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PRONOMINAL CODE-SWITCHING IN *UBU ROI*

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ALFRED Jarry's *Ubu Roi* has long been recognized as a landmark of dramatical style. In evaluating the impact of the *Ubu* plays on the history of French literature, criticism has been focused on Jarry's creation of a new dramatic form,¹ on the relationship between Jarry's own character and that of Ubu,² and on the philosophy represented by the personality of Ubu.³ Père Ubu is portrayed as ugly, presumptuous and cowardly; he is at once the embodiment of absurdity, licentiousness, and evil. Throughout the trilogy of plays, he pursues his career of lust, crime, and triumph over ridicule, crushing all opposition and abusing all those he encounters. Jarry turns Père Ubu loose on his audience armed with a verbal arsenal of insults and disparaging tirades, enhanced by poetically engendered phrases, neologisms, and simple obscenities. Much of Ubu's overpowering effect

¹ To the abundant early criticisms, one may add more recent studies, among them: Henry A. Grubbs, "Alfred Jarry's theories of dramatic technique," *Romanic Review*, 26 (1935) 340-345; Dan M. Church, "Père Ubu: the creation of a literary type," *Drama Survey*, 4 (1965) 233-243; Brian E. Rainey, "Alfred Jarry and Ubu: the *Fin de siècle* in France," *Wascana Review*, 4 (1969) 28-36; Roger Shattuck, "What is 'pataphysics'?" *Evergreen Review* v. 4, no. 13 (1960).

² See, for example, Luigi Gozzi, "Di Jarry e del personaggio" *Il Verri* 25 (1967) 14-33; I. Konigsberg, "New light on Alfred Jarry's juvenalia," *Modern Language Quarterly*, 27 (1966) 299-305.

³ For instance, G. E. Wellwarth, "Alfred Jarry: the seed of the avant-garde drama" *Criticism*, 4 (1962) 108-119; Renato Mucci, "Jarry: la patafisica e il suo collège," *Letteratura* 31 (no. 85-87) 154-158.

can be directly attributed to his unique language, consisting of a blend of lyrical soliloquies, striking juxtapositions, and insane ravings. Ubu is many persons in one, an absurd and yet disturbingly effective schizophrenic, and as he variously assumes different postures, his style of speaking likewise changes to fit the situation. Perhaps the most characteristic pattern of Père Ubu's verbal schizophrenia emerges upon consideration of his conversations with Mère Ubu in the first of the trilogy, *Ubu Roi*.

The French language, through the choice of the second person pronouns *tu* and *vous*, is capable of a wide range of subtle connotations during personal address. The distinctions embodied in this pronominal dichotomy are many, and include the implicit hierarchization of speaker and listener, the self-evaluation of the speaker, and the setting of the overall mood. Originally, the main distinction was one of power; one addressed someone in a less powerful position than himself as *tu*, but received only the more respectful *vous* in reply. The mutual use of *tu* implied great intimacy, and was more widely used among the working classes, while the mutual *vous* predominated in situations involving an equal balance of power, and carried more formal overtones. In modern French, the basic distinction is largely one of personal intimacy rather than power, so that the non-mutual use of *tu* and *vous* is greatly curtailed.⁴

In general, the choice of pronouns between two individuals is invariant at any given time, due to the nature of the inherent connotations, and may be changed only if circumstances become suitably altered. The pronominal usage of one speaker to another therefore represents a socio-linguistic code⁵ characterizing both the speaker

⁴ For an enlightening study of this pronominal distinction in French and in other languages, see Roger Brown and Albert Gilman, "The pronouns of power and solidarity" in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge: M. I. T. Press, 1960; pp. 253-276. In French Canadian, the mutual use of *tu* predominates, with *vous* being reserved for priests and other individuals who by virtue of their age or social prestige are felt to occupy a position demanding a more reverential form of address.

⁵ For a more general study of social codes, see Basil Bernstein, "Elaborated and restricted codes: their social origins and some consequences" in *The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. J. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (*American Anthropologist*, v. 66, no. 6, pt. 2), pp. 55-69; D. L. Goyvaerts, "Linguistic behavior and the acquisition of social roles: one aspect of linguistic performance," *Studia Linguistica*, 26 (1972) 1-13.

and the situation, and as such may not be broken without resulting in a breach of etiquette. This code may be defined as the collection of linguistic forms which, by common convention of a particular speech community, are accepted as being appropriate to each given situation. One may therefore speak of a formal code, a casual code, an intimate code, and so forth. Part of each person's command of his own language is an awareness of the various codes, and acknowledge of the situations in which they must be used. By definition, therefore, every situation demands the exclusive use of one particular code by each person. Part of the outward manifestation of Ubu's utter disregard for the values of his society is his constant switching of this fundamentally invariant code, and the person bearing the brunt of his linguistic audacity is his own wife, Mère Ubu.

