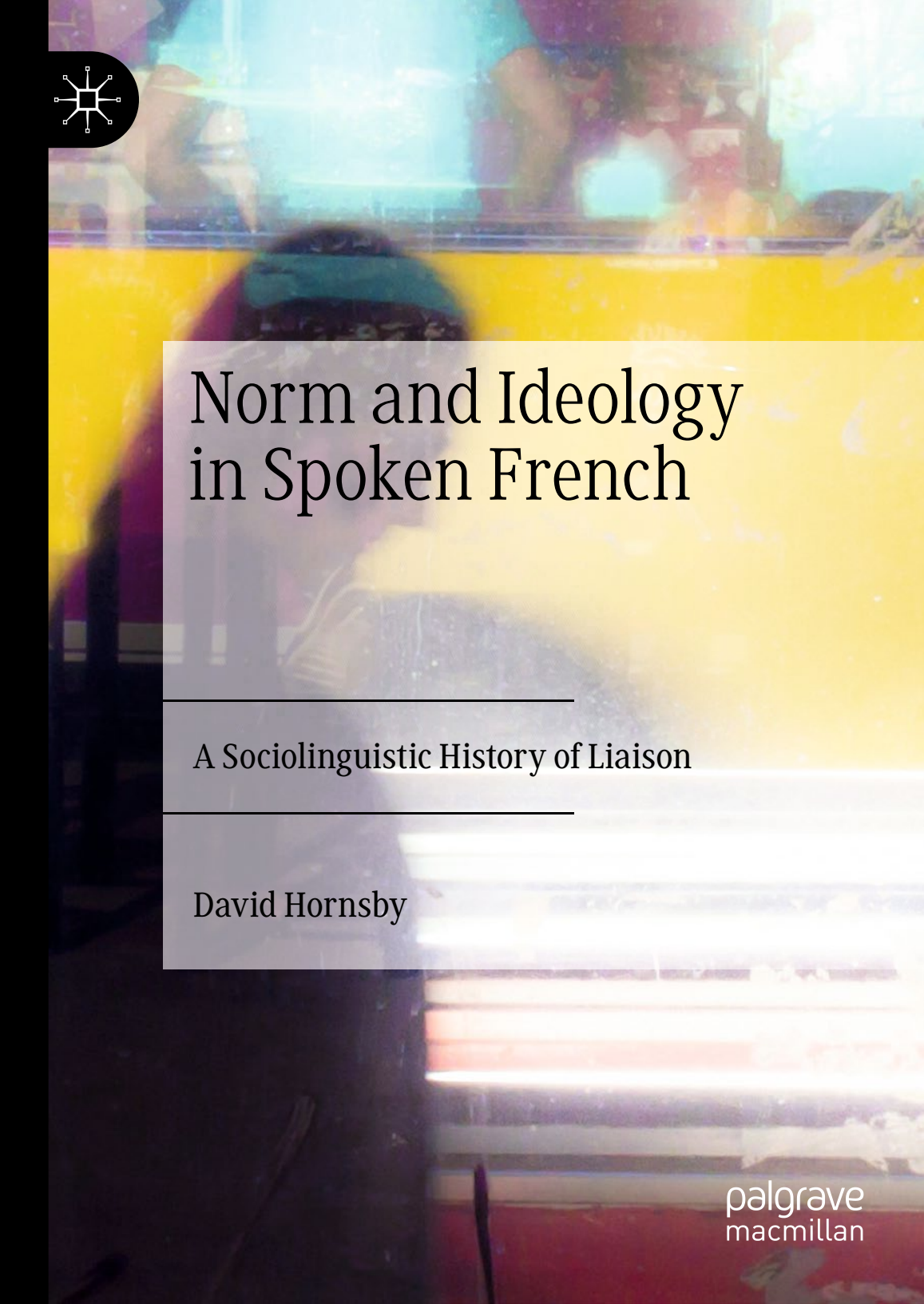

Norm and Ideology in Spoken French

A Sociolinguistic History of Liaison

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For Elizabeth and Meli

Preface

While one might question the wisdom of adding to the already copious literature on liaison in French, I was drawn to the subject as a sociolinguist for three reasons. Firstly, as the title suggests, a variable phenomenon subject to highly complex prescriptive rules, and mastered only by a minority of speakers, offered an ideal case study for Anthony Kroch's ideological model of variation and change, as outlined in Part I. Secondly, although it is generally accepted that liaison occurs most frequently in scripted styles, the relationship between liaison and literacy remained under-explored, and called for a diachronic examination as provided in Part II. Finally, liaison provides a striking example of French sociolinguistic data failing to fit established theoretical models. This *exception française* has become something of an 'elephant in the room': frequently observed, but rarely addressed or discussed. I attempt to shed some light on this broader question in Parts III and IV.

Completion of this book would not have been possible without the help and advice I have been given at various stages. I am grateful to the British Academy for Small Grant SG40599, which greatly facilitated transcription and data analysis for the 'Four Cities' project, and to the University of Kent Modern Languages Research Committee for financial support during the fieldwork period. A University of Kent internal research award was enormously helpful in the latter stages of manuscript preparation, and I should also like warmly to thank three Kent colleagues,

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I am indebted to Tom Baldwin, Tony Bex, Zoe Boughton, Aidan Coveney, Jacques Durand, Julien Eychenne, Bernard Laks, Ian Mackenzie, Elissa Pustka, Peter Trudgill and especially Nigel Armstrong for advice and comment on earlier drafts; any remaining errors and misunderstandings are entirely my own. The debt this book owes more widely to the *Phonologie du Français Contemporain* project, launched by Jacques Durand, Bernard Laks and Chantal Lyche, will be evident from even a cursory look at these pages. I am grateful to Rhiannon Chappell, Rachel Dickinson and Emma Furderer at the University of Kent Templeman Library, all of whom went out of their way to help me locate obscure but invaluable source material. Elizabeth Hornsby, Jayne Hornsby, Marie-Louise Jackson, Martin Kane, Jon Kasstan and David Stalley all kindly proofread draft chapters and made perceptive and helpful comments. Thanks are due too to the Language and Linguistics editorial team at Palgrave Macmillan, and particularly to Alice Green for her unfailing support. Finally, thank you to my long-suffering family for their forbearance as the project came to fruition, and to Amelia Holmes, who has waited a very long time to see this book in print.

