Cognitive Aspects of Language Evolution and Language Change: the Example of French Historical Texts

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To the memory of Brigitte Schlieben-Lange (1943-2000)

Abstract: In a text-linguistic approach, the author starts from the assumption that every text token complies with a cognitive framework called ‘genre’ or ‘format.’ Analysing the two first historical texts written in Old French prose –they deal with the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204)–, he puts forward two theses: (a) If somebody tries for the first time to write such texts, s/he will use already existing cognitive models – the only possible one being in this case Old French novels in verse (so-called romances), i.e., texts nowadays –but not then– considered as fiction. (b) It will still take considerable time until the cognitive and linguistic framework for historical prose proper will develop. – The analysed material confirms both theses. Addressees are still thought of as hearers, history is conceived of as a tale consisting of a series of adventures where marvellous things happen, with the technique of enhancing (sachiez que “let it be known to you”) coming directly from these romances, etc. Generally speaking, there is a lack of abstraction from and distance to the represented events. The appropriate cognitive framework will appear much later – even (in our eyes) elementary terms like ‘event’ (événement) being attested for the first time only 250 years later.


1. A text linguistic approach

There are different kinds of linguistics. The opposition between sentence and text linguistics can define two of them. Text linguistics starts from the assumption that we do not speak in words or sentences, but in utterances as often called texts. This means that when we make use of the admittedly finite means a language offers us, this does not lead to an infinite series of sentences, but of utterances. Thus text linguistics deals with entire texts, where any text belongs to a particular text genre. Among the text genres, some can be highly demanding, especially written ones; they should be formulated in a way that guarantees a widespread reception in any situation of communication. To the oral genres belong specimens like small talk, a genre whose realisation should be easier. At any rate, this means that when speaking or writing, we have to start

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1 A seminal paper in this respect was Daneš 1966. The basic level is syntax; above we have semantics, the top-most level being the organisation of the utterance. The genres and their cognitive demands have to be placed still on top of the third level of Daneš.
from a conception fitting into the appropriate genre, giving it an adequate text-syntactic and semantic realisation leading to an appropriate organisation of the entire utterance.

The concept of genre is dealt with under different terms: in television we tend to call it a ‘format’, in the theory of action, genres come as ‘activity types’ or ‘types of acting’, in literary studies ‘genres’ is the preferred expression. Others use ‘traditions of speaking’, ‘simple forms’ (André Jolles). Or, in daily communication: ‘communicative genres of everyday life’. A definition of this last term, inspired by anthropological phenomenology, shows what is meant in general:

"Communicative genres are considered to be those communicative phenomena that have become socially rooted. Their basic social function consists of alleviating the burden of subordinate (communicative) action problems. Due to the fixed patterns they [p. 76] constitute, genres are an orientation framework for the production and reception of communicative actions."³

The expression ‘traditions of speaking’ or ‘discourse traditions’ clearly manifest the diachronic side of such genres⁴. As often they have a very long history and are sometimes only slightly, sometimes considerably, modified over time. Witness the example of the juridical judgement: In the Latin tradition the Praetor used to pronounce just one sentence. In principle, this tradition has not changed, e.g., in France, but now the single sentence can go over two or three pages with up to 10 degrees of subordination⁵. Such examples clearly show the amount of conceptualisation, of cognitive activity, behind the formulation of such texts. At the same time, they show how demanding textual genres can be in terms of linguistic means we need in order to realise them: without the appropriate subordinating techniques (which, in French and other Romance languages, evolved only over time) such a sophisticated task cannot be fulfilled⁶. And French judges have to spend a considerable amount of time in training until they eventually master this textual genre. At the same time this means that we do not start from the idea—cherished by generativists—that language as a system exists per se in the heads of all speakers. (a) The possibilities language systems offer us develop over time according to the necessities of the society using the language; Gusiilay, e.g., wouldn’t offer us the possibility of writing a French style

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² Jolles 2006.
³ Knoblauch and Luckmann 2004, 203.
⁴ Schlieben-Lange 1983.
⁵ Krefeld 1985.
⁶ A lot of historical and theoretical research has been done on the evolution of subordinating techniques: Klare 1958, Stempel 1964, Ehrliholzer 1965, Raible 1997 and Raible. 2001.
judgement\(^7\). (b) An individual actively acquires these possibilities only to the extent s/he needs them.

