

But by far the greatest number of homonyms have been altered in their form. The changes to which they were subjected, and which are of the same kind as those made in words which have the same origin (as “entier, intègre,” both from “integer ;” “poison, potion from potio ;” “carbone, charbon, from carbo”) must be classified, I think, under the following heads :—

(a.) The Diphthongation of the radical vowel :

vierge = virgo, to distinguish it from	verge = virga ;
fierté = feritas, „	(La) Ferté = firmitas ;
fier = ferus, „	fer = ferrum ;
fièvre = febris, „	fèvre = faber ;
hier = heri, „	hère = herus ;
rien = rem, „	rein = renes, um ;
siècle = saeculum, „	seigle = secale ;
pois = pisum, „	pis = pectus, pejus ;
seul = solus, „	sol = solum ;
muid = modius, „	mode = modus ;
je dois = debeo, „	dès = de+ex ; des = de les ;
je siérai = fut. of seoir „	je serai ;
je viendrai = fut. of venir „	je vendrai ;
je tiendrai = fut. of tenir „	je tendrai.

(b.) The use of a diminutival suffix :

soleil = sol[iculus], stands for sol, which has the meaning solum ;	
rameau = ram[ell]us, „	rame, „ remus ;
lentille = lent[illa], „	lente, „ lens, lendis ;
sommeil = somn[icul]us „	son (or somme) sonus ;
oreille = auricula, „	or (“aure, ore, eure”) aurum.

Sometimes it happens that both homonyms avoid each other, so to say, by both taking the diminutival suffix. Thus “avis, apis,” which would have produced the same form, give respectively “oiseau = aviculus, for avicula,” “abeille = apicula ;” “corbis, corvus,” gave in the same way “corbeille = corbicula,” “corbeau = corvellus.”

(c.) The use of other suffixes of various kinds. Ex. :

peuplier = pōpulus, to distinguish it from	peuple = pōpulus ;
airain = aes, aeris, „	air = aer

(d.) The use of a prefix :

(?) de-main = manè,	to avoid main = manus ;
(?) em-peser, from poix, pix, „	peser = pensare ;
(?) ra-doter, from Flem. doten, „	doter = dotare.

(e.) Epenthesis (insertion of an euphonic consonant) as in “gendre = gener ; genre = genus.”

(f.) Preservation of the sign of the nominative as in “fils

=filius, lacs = laqueus," to distinguish them from "fil = flum, lac = lacus."

(g.) Lastly, certain grammatical irregularities may, perhaps, be explained by the same cause, as well as some of the singular changes which puzzle the etymologist :

bals, the plural of bal, avoids baux, the plural of bail, and also "beaux;"
 mails, ,, mail, ,, maux, ,, mal;
 régals, ,, régäl, ,, régäux, ,, régäl = regalis;
 pèlerin = peregrinus, avoids Perrin = Petrinus;
 ri (for ris), past. partic. of rire, avoids ris = laughter;
 nui (for nuit), ,, nuire, ,, nuit = night;
 sage = sapius, should be "sache" (cf. sachant = sapiens, proche = propius), which is also given by "sapiam;"
 poids = pensum, should be "pois:" the *d* of "pondus" seems to have been accepted to avoid similarity with "pois = pisum;"
 serge = serica, should be "série," like "series;"
 fois = vicem, vices, should be "vice," like "vitium;"
 peigne = pecten, should be "peine," like "poena;"
 sabre should be "sable," were it not for "sable = sabulum;"
 selon = secundum, stands, perhaps, also for "seon, seond," and has undergone the change to avoid *second*.