Canterbury, UK David Hornsby

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Part I

Models

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Ideology and Language Change

1.1 Kroch's Model of Language Variation

In a seminal article published in *Language and Society* in 1978, Anthony Kroch appeared to question one of the core tenets of linguistics. The axiom 'Linguistics is descriptive, not prescriptive' had become as much a *raison d'être* as a guiding principle for a discipline determined to challenge language-related prejudice. Linguists generally, and sociolinguists in particular, had been at pains to stress the equality of all varieties, and reject folk-linguistic stereotypes associated with regionally or socially defined speaker groups. So when Kroch observed, citing evidence from Labov's famous (1966) New York City survey, that 'prestige dialects require special attention to speech' and 'non-prestige dialects tend to be articulatorily more economical than the prestige dialect' (1978: 19–20), he was acutely aware that his views could be characterised as reviving prescriptive stereotypes of 'lazy' working-class usage.

As he made clear, however, Kroch's intention was not in any way to be judgmental or prescriptive. In claiming that 'working-class speech is more susceptible to the processes of phonetic conditioning than the prestige dialect' (p.18), Kroch was simply arguing that language change has an ideological component which, however inconvenient it might be, could no longer be ignored. While working-class speech follows 'natural' phonetic conditioning processes,[1] higher status groups, he claimed, actively

[1] For a definition of 'natural' he cites principles of 'naturalness' presented by Miller (1972) and Stampe (1972); on 'naturalness' in non-standard varieties see also Anderwald (2011).

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resist these same processes in order to maintain social distinction (1978: 30):

> Our position, as stated earlier, is that prestige dialects resist phonetically motivated change and inherent variation because prestige speakers seek to mark themselves off as distinct from the common people and because inhibiting phonetic processes is an obvious way to do this. Thus, we are claiming that there is a particular ideological motivation at the origin of social dialect variation. This ideology causes the prestige dialect user to expend more energy in speaking than does the user of the popular vernacular.