2. The particular evolution of Old French Texts: Telling the truth requires prose

These general considerations may serve as a background for the peculiar, particular situation in Old French, which will be the object of this article. A characteristic of mediaeval cultures is diglossia: Content is written down in Latin, whereas spoken language makes use of the respective vernaculars. Now Old French literature starts, in specific contexts, with written texts already at the beginning of the 9\(^{th}\) century. In the 11\(^{th}\) and 12\(^{th}\) centuries, these texts become truly abundant. A common denominator of nearly all of them is that they are realised in verse, not in prose. There exist a big number of novels belonging above all to the so-called *chansons de geste* (decasyllabic verse with assonances; they have no authors) and octosyllabic rhymed *romances* [p.77] (they tend to be linked with the name of an author, the most renowned one being Chrétien de Troyes\(^8\)). Although being novels in our eyes, for the contemporaries the content of these texts was seen as being true\(^9\).

Thus until the end of the 12\(^{th}\) century, prose texts remained the domain of Latin. But as a result of a discussion having lasted for about 25 years, things changed at the beginning of the 13\(^{th}\) century. The basic question had been: how can a text written in verse express the truth? It stands to reason that historical persons whose speech is thought to be reported did not speak that way.

3. The first historical texts in Old French deal with the Fourth Crusade

This is why we are by now confronted with an ever-growing number of prose texts written in Old French. Two of the first ones deal with a contemporary event: Two participants tell us what happened in the Fourth Crusade (1202 to 1204). This means that these texts are historical texts in a true sense. They even constitute the most important information we have about this Crusade. The respective authors were Geoffroi de Villehardouin (1160 – c. 1212) *De la Conquête de Constantinople* (On the Conquest of Constantinople); he was “member

\(^7\) As to this language see: Tendeng 2007.  
\(^8\) c. 1140 – c. 1190  
\(^9\) There is no contemporary concept of history in our sense. Witness Geoffrey of Monmouth (c. 1100 – c. 1155) with his *Historia regum Britanniae* (History of the Kings of Britain) that treats the Arthurian legends as belonging to history.
of the general staff” of this undertaking, whilst the second author was a simple soldier: Robert de Clari (c. 1170 – after 1216): *La Conquête de Constantinople*.

Here some information about the Crusades, especially the fourth one, is at stake. There were lots of Crusades, each one being – from a today’s perspective – totally unnecessary, superfluous, harmful, deleterious and obnoxious. The fourth one was particularly catastrophic, albeit with advantageous economic consequences for Venice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Crusade</th>
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<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>1095–1099</td>
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<td>8th</td>
<td>1270</td>
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<td>1271–1272</td>
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[p. 78] In the case of the Fourth Crusade, a predominantly French affair, the original idea was to transport the army by ship from Venice to Cairo. Some important points in telegraphic style: The crusaders needed about 100 ships for 35,000 persons, including 2000 knights with their horses; the Venetians charged 85,000 marks of silver, but the crusaders could not afford the whole sum; this lead to negotiations and a contract: the crusaders had to do some services for the Venetians (the Doge himself took the cross and participated with a Venetian contingent). They had to neutralise the biggest competitor of Venice in Mediterranean trade on the Adriatic Sea, the (Christian) port of Zadar. There was a more subtle strategy as to Constantinople, the biggest competitor of Venice in the Mediterranean: The crusaders should enthrone Alexis as the righteous emperor of Constantinople, a man who lived exiled in Germany and promised a high sum for helping restore him (this money would not only have covered the sum the crusaders owed to Venice); this lead to a first conquest of Constantinople. Alexis was enthroned, but failed to keep his promise. As a consequence, the city was conquered for a second time, followed by the sacking of a Christian metropolis by Christian crusaders. This laid the foundation for the domination of the
Mediterranean trade by Venice, thus creating its incredible wealth accumulated during the following centuries\textsuperscript{10}.

Thus we have two writing participants of this undertaking, with Villehardouin, as a member of the general staff, being well informed especially about all negotiations, while Robert de Clari has a simpler perspective and knows much less. For both of them, though, a major problem was that there didn't exist a tradition of writing historical prose texts in Old French. Since the authors of the two texts I am interested in are no learned persons, they were not acquainted with a Latin tradition whatsoever. So what could be a model they could follow?

