



City Words: An Invitation to Travel

Yves Grafmeyer

About: Topalov, Christian, Coudroy de Lille, Laurent, Depaule, Jean-Charles and Marin, Brigitte (ed.). 2010. *L'aventure des mots de la ville à travers le temps, les langues, les sociétés*, Paris: Robert Laffont (Bouquins series), 1495 pages.

L'aventure des mots de la ville (The Adventure of City Words Through Time, Languages, Societies), tells the story of the use of words, taking the reader through different places, languages, and times in order to evoke the relationship between societies and their cities. This book, which contains a remarkable amount of knowledge, is also an invitation to conduct new investigations into the many paths and perspectives that it opens up.

We can only congratulate and thank the editors and authors for this truly impressive collection, with its well-chosen title. Because it really is in many ways about adventure: the adventure of words that speak about cities by traveling back to the time and language of one society to another, sometimes going from one language to another, and making return trips; a lengthy adventure of an editorial project bringing aboard the same ship 160 researchers from different disciplines, working in eight languages and from an even more numerous number of countries; adventure, finally, for the reader who is invited on a journey to travel between cities, between linguistic spheres, between words, between time periods.

To indicate this journey, or rather these countless possible journeys, signposts and landmarks abound: definitions from dictionaries, synonyms, translations, cross references, etc. Nevertheless, diverse paths can be taken: there are wide boulevards (oh! the *boulevard*: this avenue that sometimes leads somewhere, and sometimes, to the contrary, sends us in circles back to our starting point...); there are a lot of nice, small streets, with many uses and meanings; there are also hidden passages that open onto discrete and unexpected connections that have their own logic...

Moreover, these journeys can be experienced in different ways, in the way of informed tourism, or an urban stroll deliberately unplanned, or even from an ethnographic point of view that seeks, at the same time, to reduce the distance with far away places, the foreign, the unknown, but also, conversely to be surprised by the familiar, to free oneself from the illusion of its transparency.

Words and People

The 264 entries contained in this work do not refer to abstract concepts or to processes (segregation, suburban sprawl, renewal, gentrification...). They are “everyday words,” that refer to concrete things: a city, a part of a city, a road, a house... These words and the representations that they convey are not mere replications, pure carbon copies of an “objective” physical and social reality: they give shape to the experience of this reality. They are also a means to change reality, because action entails a choice of words to designate what is and what should be: this shows that

this invitation to travel is not only addressed to researchers and students, but much more widely to all professionals who want to know the history, the scope and the effects of the vocabulary which they summon. It is made clear in the introduction that adherence to this constructivist perspective inspires and pervades the method of investigation- because it truly is an investigation.

If this is the way the book reads, it is because, besides objects and words, there are also and more importantly people, who name, pronounce, classify, agree or disagree, have their own way of saying things and of describing the social world. Along these 1500 pages or so, people are everywhere. That is one of the great original aspects of this undertaking: “this is not a dictionary” (we are forewarned straightaway by Christian Topalov), but rather a “treasure” where all social science researchers interested in the city will find plenty to mine. Investigating the meanings given to words through uses and thus through users is indeed the ambition of this work that, by the way, was initially going to be called *Le Trésor des mots de la ville* (*The Treasure of City Words*). Drawing from an impressively diverse corpus, this social investigation into words unfolds from one article to the next, constantly making sure to associate the meaning- or meanings- of a word to more or less stable communities of speakers. It works at different scales that go from whole linguistic areas to regional variations to smaller, more or less consistent groups or networks: developers, administrators, urban planners, reformists, journalists, writers, lawyers... Analyzing words as they are said, is also a way to give importance to the varied contexts of utterances, illustrating the polysemy of many terms, including for a single speaker.

Valuing and Devaluing Meanings

All speakers are tied up in social processes with something at stake. Words can be revealing but, once again, they are not only the linguistic double of what takes place in “reality,” since they can be an integral part of these stakes, employed as categories and tools for action.

This is clearly already the case for all attempts at lexical standardization that, by definition, explicitly take for their object the terminology itself. No language, no region or time period considered in *L'aventure des mots de la ville* seems to escape these multiple attempts to police words, sometimes with great success, but always prone to revision. Goals and ways to control vary with the actors (public authorities, lawyers, professionals, researchers, dictionary writers...): dispelling ambiguities, encouraging a unified national vocabulary (today even international), and in the same way advancing knowledge and/or power. Admittedly, this work chose not to discuss the words that belong only to technical, administrative, or scholarly languages. But a great many examples show well how these words interact with the common language, originating in it or being adopted by it.

The history of words that talk about the city is intimately tied to another wide-reaching process through which the differences and the hierarchies that structure urban worlds are built, expressed, and redefined over time. Naming the forms of housing, the types of neighborhoods or cities, is often a way to rank those who live there or visit. Thus, it is not surprising to observe, in all languages, how often the fate of words is caught up in the well-known logics of distinction and the gradual erosion of distinctive signs. This is how, for example, the French word *appartement*, whose connotation was initially clearly prestigious, has seen its use, since the beginning of the 19th century, become more generalized, used as a synonym for all housing in apartment buildings. Moving to other languages, the American *apartment*, like the Brazilian *apartamento* has experienced the same generalization, after having been a sign of distinction. The French word *pavillon* has had a comparable adventure, from the chateau's annex where nobles occasionally resided to the pejorative term used for suburban detached housing and the mediocre “*pavillonnaires*” that live there.

There is clearly a strong tendency here, but not to the point of universal law: some words have experienced the opposite fate. For example, *residence* appeared in French in the 13th century as a neutral administrative and legal category (the Prince's residence, and residency requirements for

high civil servants), then, during the 20th century, it took on positive connotations in the common language as well as for real-estate professionals and researchers. The author of the entry concluded by describing the growing importance of this logic of distinction that during the 1950s and 1960s responded both to social demand and to private developers who were more and more concerned with differentiating their buildings from the stigmatized image of social housing projects. But we can add that the adventure continues today, with the current movement of the “*résidentialisation*” of these same housing projects...