Presenting evidence from a range of studies, Kroch cites three examples of phonetic change, namely (i) consonantal simplification (ii) vocalic processes of chain shifting and (iii) assimilation of foreign phonemes to a native pattern, all of which, he argues, are further advanced in non-standard varieties. Among higher status groups, by contrast, resistance to such linguistic processes demands a particular effort 'motivated not by the needs of communication but by status consciousness' (p. 19), which procures social advantage for the user. Linguistic conservatism on the part of elite groups, viewed by Kroch as the embodiment of their ideological value-system, had also been observed by Bloomfield (1964 [1927]: 393–94) half a century earlier:

> These dialects are maintained by social elites and such elites are by and large conservative. The use of conservative linguistic forms is for them a symbol of their whole value system. From this standpoint the conservatism of the literary language has basically the same source as that of the spoken prestige dialect, since the standards of the literary language are set by the elite.

Kroch's emphasis on the ideological dimension has been challenged in recent years by commentators who associate linguistic conservatism not with ideology, but with isolation (see especially Trudgill 1992, 2011). Isolation may even promote the very opposite of the simplifying changes Kroch associates with low-status speakers. Milroy and Margrain (1980), for example, highlight the exceptional phonological complexity of the

working-class vowel system of English in Belfast, a relatively peripheral city within the United Kingdom in which close-knit communities inhabit what Milroy (1980) describes as 'urban villages'. Andersen (1988) has noted the prevalence of 'exorbitant phonetic developments' in isolated communities, such as *kugv* ('cow') /ku:/ > /kigv/ in Faroese (see Trudgill 2011: 153), which again appear to run counter to the expectations of Kroch's model. One can also, moreover, point to counter-examples within the evidence which Kroch himself cites. He notes, for example, that /r/-deletion in New York is a simplifying change which, according to Labov's (1966) evidence, is both further advanced among working-class speakers and stigmatised by elite groups. Within England, however, the pattern is reversed: the prestige accent RP (Received Pronunciation) is notably non-rhotic, while some low-status varieties retain non-prevocalic /r/; similar remarks apply to 'HAPPY-tensing' in many British English varieties, where replacement of a lax unstressed final vowel by a tense one results in increased articulatory effort. But Kroch is careful not to claim that 'regular phonological processes can all be reduced to simplification of some sort' (p.23, fn. 9), and among the 'established prestige dialects' to which he restricts his remarks, his model has a clear and obvious relevance to the case of standard French, a language which has probably seen more rigid top-down codification than any other.

1.2 The 'Least Effort' Principle

Similar observations had certainly not been lost on French commentators. Kroch himself (p.18, fn.4) cites Schogt (1961: 91), who had drawn attention to class-based differences in speech, and notably the conservatism of upper-class varieties, contrasting 'la langue populaire riche en innovations, qui a pour elle le grand nombre, et la langue des classes aisées, qui est plus conservatrice et qui s'impose par son prestige'. In similar vein, simplifying tendencies in working-class speech had been subsumed in a broad 'principe du moindre effort' or 'least effort principle',[2]

[2] The term 'loi du moindre effort' in the context of the French language appears to have been first used in a little-known article by Léon Bollack (1903; see Hornsby and Jones 2006), who identifies

which had been central to at least two descriptive works (Bauche 1920; Guiraud 1965) on *français populaire* (broadly conceived as the working-class speech of Paris),[3] as well as strongly influencing Frei's (1993 [1929]) *La Grammaire des Fautes*. The least effort principle in these works is not restricted to phonetic processes as for Kroch, and includes for example the elimination of inflectional redundancy which distinguishes spoken French from the formal written code: *les petites princesses arrivent* for example has four suffixal plural markers (underlined) in writing, but only one marker *les* [le] in speech. Informal deletion of the negative particle *ne* (e.g. 'je sais pas' for 'je ne sais pas') is known to be more common in working-class than in middle-class speech (see Ashby 1981; Coveney 2002: 55–90), and can be understood again in terms of the least effort principle, in that it reduces the number of explicit markers of negation from two (*ne* and *pas*) to one (*pas*). The same principle can be seen to have been extended further in the colloquial, and still highly stigmatised, *t'inquiète !* for *ne t'inquiète pas !*, where both *ne* and *pas* can be deleted because word order in the case of the negative imperative is itself a marker of negation (contrast the positive imperative *inquiète-toi !*, where the pronoun follows rather than precedes the verb).