An easily understandable example for the necessity of genres and their active knowledge are the reports on the conquest of the Americas by European colonists. What we know today rests, as regards the role of Spain, mainly upon reports written by the conquerors themselves. But these reports were justifications addressed to the Spanish Crown (relaciones) showing that all the respective acts complied with Spanish Law. (The conquerors had contracts with the Crown allowing them to take possession of foreign land under well-defined conditions.) Those who wrote these reports admirably mastered the respective text genre (which does not at all imply that they told the truth, to the contrary). Nevertheless, there exist also reports of simple participants not acquainted with the art of writing understandable texts. An example is Alonso Borregán, a simple soldier. What he describes is certainly authentic. He is even able to write correct sentences; but whoever is able to understand even small text-passages of his \textit{Crónica de la conquista del Perú} should be awarded a prize. Up to now, any tentative was bound to fail\textsuperscript{11}.

While in 16\textsuperscript{th} century Spanish there existed good generic models not mastered by simple scribes, at the beginning of the 12\textsuperscript{th} century even the generic models lack in Old French. What will happen is presumed in the two following theses:

\textit{Thesis I}: If in such a situation authors try for the first time to write a historical text in prose, they will use already existing generic models -- here romances in verse.

\textit{Thesis II}: It will still take considerable time until the cognitive and linguistic framework for historical prose proper will develop.

\textsuperscript{10} A late consequence was: Pope John Paul II had to apologise in public, in 2001, during a visit he paid to Greece, for the sacking of Greek orthodox Constantinople by Roman catholic crusaders which had happened almost 800 years before.

\textsuperscript{11} The last serious effort: Stoll 1997.
4. The structure of romances in verse

Chrétien de Troyes was highly popular among his contemporaries and remains known for his well-structured texts. Two modern scholars, Karl D. Uitti and Michelle A. Freeman write:

“With Érec and Énide (ca. 1170), a new era opens in the history of European story telling – an era whose effects are still very much with us today. This poem reinvents the genre we call narrative romance; in some important respects it also initiates the vernacular novel.”12

When we intend to tell a certain event to others, we have to bring a bulk of information chunks into a linear order. Where do we have to start? Where do we have to put an end? How many participants of an event should be mentioned in the narrative? What is necessary in the domain of descriptions of people, places, and objects? What can or should be omitted and what not? Chrétien was the first one among vernacular storytellers who would aptly create an intelligible and seemingly self-evident chronological order in his narrative, resulting in a clear tripartition into beginning, middle and end. Causality plays an important part. Thus this author, apart from writing in verse, could to some extent be a model for historical writing.

Typically, a young would-be knight starts from home in quest (quête) of important and marvellous encounters to happen during long travels. [p. 80] After having overcome lots of dangerous situations, this chevalier errant (knight-errant) arrives at his final vocation or destination. Thus the basic structure of such a romance is a chronologically ordered sequence of so-called adventures (aventures). This is what can be adapted in any event by our amateur historians. Villehardouin, one of the leaders, is better acquainted with the tradition of telling romances than the simple soldier Clari. This turns out to be an advantage and a disadvantage at the same time.

5. A comparison between Chrétien (Perceval) and the two historians

In order to show the dependence upon romances in the conceptualisation of actions and their sequence, I will use a corpus of three texts: the last work of Chrétien, the unaccomplished Perceval with its 9100 odd verses, and compare features of this text with the texts of the two historians. Chrétien’s text encompasses 51213 tokens representing 5527 types; for Villehardouin the respective

12 Uitti & Freeman. 1995, p. 36.
numbers are 46718 and 4426, for Clari 32228 and 3589. This means that the relation between types and tokens is largely equivalent.

How can the author of a text make his recipients believe that he is telling the truth? For *chansons de geste* and *romances en vers* this was quite simple: they had to make believe that they depended on a written source (*livres* ‘book’ and *estoire* ‘history’). This is true already of the *Chanson de Roland*, a *chanson de geste* written down in the context of propaganda for the First Crusade. The author of the *Song of Roland* refers six times to a *Gesta Francorum* that would contain the story he is telling. In one case, he happens to put such a reference into the mouth of a person acting in a battle itself, thus unmasking the device: Turpin could not know what would be written later about the battle he is participating in (Laisse CXI).

