

Introduction

Some of the most exciting and stimulating literature to appear during the last few decades has been written by men and women living in, or originating from, former colonies of the various European powers. This is certainly true in the case of France and francophone literature. While not quite matching the regularity with which non-metropolitan 'English' authors have carried off the Mann Booker prize in recent years, winners of the most prestigious French literary prizes have included a significant number of 'francophone' writers: the Moroccan Tahar Ben Jelloun, the Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau, the Lebanese Amin Maalouf (Prix Goncourt), Ivory Coast's Ahmadou Kourouma (Prix Renaudot) and a string of writers such as Jonathan Littell (Goncourt), Dai Sijie, François Cheng (Prix Femina) and André Makine (Goncourt/Médicis) who are at best French by 'adoption'. Moreover, one of the latest additions to the group of forty 'immortels' who make up the Académie française is the celebrated Algerian novelist Assia Djebar. The tenuousness of the link between the French national space and an increasingly dynamic domain of literary output is one of the key, perhaps defining, characteristics of the field this book sets out to investigate: francophone literature. Yet it is highly questionable whether the term 'francophone literature' can be applied with any degree of accuracy to an easily identifiable and unchallenged corpus of texts. Part of the reason for this is that the word 'francophone' itself has become something of a label of convenience that often masks as much as it reveals. So any attempt at providing even a working notion of what 'francophone literature' is must begin by examining the terms francophone and *francophonie* in some detail.

The francophone world

Undoubtedly the most graphic way of representing the notion of *francophonie* is through maps. Just as vast tracts of the globe were formerly coloured pink to represent the territories ruled by the British Empire, so it is still possible today to map the world in ways that demonstrate how considerable areas of

its surface remain within the economic and cultural sphere of influence of metropolitan France. As this analogy with the history of Empire suggests, it is virtually impossible to discuss *francophonie* without connecting it to the history of European expansion, the imperial aspirations of individual nations and colonisation. The exact nature of this French influence today, how it operates, to what purposes and to whose benefit, are questions that will preoccupy us when we move on to discuss the concept of *francophonie* below. In this attempt to 'map' the field, however, it is probably sufficient to note that representations of the francophone world generally prefer to focus not on such politically sensitive ideas as 'influence' but on apparently more concrete and less controversial notions such as 'language use'. This is all well and good if we are content to view the map of the francophone world as a static snapshot. It is rather less satisfactory if we want to understand something of how and why French came to travel into so many foreign parts of the world. That sort of understanding comes at the price of acknowledging the fact that the French language was spread through the actions of individuals and groups and that it currently serves other individuals and groups in a variety of different ways. French did not travel abroad as a disembodied language and the history of its journey cannot easily be dissociated from its current state of health or its current pretensions to having status as a world language.

The journey of the French language to overseas territories can be seen as having occurred in two distinct waves that happened at two different periods of history. From the outset, however, political and economic considerations seem to have been paramount. These were certainly the motivations driving François Ier when, in 1533, with papal assent secured, he actively encouraged French ship-builders and navigators to challenge the supremacy of Spain and Portugal in trade across the Atlantic. Thus began what might be considered the first wave, a period of exploration and largely mercantilist activity that lasted almost two and a half centuries until the Treaty of Paris of 1763. It saw French vessels, explorers and traders active not only in the North and mid Atlantic but in the Indian Ocean and beyond. Nor did the discovery of a territory necessarily imply any commitment to an enduring presence or to occupation. Canada, discovered in 1534, did not begin to attract settlers as such until concerted efforts were set in train by Richelieu when he became 'superintendent of navigation and commerce' in 1626. Only slowly through the course of the seventeenth century did the settlement in *Nouvelle-France* take hold but it gradually expanded to cover the valley of the St Lawrence river, the Great Lakes region, Newfoundland and Acadia, while to the south the French had travelled along the course of the Mississippi to establish a colony in Louisiana and gain access to the Gulf of Mexico. By the early decades of the

eighteenth century the French presence in North America covered significant expanses of territory. This expansion led to conflict with the British colonial presence on the east coast that would eventually see the defeat of the French forces in 1759 and the handing over of the whole of Canada and its dependencies through the treaty of 1763. Part of Louisiana was ceded in the same treaty while the second part was sold to Britain by Napoleon in 1803. Within a short space of a few decades a whole American world seemed to have slipped between the fingers of a French monarchy keen to reap the benefits of its trade monopolies but oblivious to any wider implications that might attach to the possession of overseas territories. As for the populations that remained in the various francophone enclaves of North America, their fate was to play itself out into modern times as a struggle for cultural survival and ongoing interrogations about identity that continue to the present day.