Echoes of Kroch's claims regarding the conservatism of elite groups are also to be found in prescriptive works. The *Avant-Propos* (p.V) to Fouché's (1959) *Traité de prononciation française* (which, the author notes, is based on investigations 'dans divers milieux cultivés de la capitale'), for example, recalls Kroch's comments on ideology and the phonetic assimilation of loan words:

> Mais déjà pour certains exemples, la prononciation à la française a provoqué chez plusieurs de nos informateurs un léger sourire et parfois davantage. Nous pensons en particulier au nom propre anglais *Southampton*, prononcé à la française *Sou-tan-pton* ou *Sou-tan-pton(e)*. C'est qu'un nou-

simplifying tendencies with 'éléments transformistes' destined to overcome the conservatism of standard French (in similar vein, Frei 1929 would see non-standard French as 'français avancé', heralding the standard language of the future). Bollack's focus, however, was on writing rather than speech, and his use of the term is not linked to social class or ideology.

[3] And, by extension, francophone France more generally: 'le français populaire de Paris est, avec quelques différences sans grande importance, le français populaire de toute la France, de la France, du moins, qui parle français' (Bauche 1920: 183).

> veau courant s'est fait jour. En effet, on répugne de plus en plus dans les milieux cultivés à prononcer les noms propres étrangers d'introduction récente comme s'ils étaient français. Seule la masse continue l'ancienne mode.

Whether or not this represented an innovation as the author suggests (we will see evidence in Part II that this trend was in fact far from new), the evident disdain in *milieux cultivés* for regular processes of assimilation practised by *la masse* is laid bare in Fouché's account and is entirely consistent with Kroch's claims. In fact, Fouché's example neatly illustrates the way elite groups maintain social advantage through language. By resisting phonetic assimilation of loan words, members of privileged groups are able to signal a degree of familiarity with the donor languages, and thereby possession of a cultural capital unavailable to those without access to high-level education. As Bourdieu observes (1982: 51–52), the linguistic capital enjoyed by elite groups can only be procured at significant cost in terms of time, effort and (by implication) money:

> La langue légitime doit sa *constance (relative) dans le temps* (comme dans l'espace) au fait qu'elle est continûment protégée par un travail prolongé d'inculcation contre l'inclination à l'*économie* d'effort et de tension qui porte par exemple à la simplification analogique (*vous faisez* et *vous disez* pour *vous faites* et *vous dites*). (Author's emphasis.)

1.3 The Ideology of the Standard

Bourdieu's conception of *la langue légitime*, a totemised prescriptive standard imposed by state sanctioned elites, is best viewed in terms of what James and Lesley Milroy (2012) have termed 'the ideology of the standard'. Lesley Milroy (2003: 161; cited by Armstrong and Mackenzie 2012: 26) has defined a language ideology as 'a system for making sense of the indexicality inherent in language, given that languages and language forms index speakers' social identities fairly reliably in communities'. Like all ideologies, it is largely unconscious and represents an internalised set of beliefs which are perceived by those who hold them as 'received wisdom' or simply 'common sense'. As Armstrong and

Mackenzie (2012: 6) point out, the ideology of the standard in particular legitimises a hierarchical ordering of society and contains a normative element, directing the way speakers ought to behave. The standard itself 'borrows prestige from the power of its users' (*ibid.*), who have an interest in its maintenance and therefore generally oppose change as Kroch suggests. This ideology is extraordinarily powerful and pervasive in France, where, as Brunot (1966: III, 4) famously observed, 'le règne de la grammaire.. a été plus tyrannique et plus long qu'en aucun pays'.[4] In his seminal sociolinguistic account of standardisation in France, Lodge (1993: 156) sets out its three core tenets, which we summarise below:

1. The ideal state of a language is uniformity: non-standard language is improper and change is to be deplored.
2. The most valid form of the language is to be found in writing; speaking is considered to be 'less grammatical' than the written form and the purest form of the language is to be found in the work of the best authors.
3. The standard language, which happens to be used by those with most power and status, is inherently better than other varieties. Other sociolects, which happen to be used by those with little status and power, are seen as debased forms of the standard and can be dismissed as 'sloppy' or 'slovenly' ways of expressing oneself.

The first of these beliefs demonstrates why standardisation should be seen as an ideology rather than simply a process. As language is always subject to variation and change, the ideal of uniformity, manifested in a one-to-one relationship between correct form and meaning, can never fully be realised, even with the support of purist institutions, which attempt to eliminate variability from the legitimised variety. The most iconic of these institutions is the *Académie Française*, founded by Richelieu in 1635, the conservatism of which drew this stinging rebuke from Fénelon in an open letter in 1714: 'On a appauvri, desséché et gêné notre

[4] Cf. Klinkenberg (1992: 42) 'le français offre sans doute l'exemple le plus poussé qui soit de centralisme et d'institutionalisation linguistique'. The opening chapter of L.C. Harmer's *The French Language* (1954) is appropriately entitled 'A Nation of Grammarians', a label attributed to Duhamel (1944: 50).

langue.' In more recent times this conservatism has found expression in opposition to loan words from English, and resistance to feminisation of professional titles. The second core belief in particular, that the written language is inherently superior,[5] is especially deep-rooted in France, and has notably hampered many an attempt to reform the orthographic system. In a culture which identifies French with its written form, reform proposals are not infrequently pilloried as attacks on the language itself (see Désirat and Hordé 1976: 218–20)[6] and indeed the complexities of French spelling which make it so difficult to learn are held up as something of a virtue.[7] Standard forms are seen not merely as correct, but also as inherently more beautiful than low-status variants. As we will see repeatedly below in respect of liaison, purist strictures are often defended in terms of the *harmonie* of the favoured forms, or the *cacophonie* of those proscribed, without any need being felt to explain how *harmonie* or *cacophonie* are defined.

The most steadfast defenders of the status quo tend, of course, to be those who have had the means, time and resources to master the complexities of the standard written norm. The minority who do so secure

[5] Cf. Kroch (1978: 30):

> The influence of the literary language on the spoken standard is one manifestation among others of a socially motivated inhibition of linguistic change. This conclusion is reinforced by the fact that prestige dialects not only inhibit changes that violate written forms but also resist changes in such features as vowel quality long before those changes would cause noticeable contradictions between the written and the spoken forms.

[6] The widely-held belief that 'correct' French is to be equated with its written form is neatly illustrated by a hypercorrection, and a purist response to it. In Etiemble's famous (1964) broadside against Anglo-American loanwords, *Parlez-vous franglais?*, the singer Dalida is quoted as having said 'je n'en ai pas prises [pʁiz]' during a television interview, in what appears to have been an unsuccessful attempt to make a past participle agreement. Rather than comment on the inappropriateness to speech of what is essentially an arcane orthographical rule, formally inculcated through years of daily school *dictées* but rarely mastered by French native speakers, Etiemble (p. 282) excoriates this non-native French speaker for 'une belle grosse faute contre notre syntaxe'. That a man of the left, and a champion of French independence from US capitalism, should find himself judging a relatively uneducated immigrant by the exacting orthographic standards of a privileged class does not appear to have been viewed at the time as in any way incongruous.