<table>
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<th>CXI</th>
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<tr>
<td>Franc i unt ferut de coer e de vigur; Pagans are slain, a thousandfold, in crowds,</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paien sunt morz a millers e a fuls; Left of five score are not two thousands now.</td>
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<tr>
<td>De cent millers n'en poent guarir dous.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dist l’arcevesques: «Nostre hume sunt mult proz: Says the Archbishop: &quot;Our men are very proud,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Suz ciel n'ad home plus en ait de meillors. No man on earth has more nor better found.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Il est escrit en la Geste Francor In Chronicles of Franks is written down,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que vassal sont a nostre empereur.&quot; What vassalage he has, our Emperour.&quot;</td>
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In his *Perceval*, Chrétien refers five times to an *estoire* as his source, one time to a book (*li livres*); these sources testify (*tesmoigner*) or tell (*conter, re-contre, deviser*) what he himself is telling: [p. 81]

Apart from that, the author refers 13 times to truth (as *vérité*).

Now, as eyewitnesses, Villehardouin and Clari have no source at all they could refer to, so what they tell us is their own story. Nonetheless, borrowing

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13 For the technical and numeric side, Simple Concordance Program 4.0.9 for Mac was used.
from the discourse tradition of romances in verse, Villehardouin thinks it is unavoidable to refer to such a source:

Nevertheless, when Villehardouin uses the verb tesmoigner ‘to testify’ – a term we are already familiar with through Chrétien – the alternating, but otherwise parallel occurrences show that it is he himself who guarantees the truth, in other words: that ‘the book’ refers to himself:

Less familiar with the respective discourse tradition, Clari uses istoire or estoire, instead, as a designation of his own text.

At the end of his text, he is as explicit as one can be in this respect:
Now have ye heard the truth, in what manner Constantinople was conquered, and in what way Count Baldwin of Flanders became emperor thereof, and my Lord Henry his brother after him; for he who was there and who saw these things and who heard the testimony thereof, Robert of Clari, Knight, hath also caused the truth to be put down in writing, how the city was conquered; and albeit he may not have recounted the conquest in as fair a fashion as many a good chronicler would have recounted it, yet hath he at all times recounted the strict truth; and many true things hath he left untold, because, in sooth, he cannot remember them all.

With “Now have ye heard the truth…” he remains nonetheless in the overall style of verse romances, referring to his public as hearers. We find this in Perceval as well as in Villehardouin’s text. He uses ‘to hear’ not only as a back reference, but also when speaking of events he is going to tell us:

115     li six message com vos avez oï, et pristrent conseil

There are 22 similar cases more of ‘as you have heard’. Now the downward references: [p. 83]

528     aprocha.//XV. [070]  Or oïez une des plus granz merveilles
1208    com vos avez oï. Or oïez se ceste gent devoient terre
1238    que il fu toz esmiez.//Or oïez une grant merveille: que en

Besides using the same perspective of recipients hearing his text, Clari is more modern because he refers also to himself as to the speaker addressing his public (si vous dirons – and we will tell you):

8       Constantinople; si vous dirons après qui il furent et par
63      et de l'estoire, si vous dirons de ce vaslet et de l'empereur
85      de Constantinople. Or vous dirons de cel enfant et des croisiés
95      ester de l'estoire; si vous dirons le mesfait dont li marquis
151     guerdon, si comme nous vous dirons après. Or avint, après que
189     leur chevauchiée. Si vous dirons ce qu'il font. Chascuns
193     à roi./LXVI.//Or vous dirons d'une autre aventure qui
240     chier, si comme nous vous dirons après.//Si envoieren saisir
245     males voies comme nous vous dirons après./LXXXII.//Quant la
250     en l'autre une toile: si vous dirons dont cil saintuaire estoien

Clari is even able to mark the beginning of a digression using again estoire for his own text:
VIII.//Or vous lairons ici ester des pelerins et de l'estoire
(For the moment we will let remain here the pilgrims and the story—)
fait. Or vous lairons ici ester de l'estoire; si vous dirons
y sont, vous lairrons nous ester à dire. Car nus hom terriens

When trying to make large texts intelligible, an important task is accentuating—or rhematising, to speak with a term belonging to the level of utterance organisation—certain passages. One of the means employed by Chrétien is the imperative sachiez que, ‘let it be known to you’. Chrétien doesn’t use it too frequently, though: Only 18 times in the 9100 odd verses of his Perceval. Here are some examples:

1946       ice puis je bien afichier./Et sachiez que je sui sa niece,/mes
2169       vostre aaiges/n'est tex, ce sachiez de seür,/que vos a chevalier
2559       /mes il reperdront, ce sachiez./Les ialz amedeus me sachiez
...
2941       a mout grant musardie;/et sachiez que par coardie/nel lait
2997       en avant tanra/la terre, ce sachiez de fi,/et se ele est morte