Consider the opening lines of the play which, after Père Ubu's preliminary interjection, proceed as follows:

MÈRE UBU: Oh, voilà du joli, Père Ubu, vous estes un fort grand voyou.

PÈRE UBU: Que ne vous assom'je, Mère Ubu!

Here, despite the banal volleys, a semblance of dignity is being preserved. Both parties are on an equal verbal footing and neither has sunk to the moral depths which will eventually be reached; hence the mutual *vous*. The situation is not stable, however, for Mère Ubu begins to taunt her husband about his loss of power and his present lot, thus provoking the first of many code-switches by the volatile Père Ubu:

MÈRE UBU: Comment! Après avoir été roi d'Aragon, vous vous contentez de mener aux revues une cinquantaine d'estafiers armés de coup-choux, quand vous pourriez faire succéder sur votre fiole la couronne de Pologne à celle d'Aragon?

PÈRE UBU: Ah, Mère Ubu, je ne comprends rien de ce que tu dis.

Here we observe Père Ubu slipping from his pedestal of self-righteousness and propriety: the animal instinct has been aroused and he is more interested in ferreting out his wife's designs than in maintaining himself linguistically aloof. Mère Ubu is quick to respond to the switch, for she replies:

Tu es si bête.

As the full impact of his wife's scheme hits Père Ubu, however, he reacts with another sudden code-shift:

MÈRE UBU: Qui t'empêche de massacrer toute la famille et de te mettre à leur place?

PÈRE UBU: Ah, Mère Ubu, vous me faites injure, et vous allez passer tout à l'heure par la casserole.

A moment of hesitation, a feeling of shock at the stark brutality of his wife's proposal, and Père Ubu returns to the formal style of address employed at the beginning of the scene. Certain of success, Mère Ubu continues to address her husband as *tu*, for, despite his protestations, Père Ubu has been convinced. Mère Ubu's remark, closing the first scene, reveals the power she wields over her pretentious husband:

Grâce à Dieu et à moi-même, peut-être dans huit jours serai-je reine de Pologne.

The next example of Père Ubu's variable usage of the verbal code comes in the following scene, during the banquet given to form the regicide conspiracy. Before the guests arrive, Père Ubu and his wife address each other as *tu*, and engage in a great deal of mutual insulting. Père Ubu is greedily devouring the food prepared for the guests, and Mère Ubu is trying to ensure that some food remains. Both parties are at their worst behavior, and the *tu* usage follows naturally from the surrounding events. Once the visitors have arrived, however, Père Ubu puffs himself up to the full extent of his pretentiousness, and all members of the party are addressed as *vous*. This pretence cannot be maintained for long, and when he becomes enraged at the amount of money spent in preparing the "feast," Père Ubu rebukes his wife with the familiar forms:

Eh! Me crois-tu empereur d'Orient pour faire de telles dépenses?

Mère Ubu brushes off this remark, and Père Ubu, seeking to reestablish a more formal mood, while chastizing his wife once again, retorts:

Ah! Je vais aiguïser mes dents contre vos mollets.

These attempts at restoring order notwithstanding, the meal has already begun to degenerate, and Mère Ubu continues to address her husband as *tu*. He soon follows suit, and as the discussion becomes more heated the invited Captain Bordure also becomes a recipient of the *tu* forms. At this point, Père Ubu and Mère Ubu are portrayed in their true forms, devoid of any further pretensions. The code-switching also comes to a stop, at least temporarily, for there are no longer any appearances to be maintained. Thus what seems at first glance to be a totally absurd and fanciful scene can be shown to possess an internal structure analyzable in terms of a linguistic model. For Père Ubu, the *tu* and *vous* forms of address conform to the basic dichotomy represented by his personality: the pompous and self-deceiving aspect, exemplified by *vous*, and the vile and base character, represented by *tu*. Mère Ubu is almost, but not quite, a reflection of her husband's linguistic usage, inasmuch as she is more consistent in the face of the reality of her relations with her husband; hence her more frequent use of *tu*.