Elsewhere, this period of mercantilist activity lasting almost three centuries saw the establishment of trading posts, forts, storage depots and embryonic colonial settlements as circumstances and necessity dictated. Much of it was regulated through state monopolies operating through companies created for the purpose and endowed with a royal charter. The transatlantic trade also involved the trade in slaves that provided the workforce on the Caribbean plantations, repopulating islands whose indigenous populations had effectively been exterminated by the Europeans. European historiography prefers to present this tale in terms of beginnings, providing dates for the 'discovery' or 'settlement' of various locations: Martinique, 1625; Guadeloupe, 1635; Cayenne, 1637; Louisiana, 1682; Saint-Domingue (later Haiti), 1697. For the indigenous populations, of course, it was experienced not as the beginning of history but as its end. The fact that French expansion in the Caribbean relied on the slave trade led traders to follow in the footsteps of those Portuguese traders who, as early as the sixteenth century, had established forts along the West African coast as holding posts for their human merchandise. Only the serious hazards of inland exploration in Africa (before the discovery of quinine in the mid nineteenth century) prevented more permanent forms of settlement being established at this time. Instead, trade centred on the major rivers flowing into the Atlantic and the Gulf of Guinea, although fortified posts at Saint-Louis on the Senegal river and Gorée would eventually provide France with a platform for later expansion into the African interior.

Such French presence as there was in West Africa at this time also served to provide supply points for traders heading for the Indian Ocean and eventually for the Far East and the Pacific. In the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries a number of trading posts or settlements were established, among them l'Île Bourbon (later, Ile de la Réunion), 1638; Madagascar, 1643;

various *comptoirs* in India: Pondichéry, 1674, Chandernagor, 1676; and when the Dutch withdrew in 1715, l'Île de France (later, Mauritius). Initial trading contacts were also made with Vietnam and Siam in the 1680s. The visit of a Siamese ambassador to the court of Louis XIV in 1684 would suggest that these early contacts were conducted on a relatively equal footing. As had been the case in North America, the growing rivalry between the French and the British on the Indian subcontinent hung in the balance throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. The Treaty of Paris considerably reduced French ambitions here too, however. By the mid century the Compagnie française des Indes had held sway over an area of Indian territory of more than a million square kilometres whereas a decade later, after 1763, the company withdrew to the five *comptoirs* that have maintained a vastly reduced French presence in India to the present day.

The bigger picture that is sketched out through these piecemeal ventures and adventures involving French traders, troops and missionaries is one of essentially Francocentric activity. Ultimately, the only justification for it was that it would provide immediate, material benefits for France. This explains the monarchy's relative readiness to concede Canada and other parts of North America to the British, to the great chagrin of the francophone populations there, or to throw in its hand in India. The Bourbons were committed to expansion for pragmatic reasons rather than as a matter of principle. For the French monarchy there was a dual attraction in the mercantilist activity: firstly, there was profit to be made, and secondly, overseas expansion allowed France to position and reposition itself in the power play of political interaction between the European states, effectively the geopolitics of the day. But France under monarchical rule was never committed to overseas expansion as a strategic political doctrine, and was probably incapable of even conceiving it in such terms. Indeed, after the Treaty of Paris, in the decades leading up to the Revolution of 1789, the defence of France's overseas possessions was pursued as much as an extension of European rivalries as it was for its own sake.