[7] Ball (1997: 191-92) lists some of the more vitriolic responses to the proposed 1990 spelling reforms, which included the following from Yves Berger in the November 1990 edition of *Lire*: 'Stupide, inutile, dangeureuse : c'est une entreprise qui relève de la pure démagogie, de l'esprit de Saddam Hussein'.

the considerable social advantages which accrue from the third core belief, that the standard variety is inherently superior. These include improved educational outcomes, enhanced employment opportunities, professional success, and even favourable treatment from medical professionals, who pay greater attention and offer more positive diagnoses to middle-class patients (see Bourdieu 1982: 45 fn.21). By contrast, those who do not are left in a state of linguistic insecurity which hampers their self-esteem and restricts life chances,[8] and are subject to sanction by a normative establishment, whose primary purpose, for Bourdieu, is to maintain the value of the linguistic capital monopolised by elites (1982: 49):

> La dépossession objective des classes dominées (…) n'est pas sans rapport avec l'existence d'un corps de professionnels objectivement investis du monopole de l'usage légitime de la langue légitime qui produisent pour leur propre usage une langue spéciale, prédisposée à remplir *par surcroît* une fonction sociale de distinction dans les rapports entre les classes et dans les luttes qui les opposent sur le terrain de la langue. Elle n'est pas sans rapport non plus avec l'existence d'une institution comme le système d'enseignement qui, mandaté pour sanctionner, au nom de la grammaire, les produits hérétiques et pour inculquer la norme explicite qui contrecarre les effets des lois d'évolution, contribue fortement à constituer comme tels les usages dominés de la langue en consacrant l'usage dominant comme seul légitime, par le seul fait de l'inculquer.

Central to Kroch's thinking is what Bourdieu above and elsewhere refers to as *distinction* (see especially Bourdieu 1979), that is the

[8] Gueunier et al. (1978) contrast attitudes among speakers in Tours, a city traditionally associated with 'good' French, with those observed in areas of linguistic insecurity such as Lille, where a working-class male informant bemoaned his own perceived inability to speak his native language (p.157):

> Nous, les gars du Nord, on fout des coups de pied à la France … s'appliquer, on peut y arriver, mais..on arrivera jamais à parler français, c'est pas vrai! … Je pourrais aller à l'école pendant dix ans, ben j'arriverais jamais à parler le français.

maintenance and regular use by elite groups of various symbols of cultural capital, in this case prestige linguistic forms, which enable them to distance themselves socially from the majority of the population. Their capacity to do so depends on the inaccessibility to all but a privileged few of certain elements of the prestige norm. This in turn raises the question of what 'inaccessible' might mean in this context, to which thus far we have offered only a partial answer. For Kroch, elite groups are schooled to use variants associated with careful or prepared speech which are not subject to what he considers normal phonetic conditioning, and which therefore require greater thought and articulatory effort. Linguistic forms can, however, also be inaccessible to low-status groups because they can only be learned through formal education, to which they have restricted access.[9] This is particularly true of those which (a) do not occur, or no longer occur, in speech and therefore are not acquired as part of mother-tongue competence and (b) require detailed knowledge of complex prescriptive rules, both of which are present in abundance in written standard French. In fact, such is the distance between informal spoken and formal written French that some scholars (e.g Massot 2005, 2006; Hamlaoui 2011; Zribi-Hertz 2006, 2011) have proposed a diglossic model for modern French in which the L functions are fulfilled by a mother-tongue variety which Massot labels *français démotique* (FD), and the H functions by *français classique tardif* (FCT), an archaic variety which has to be learned via formal education. While the diglossia hypothesis remains controversial (see Coveney 2011 for critique),[10] the maintenance in writing of moribund tense and mood forms (e.g. the past historic, past

[9] Citing the example of the French vowel system, which has undergone significant simplification from twelve to seven oral vowels, Armstrong and Mackenzie (2012: 19) link social distinction to maintenance of a conservative written standard, a theme we develop below:

> The elements in the maximal twelve-vowel system, redundant in this linguistically functional view, continue however to serve a sociolinguistic purpose, as indeed is typical generally of 'conservative' elements in a linguistic system. This is facilitated in part by the fact that the functionally redundant elements in the twelve-vowel system have orthographic correlates, which are not equally accessible to all speakers.

[10] For a discussion of the diglossia hypothesis with respect to variable liaison, see Hornsby (2019).