In the first scene of Act Three, the Ubus are alone in the palace of the recently-dethroned King Wenceslas, reveling in their newly acquired wealth. Here, as during the latter part of the banquet scene, there are no pretences which need to be maintained; both Père Ubu and Mère Ubu are satiating their greed, oblivious to the standards of regal behavior. Both address each other as *tu*, as befits their actions, and continue to do so until Mère Ubu provokes the new king by the suggestion that he form an alliance with the young Prince Bougreilas. Père Ubu rises up in all his fury and cries:

Encore de l'argent à donner? Ah! non, du coup! vous m'avez fait gâcher bien vingt-deux millions.

This example of code-switching carries a different import from the previous cases, for it provides a clear portrayal of Père Ubu's schizophrenic tendencies. By returning to the *vous* form of address in a situation where there are no external factors which would define a mood of formality, he is transcending his plebian relations with his wife and assuming the role of a true monarch. Such a shift of style of course adds to the absurdity of the scene, for the very sentence he utters in this formal manner is indicative of his boundless greed

and selfishness. A more natural situation is achieved, however, as Mère Ubu continues to address her husband as *tu*, thus disregarding his rebuke. Unable to keep up his double identity, Père Ubu soon relapses into the *tu* form of address, and the proper perspective is restored.

The second scene of the same act shows King Ubu, Queen Ubu, and the noblemen who are being condemned to death. This is perhaps the most ludicrous scene of the entire play, for Père Ubu indulges in a wild jumble of execution, law-making, and financial transactions. The utter insanity of the personage of Ubu is nowhere better illustrated, and in keeping with the incongruity of the entire scene, Père Ubu addresses one and all as *tu*: nobles, magistrates, and of course his wife, in complete violation of the supposed formality of the situation, which demands the exclusive use of *vous*. The usage of *tu*, more fitting in view of Père Ubu's general attitude toward others, is thus juxtaposed with the formal *vous*, befitting a true king, but ludicrous in the mouth of Ubu. This contrast contributes to the tone set by Ubu's chaotically jumping from one affair to another, and from one personality to another.

Scene seven depicts a similar situation. Ubu, gathered with his wife and his *conseillers de phynances*, convenes the meeting with the formal *vous* being extended to everyone. Upon being provoked, by his wife and by the unexpected arrival of a messenger, he returns once again to the unkinglike *tu*, characterizing his most usual manner.

The following scene describes King Ubu mounting up to ride off to war. Mère Ubu speaks to her husband with the familiar *tu*, but when she informs him that his horse is starving to death, he retorts:

Elle est bonne celle-là! On me fait payer 12 sous par jour pour cette rosse et elle ne me peut porter. Vous vous fichez, corne d'Ubu, ou bien si vous me volez?

The switching of personalities is mirrored by the shifting of the linguistic code, exemplified by the choice of second person pronouns. Once more the code-shifting is provoked by Père Ubu's assuming a double role: first the comic figure, and second the outraged king. As he rides away and falls off his horse, Père Ubu resumes the addressing of his wife as *tu*, as if his fall to earth symbolized the fall of his dignity.

In the first scene of Act Five, we find Mère Ubu speaking to Père Ubu from the darkness, pretending to be the voice of an angel. Properly intimidated, Père Ubu addresses the "apparition" as *vous*, although his remarks become more daring as the conversation continues. Once he becomes aware that he is speaking to his wife, however, he returns to the usual style typifying their relationship:

Ah! c'est trop fort. Je vois bien que c'est toi, sottie chipie!

Relieved of the burden of speaking to a divine apparition, Ubu immediately sinks to his ground state, with no intervening styles being utilized along the way. As he proceeds to outline the list of tortures to which his wife will be subjected, he becomes increasingly less self-conscious, and in the height of his ferocity he even provokes a well-motivated code-switch on the part of Mère Ubu, who exclaims:

Grâce, monsieur Ubu!

Although couched in terms of an absurd drama, Jarry has provided a coherent and structured model of linguistic code-switching. The patterns of style-shifting which emerge from the text find their analogues in real life situations,⁶ and highlight the inherent power contained in the opposition *tu-vous*. As a social function this opposition defines a wide scale of protocols and implications, and as a literary device, it is capable of producing the sort of ordered heterogeneity to be found in *Ubu Roi*.

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⁶ Some examples of linguistic code-switching in real speech situations are discussed in William Labov, "The study of language in its social context," *Studium Generale*, 23 (1970) 30-87.