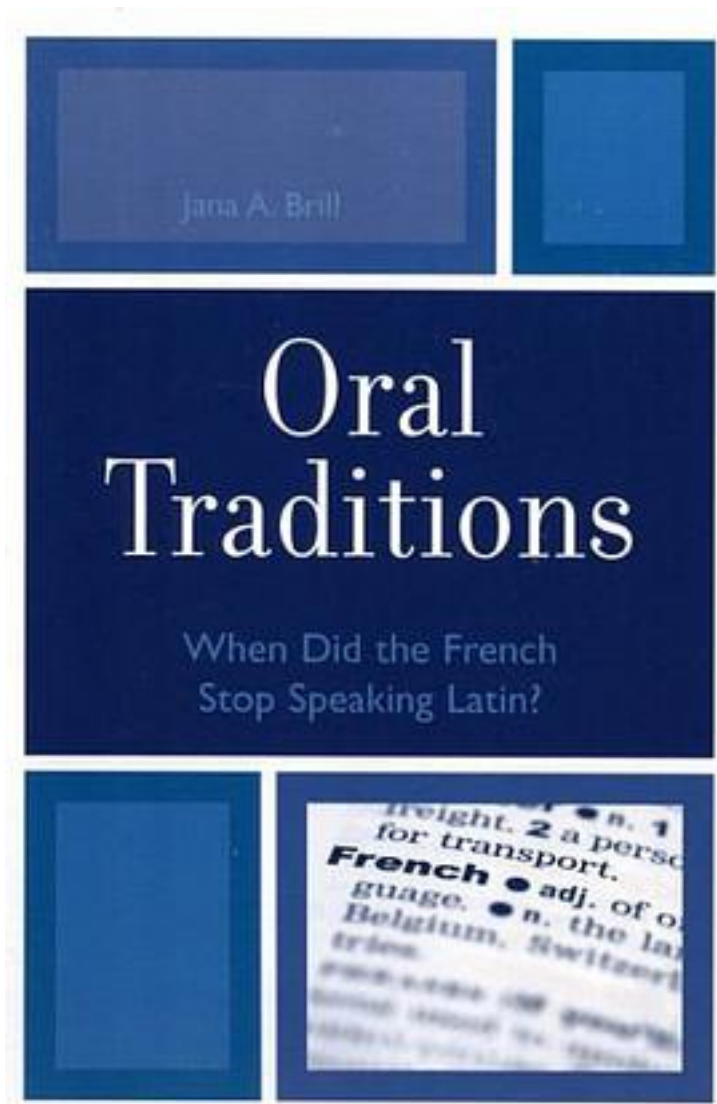


Oral Traditions



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In *Oral Traditions: When Did the French Stop Speaking Latin*, voices from 13th century street theatre, a 17th century fairy tale by Perrault, and the journal of an unhappy 19th century queen, blend to show how the French language evolved from its Latin roots. The focus is on past tense verbs, the core of oral and written narrative. In chapter one, selected prose passages from the 13th century "cantefable," *Auccassin et Nicolette*, are analyzed for verb usage. It appears that the more rustic characters preferred the traditional Latinate simple past, while the nobler, presumably more educated, speaker/singers occasionally tried the newer compound form for narration. Chapter two treats verb usage in Perrault's tale *Les Fees*. A key line in the 1695 manuscript shows that the "new" grammaticized compound past was already in use in the oral tradition of bedtime tales. Perrault "corrected" the syntax by reversing the order of the past participle and the following adverb. This change, the insertion of a locational adverb between the two parts of the compound, created a more Latinate and literary sound for his 1697 first edition. It offers us a glimpse of the oral/literary dynamic of the time. Hortense, the reluctant Queen of Holland, and Napoleon's stepdaughter and daughter-in-law, writes a romantic journal in correct schoolgirl French. In chapter three, we see and "hear" the situations and contexts appropriate to simple and compound past verb forms in the 19th century. Finally, the Appendix provides the transcriptions of taped recordings from the 1980's of three subjects from northern France, telling their versions of *Petit Chaperon Rouge* 'Little Red Riding Hood.' In addition to showing that verb forms are often memorized as part of a tale, these recordings demonstrate how traditional oral literature varies from speaker to speaker. Some speakers stick to the traditional telling style, others use more modern language. The sound of the Latinate simple past of French fairy tales announces a

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