Introduction

This chapter explores the extent to which the distinctive figurative language used by linguistic purists in sixteenth-century France is underpinned by what might be termed a mercantilist conception of linguistic exchange during the period of early capitalism. We explore the everyday experience of the French readers of Henri Estienne’s denunciations of what he considered to be the corrupting influence of Italian on the French language, with specific reference to their often hostile attitude towards expatriate Italian bankers and financiers, and examine how Estienne seeks to appeal, through a series of carefully chosen metaphors of economic exchange, to such ‘common ground’ knowledge.

While Polonius’ words to Laertes ‘neither a borrower nor a lender be’ can hardly be stretched to constitute a comment on the contemporary state of the English language, the advice that they contain (‘For loan oft loses both itself and friend, And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry’; Shakespeare [1998] *Hamlet* Act 1, Scene 3) seems apposite as a description of the particular concerns of those who sought, over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to limit or, indeed, halt and turn back the flow of foreign loanwords into their national language. Such early linguistic purism was by no means restricted to France, and the distinctive forms of polemical language that characterize it crossed cultural boundaries with disarming ease, especially given the fact that they were frequently used to castigate
borrowing from the very language from which they had themselves been borrowed. Two more quotations from contemporary English writers will set the tone for my discussion:

I am of this opinion that our own tongue shold be written cleane and pure, unmixt and unmangeled with borowing of other tongues, wherin if we take not heed by tijm, ever borowing and never payeng, she shall be fain to keep her house as bankrupt. For then doth our tongue naturallie and praisable utter her meaning, when she bouroweth no counterfeitness of other tongues to attire her self withall, but useth plainlie her own [...]. (Sir John Cheke, letter to Sir Thomas Hoby prefaced to Hoby’s translation of The Courtier (1561); cited in Baugh and Cable, 2002: 217)

Among all other lessons this should first be learned, that wee never affect any straunge ynkehorne termes, but to speake as is commonly received: neither seeking to be over fine, nor yet living over-carelesse, using our speeche as most men doe, and ordering our wittes as the fewest have done. Some seeke so far for outlandish English, that they forget altogether their mothers language. And I dare sweare this, if some of their mothers were alive, thei were not able to tell what they say: and yet these fine English clerkes will say, they speake in their mother tongue, if a man should charge them for counterfeiting the Kings English. (Thomas Wilson, Arte of Rhetorique (1553), ‘Plainnesse, what it is’; cited in Baugh and Cable, 2002: 218)

We meet here (and not for the last time) the distinctive language of the early purist and, in particular, some of the metaphors that become commonplace in discussions of language contact and influence: cleanliness, purity, integrity and wholeness, along with a characteristic emphasis on metaphors of – dysfunctional – economic exchange. For John Cheke, continued borrowing of foreign terms without repayment will result in linguistic bankruptcy, and the act of borrowing itself entails a disfigurement of the language that is akin to counterfeiting. Wilson, in his own contribution to the notorious ‘inkhorn’ controversy (primarily, but not exclusively, concerned with borrowing from Latin), denounces those that seek out ‘outlandish’ (i.e. foreign) words as counterfeiters of the King’s English. While these metaphors may raise a smile today, their ‘entailments’ (or logical consequences; see Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 157–8; Kövecses, 2002: 93–105) are more serious, and betray the