[p. 84] Instead, Villehardouin uses this device abundantly—94 times, typically as “et sachiez que”. Some cases:

354       li pelerin de lor païs. Et sachiez que mainte lerce i/fu plorée
574       tant de belles. //{076} Et sachiez que il portèrent es nefs
687       le/departirent tote-voie. Et sachiez que ce fu la plus granz
728       volez asseurer devers/vos. Et sachiez que si haute convenance
775       /contre le roi de Hongrie. Et sachiez que li cuer des genz ne
1021      les autres ere soveraine. Et sachiez que il n'i ot/si hardi

How are actions and events themselves conceptualised? As we know, the heroes of verse romances encounter adventures whose nature is often marvellous. As a consequence, in his Perceval Chrétien uses 25 times avanture, two times we find the negative term mesavanture, 34 times there happen mervoilles, marvellous things. – Now Villehardouin qualifies 25 events as aventures, according to the nature of the Fourth Crusade 15 of these being characterised even as mesaventures. At the same time, there are 23 cases of marvellous things, both terms occurring in passages like “Or oïez une des plus granz merveilles et des greignors aventures” – ‘Now hear—another rhematising device he uses often times— one of the biggest marvels and of the greatest adventures’. Even Clari resorts to this same conceptualisation: There are 18 cases of mervoil-
le, 6 of them in the syntagm *une fine mervoille*. In his case, *avanture* is less frequent – he prefers the etymologically related verb *avint que* (‘it happened that’, 24 cases), liked also by Villehardouin (29 tokens). This clumsy construction, familiar to those who know the style of the *New Testament* (‘Now it happened that Jesus entered into Jerusalem’ instead of ‘Jesus entered…’), is extremely rare in Chrétien (8 occurrences in 9100 verses only).

6. Clause linking

Contrary for instance to the *Chanson de geste*, clause linking – by both coordinating and subordinating techniques – is well established in Chrétien\(^\text{14}\). As may be expected, most frequent are the relations of causality; generally speaking, there is also a lot of argumentation in Chrétien’s dialogues. As regards the sequence of events and actions in time, one would be prone to think that a simple instrument could be the conjunction *when*. Throughout the text of Chrétien, though, we have only 110 cases of linking with *quant* ‘when’ – cases where generally a long sequence of foregoing propositions is resumed: For example about 40 verses describing a young lady (*pucele*) [p. 85] followed in verse 1873 by “Et *quant* li chevaliers la voit” – ‘and when the knight saw her …’ In Chrétien’s *Perceval*, only 27 *when*-occurrences open a new sentence. Instead, reading the text of Clari, *quant* reappears with high frequency in quite clumsy a manner: He uses *quant* 363 times, predominantly in the scheme “X happened. *When* X had happened”, with the next proposition repeating part of the foregoing one, “[… the Doge] prendroit il la croix. Et *quant* il l'eut prise, si li donna…” ‘… the Doge would take the cross. And when he had taken it …’ Villehardouin uses this inelegant technique in a much less obstinate manner. Among his only 154 instances of *quant*, only a small part is of this nature with its somewhat pedantic effect.

As has been said, causal linking is frequent in Chrétien’s narrative. In his *Perceval*, we encounter 46 tokens of coordinating *car* and 28 tokens of subordinating *por ce que*. There seem to exist metrical causes for the repartition: 24 of the 28 *Por ce que* open a new verse, whereas this holds only for 28 of the 46 *car*-tokens. In Villehardouin linking by a subordinate clause is nearly as frequent as coordination: 22 tokens of *porce que* against 28 with *car*. Clari clearly prefers coordination: 47 *car* against 6 of *pour ce que*.

\(^{14}\) There is a seminal work on this topic cited already above, Stempel 1964.
7. First thesis appears plausible

Thesis I was: If in a situation as initially described authors try for the first time to write a historical text in prose, they will use already existing generic models – the most appropriate being here romances in verse.

This thesis was confirmed as regards the overall conceptualisation of the events described in both historical texts: A sequence of marvellous events qualified as adventures, chronologically well ordered and linked, not least by introducing explicit causal relations besides the temporal ones. The author is supposed to rely upon a written source guaranteeing the truth; he addresses his recipients as hearers, using rhematising techniques reflecting the performativity, i.e., the situation of reception, of the said romances: formulae like sachiez que or oîez as well as direct address to the recipients (vos avez oï, vos dirons après...). There was a difference in degree, though, between the two authors, with Villehardouin showing a stronger influence of the romance model; the text references of the author who served as a simple soldier are more innovative, too, not least in the kind he signals digressions. Here Chrétien could not serve as a good model and Villehardouin doesn’t succeed in marking digressions well. On the other hand, Clari is quite clumsy in signalling time sequence using in an obstinate manner the when-technique. Typical is also a considerable use made of direct speech in Chrétien and in the texts of the historians.