Even though dominant and very much visible in the corpus, the semantic path that goes from prestigious to commonplace is not the only one possible. The opposite path also exists. We have just seen it. Even stigmas, usually associated with certain terms, can be turned around by those who are victims of them, or by benevolent outsiders, either sympathizers or activists. *Slum, faubourg, banlieue, arrabal, barrio, favela*, and even sometimes *ghetto* or *bidonville*: so many illustrations of the complexity and ambivalence of the processes of valuing and devaluing that transform words.

People and Places

For each language studied, the authors have selected a few dozen entries relevant to four main themes: types of cities, city divisions, types of housing, and paths and open spaces. Anchored in material reality that seem to pre-date their names, the terms considered are not limited to this reality because they all refer, more or less, to uses, to perceptions, and to value judgments. In other words, these everyday words potentially contain and express in their own way the vast question of the relationship between the social and the spatial, to put it in scholarly terms. Historically, the material meaning is generally the oldest: it makes up the focal point of a halo of meanings, which grows with a sometimes proliferating interplay of metaphors and metonyms. Here again, there are some exceptions to the rule: such as the English *neighborhood* which started out by designating the community of neighbors- and more specifically “good neighbors”- before acquiring the territorial forms in which those interpersonal relationships take place.

It is particularly interesting to closely examine the double-sidedness of city words. It is structured differently and evolves according to the language, the time, the society, the terms, the context in which they are uttered, etc. It is everywhere in the ordinary speech of city dwellers, in literary texts that toy with it, in dictionaries that strive to explain it. It can also be utilized in relations of power, for city planning projects or for social reform. For example, the entry about the United States’ variant of *neighborhood* shows well how, for a long time, two competing definitions came into opposition. They corresponded to two modes of action supported by two distinct groups or networks of actors: on the one hand social reformers gave priority to people and thus to the social and relational dimension which they wanted to promote or restore between inhabitants of the same community; on the other hand, real-estate professionals and designers gave priority to places, and advocated for a specific model of rational spatial planning aimed at fostering social harmony. Both sides were seeking to impose their point of view, and thus define the “right use” of the word *neighborhood*.

In the same way, we have to realize how much the adventure of words is caught up in processes, which translate social problems into urban problems, euphemistically expressing social stigma with the vocabulary of space and housing. Proof of this, keeping to the French language, are the more or less recent avatars, the *cit * (the projects), the *banlieue* (the suburban projects), or even the *quartier* (the hood), where it is no longer necessary to point out that they are “*sensible*” (disadvantaged areas) or “*en difficult *” (troubled areas).

This wide-ranging investigation into the social uses of city words shows the polysemy of most words, their malleability, and their extreme plasticity as they occur through time. The word *maison* (house), or its equivalent in other languages studied, provides the most spectacular illustration. It plays on oppositions between the material and the social, the functional and the emotional, the

individual and the collective, the nuclear family and the lineage, the private and the public, the closed and the open, the family and the institution... This word, with its pool of multiple meanings, sometimes contradictory, can be activated or left dormant depending on the context or the time period. Through its adventure, it has become protean. And resorting to etymology is just a lure, since it is true that the traces of the past only acquire effective meaning in the present.

This brings us to the question of whether words have a capacity, however small, to structure representations of the city and thus types of action in and on the city. This question is very general and is obviously not specific to words about the city. Nevertheless, it is related through analogy to the urban sphere. To what extent can words, any word, be considered somewhat like cities and urban artifacts, something material, produced and used, but which, as Durkheim might say, because it already exists, is “exterior” to people and thus is “empowered to coerce people”?

Regarding this point, the book offers many avenues worth exploring that vary whether one considers only the history of a word or, to the contrary, the place that it occupies in the lexical system specific to a given language at a given moment. On the one hand, when we set out to follow the adventure of a particular word, *a fortiori*, as it migrates from one language to another, we get the impression that the meanings of words are very unstable. On the other hand, if a systemic point of view is adopted, supported here by the comparison between several linguistic universes, we can see more clearly the constraints at work (at least the relative constraints) that punctuate the field of possible uses for different speakers, because each word is situated in a network of related words that are constructed in very different ways depending on the language.

In order to illustrate, let's go back to the case of the word *maison*. Its equivalent in English, house, is admittedly polysemic, but its private and emotional connotation is less marked than for its equivalent words in other languages, because English speakers can also use the word home, that carries a part of the halo of meanings usually associated with the word *maison*. English speakers would say, “to be at home,” “to go home,” where Spanish or Portuguese speakers would employ the term *casa*. It is more or less the same for the French speaker who would say that he is or that he is going back “*chez lui*” more often than “*dans sa maison*.” Taken in its nominal form, “*chez-soi*,” in the common language or for sociology, is a little bit like the English “*home*.” Incidentally, neither home nor *chez-soi* are among the entries in the book, precisely because they are part of the private and emotional side of the word *maison*, with no reference to a physical structure. Except that this small preposition “*chez*” is indeed derived from the Latin *casa*... But since nobody knows this, it is not important, which confirms that etymological investigations are of little relevance.

One should see by now that *L'aventure des mots de la ville* is a captivating and unique book that is rich in the amount of knowledge that it gathers as well as in the perspectives that it offers.

Yves Grafmeyer is a sociologist and professor emeritus at The University Lyon 2. His research has mostly focused on urban dynamics (settlement and ways of inhabiting and using the city), socialization processes in the urban context and relations between career paths, social mobility and residential trajectories.

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