In the wars that ranged the Napoleonic revolutionary armies against the successive coalitions and alliances headed by England, France's overseas territories were both a theatre of combat and prizes to be seized. By 1810–11, the majority of French possessions had passed under British control and it was only with the restoration of the monarchy in 1815 that the tide gradually began to turn. The event that most clearly signalled more aggressively expansionist policies on the part of France was the military expedition to Algiers of 1830. This proved to be the first of a series of expeditions and invasions that were increasingly invested with a nationalist and imperialist significance as the century

progressed. The pattern that quickly became established as characteristic of this second wave of overseas expansion was the use of military force either of an expeditionary nature or mobilised in defence of endangered French missionaries or commercial interests. The military activity itself then paved the way for civilian settlement and colonisation. In the course of the century, following the invasion of 'Algeria', French forces began the colonisation of Senegal (1854), Indochina (1859), Nouvelle-Calédonie, French Polynesia and Tahiti (1860 onwards), Equatorial Africa (1880 onwards), Tunisia (1881) and Madagascar (1883), and tightened France's hold over the older colonies of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean.

The infrastructure put in place to support the colonial presence and administer the territories concerned became increasingly regimented, centralised and formalised by the French state as the imperial mission took shape. An important element of France's efforts to theorise and justify its colonial practice, to its own people as well as to the wider world, was the notion that superior European cultures owed it to their less fortunate fellow men and women in the colonies to bring them the benefits of civilisation. Language, of course, was a key vector through which this *mission civilisatrice* [civilising mission] could be carried out and schools were the conduit through which the elite members of indigenous society could be assimilated to French language, customs and values. So throughout this second wave of French expansion overseas, it is increasingly difficult to envisage the journey of French as that of a disembodied language, accidentally transferred and transplanted into distant parts of the world. On the contrary, its journey was planned as a matter of policy: French was actively and consciously exported as part of a concerted drive to suppress indigenous cultures and languages and replace them with the culture and language of the French colonisers.

One measure of the success achieved by colonial France's promotion of the French language is the extent to which it was eventually employed by opponents of colonial rule when the decolonisation struggles began to gather a head of steam in the latter half of the twentieth century. Within the often artificial colonial boundaries that France had erected to bring order to the colonial world it administered, French was one of the few effective unifying forces. The tool that had been used to assimilate populations to a French way of viewing the world, and a French ordering of affairs in general, was also used by those who sought to reject that order and win independence from France. This is true both on the political level, wherever negotiations needed to be conducted, and on a cultural level, wherever alternative world views and alternative expressions of identity needed to be articulated and defended. France's disengagement from its long flirtation with the colonial adventure was a messy and violent affair.

Within a decade of the end of the Second World War the terrible repression in Madagascar (1947) and wars in Indochina (1946–54) and Algeria (1954–62) could bear testimony to the difficulty France had in coming to terms with the disintegration of its empire.

Yet these politically decisive and, in humanitarian terms, tragic events cannot in themselves be considered decisive in so far as the journey of the French language is concerned. For many of the territories and nations that gained independence or came into being in the early 1960s, particularly in Africa, French was the only viable choice as official language since it alone was not associated with specific ethnic or tribal groups. In contexts where national unity was (and still is) threatened by tribal affiliations, French offered a prestigious alternative to local languages and had the added benefit of providing access to the international political scene. Even in countries like Algeria where resentment against the French and the desire for cultural self-affirmation ran high, the policy of Arabisation of the machinery of state has proved a long and painful process. The language of the education system or the language in which affairs of state are conducted cannot be changed overnight. Nor is it insignificant that the year that saw the end of the Algerian War of Independence (1962) also saw the beginning of a series of initiatives to promote the concept of *francophonie* and to give it some form of concrete institutional presence in relations between states. The publication of a special issue of the review *Esprit* in November 1962 is often seen as the starting point of these attempts to redefine *francophonie*. The first president of Senegal, Léopold-Sédar Senghor, was a contributor to the publication and in the years that followed he was one of the most energetic promoters of a drive to extend bilateral agreements between France and various ex-colonies into a network of multilateral agreements that could collectively become the institutional framework of *francophonie*.

Conceptualising *francophonie*

This chequered history of often violent, always confrontational, expansionist activity, and the corresponding violence and confrontations of decolonisation, provide the historical context with which any contemporary use of the word 'francophone' must in the long run seek to be reconciled. Yet as a linguistic term the meaning of the word 'francophone' is quite straightforward. It is generally understood as a mere synonym for 'French-speaking' or 'using French as a medium of expression'. But it is precisely because French is spoken in so many different contexts and situations across the world (including of course mainland France), precisely because it occludes the dramatic historical context