If we compare the accomplishments of our authors with those of later historians, the biggest difference lies in the increasing awareness the authors have of the nature of their activity: What means ‘writing history’? [p. 86] Witness already the verbs they use for writing: For Chrétien it is to tell: he (or his estoire) have something to tell us:

68 peinne/a rimoier le meillor conte,/par le comandement le conte
69 comandement le conte,/qui soit contez an cort

3325 une lee table d’ivoire. Ensi con reconte l’estoire, ele estoit tote d’une
3614 de Perceval./Percevax, ce conte l’estoire,/a si perdue la
7634 /Tex fu li liz, qui voir an conte,/c’ongues ne por roi ne por

The same thing holds for the two historians: they (or their “source”) tell –modern historians certainly wouldn’t like to see their writings qualified as tales:
Later on, historians know that they select their matter (recueillier, tirer, extraire), put pieces together (compiler, joindre, composer, assembler, copuler), put it into a linear order (ordonner, mettre en ordre), couch it into written form (coucher par écrit), redact it (rédiger)\textsuperscript{15}. It is quite interesting for us to see that terms which would seem self-evident in the context of historical writing appear only much later in written texts (source: Trésor de la langue française électronique): [p. 87]

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<th>1220 relation</th>
<th>1283 coucher par écrit</th>
<th>1377 énoncer</th>
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<tr>
<td>1225 paragraphe</td>
<td>1290 extrait</td>
<td>1410 tirer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1230 compiler</td>
<td>1294 assertion</td>
<td>1455 rédiger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1230 constituer</td>
<td>1300 traité</td>
<td>1461 événement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1268 convention</td>
<td>1330 copuler</td>
<td>1498 récit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1272 effet</td>
<td>1362 relater</td>
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<tr>
<td>1275 affirmation</td>
<td>1370 résumer</td>
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That the first attestation of the –to us most natural– neutral term événement dates only from the second half of the 15\textsuperscript{th} century (Engl. event, coming from the same source, is even later) will certainly come as a surprise to most of us.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. Schlieben-Lange 1983: 154sqq.
8. What about the second thesis?

Thus, history becomes more than telling a story. It needs intellectual efforts of the authors resulting in a more abstract vocabulary, reflected, among other things, by the above list of verbs and nouns. It is reflected, on the other hand, by a far more intricate syntax with subordinate clauses serving as a grounding technique for the information in the main sentence. Essentially, this evolution starts with Jean Froissart (c. 1337 - c.1406). This topic has been admirably treated by a series of papers by Peter Blumenthal who made us, by the way, rediscover Voltaire as a most remarkable historian. As a rule, introducing concepts of causality, of argumentation and valorisation makes these texts on historical events more easily understandable.

But it is still a long way to go until, e.g., in the second half of the 19th century Johann Gustav Droysen publishes his Outline of the principles of history, i.e., a kind of metahistory, or Fernand Braudel invents his conception of a history beyond simple chronological order, leading to three different layers of time, aptly adapted, e.g., by Michael Foucault who even doesn’t bother to cite him.

It is quite interesting that after a series of mental efforts going on for centuries, one can arrive at an insight formulated eventually by the German critic Theodor Lessing (1872-1933) in the title of a book: Writing history as giving sense to what has no sense. And modern literary critics like Hayden White insist on the fact, that, despite telling us the contrary, historians continue using devices of literary texts when writing history.

[p. 88] At least French historical writing started from literary text models – and even modern historians cannot but resort to them at least in part: This is the heritage of telling stories – generally speaking: of narrative – inherent in history. Modern historians need techniques of thematising and rhematising, too. Instead of “let it be known to you” and the like they use subordinating or clefting techniques, the interplay between abstraction and concretisation, the technique of resuming, etc. Nevertheless, we see that Thesis II is plausible, too: It took considerable time until the cognitive and linguistic framework for historical prose proper developed – to the extent, that eventually even the critique of history, metahistory, became possible.

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18 Lessing 1927.
References


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