

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

outlined above (that it nevertheless inevitably connotes), and precisely because the variety and range of francophone literature is so great, that the term 'francophone' can so frequently be seen as meaning different things to different people and consequently as serving no useful purpose other than as a mere label. Worse than that, the single term 'francophone' is the only expression available to us when we want to describe what can be very distinct and frequently antagonistic versions of *francophonie*.

The problem here is not one of semantics since the meaning of the word 'francophone' is relatively easily inferable from its etymology: the two elements of 'francophone' derive from the Latin word *Francus*, the name given to members of the Frankish tribe which 'invaded' Gaul in the fifth and sixth centuries AD and destined to lend its name to that of modern-day France, and the Greek word *phônê* providing the notion of 'sound' or 'voice'. Thus 'francophone' indicates 'French-speaking' in much the same way that cognate expressions such as 'anglophone', 'hispanophone' and so on, are used to designate English speakers, Spanish speakers or other such groups. But whereas these latter terms remain relatively neutral, each describing a community of language users, the term 'francophone' has been invested with a range of additional ideological and political meanings. Consequently, it must really be considered as a classic example of a *faux ami* [a linguistic 'false friend']. Whereas the English version of the word is a relatively unproblematic, objective linguistic term, its French equivalent carries with it a panoply of connotations and is applicable to a far broader set of contexts. So, rather than restricting ourselves to interpreting the word 'francophone' through its narrow *semantic* content we would do well to consider the pragmatics of actual usage.

Indeed if we look to 'usage' rather than semantics we find that the word 'francophone' is used in two quite distinct sets of contexts. Firstly, it can be taken as in some way serving to *extend* the scope of the words 'France' or 'French', almost as though what is involved is a redrawing of some hidden boundary, or rather the pushing back of some invisible frontier. Thus it is common to hear mention of 'France and the francophone world' or 'French and francophone studies' or even, 'French and francophone literature'. In such expressions the yoking together of 'French and francophone' is very largely pleonastic. It gives the impression that we are simply being served extra helpings of the same dish: any difference between the two terms is minimised since both are understood to express a sense of common roots and common identity. Indeed their coupling is a way of promoting rather than interrogating the shared common ground. Thus we are in the presence of a homogenising effect: 'francophone' has the function of *supplementing* the words 'France' or 'French' in an inclusive gesture suggestive of the fact that what is on offer is 'more of the same'.

This view of *francophonie* is not one that invites us to dig deeper and worry about the underlying meanings the word is conveying. It diverts attention away from questions of semantic quality to focus on geographical quantity. In an expression like 'France and the francophone world', 'France' functions as the key reference point. By and large it remains what it always was when the supplementary term 'francophone' is tacked on. So the addition of 'and francophone' is a way of recognising (perhaps proclaiming or celebrating too) that France overflows its borders and that those elements which give meaning to the words 'France' and 'French' (French language, French culture, French sociopolitical values) are applicable to other geographical contexts than that of the national, metropolitan space. The source of authority remains 'France' or 'French' while the term 'francophone' serves merely to extend the applicability of that authority into other spaces and other situations. The conceptual framework elaborated to deal with metropolitan realities (including a whole range of value-laden notions about linguistic, cultural, social and political behaviours) is not challenged or even called into question because these other contexts and situations are seen as mere extensions of the metropolis and are not envisaged as being fundamentally different.

There is quite a large and ever-growing body of literature on the institutional, administrative and political aspects of what we might term 'official *francophonie*' in which this type of usage is very much the norm. The history and politics of francophone institutions is not a subject of central interest to us here but it is certainly an influential field since it is within this context that the official discourse on *francophonie* is to be most readily found, perpetuating a world view that not only confounds more questioning forms of analysis but actively counters their emergence. Much of the discourse celebrating the 'official', state-sponsored version of *francophonie* has a hagiographic, spiritualistic tone. Indeed, as one commentator has suggested in a recent article: 'one could be easily forgiven for mistaking *la Francophonie* for a new form of religion, such is the zeal it inspires in some of its most fervent supporters'.¹ It is characterised by a tendency to homogenise French/francophone interests and to conflate them, if only by locating them on one side of a binary, the other pole of which is the anglophone world. This is only natural since *francophonie* in its current guise is essentially a branch of the Fifth Republic's foreign policy. Although it is more generally understood as part of France's belated response to the loss of its empire and the unavoidable process of decolonisation, its origins are not unrelated to earlier efforts by President de Gaulle, in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, to promote French geopolitical interests and simultaneously to resist the spread of American influence throughout the world. Just as French and British imperial ambitions had been fuelled by

competition that led to the creation of their respective empires, so the processes of decolonisation coincide with parallel rearguard actions to preserve power and influence: Britain moved shortly after the Second World War to create the Commonwealth while France, perhaps partly in denial and no doubt distracted by the Algerian War, took considerably longer to realise the importance of creating *francophonie* as its own network of former colonial territories. What seems absolutely clear from these adversarial origins, and perhaps more importantly from the ongoing sense that 'Anglo-Saxon' (including American) interests remain in direct competition with francophone interests, is that *francophonie* is an important element of French statecraft, embroiled in geopolitical realities that go far beyond the linguistic and the cultural.

If the cement that really binds *francophonie* together is political and economic rather than cultural there is a case for re-examining the assumption that it is the ties of language that bind together the disparate members of the francophone community. It may well be the case that the desire to maintain mutually beneficial, good relations with France is a sufficient motivation for partners in the francophone 'contract' to align themselves with France and French interests, but this is a case of *post hoc non propter hoc*. If it is true that what brought the partners together was the (imposed) common thread of language it is probably equally true that the asymmetrical nature of power relations between centre and periphery, the overwhelming dominance of France over the vast majority of its weaker partners, is the real reason why the marriage endures. But these harsh, largely economic, realities rarely take centre stage. The homogenising discourse of official *francophonie* is, of course, part of the process of creating and sustaining a myth that serves to mask such realities. Indeed, the French *Académicien* Maurice Druon's recent claim that there is 'a spiritual and mystical dimension' [un sens spirituel et mystique] to the word *francophonie* is an example of such myth-making in action.² Benedict Anderson's much-quoted claim that nations are largely 'imagined communities' applies equally well to *francophonie*, but the effort to 'imagine' it through the prism of language alone at times seems inordinately artificial and counter-intuitive.

This first context of usage identified here could be caricatured as 'France looking outwards', embracing the francophone world within a unifying vision and a homogenising discourse that says more about itself than it does about the world it thus embraces. It has clear affinities with what Marie Louise Pratt has dubbed the 'imperial gaze' which both proceeds from and helps to construct the seer's position as 'Master-of-all-I-survey'.³ By way of direct contrast, the second major context of usage assumes the word 'francophone' to serve precisely as a marker of difference and diversity. It is tempting to suggest that the direction of the gaze is simply reversed and to cast the francophone periphery as 'looking

inwards' towards France, but this would be an oversimplification and the image is inaccurate. The periphery cannot be constituted as a unified, coherent subject position and, in any event, there is no reason why the multiple paths along which such a gaze (or gazes) might travel should have a real or imagined France as their final objective.

Although dictionaries tend to be rather coy about foregrounding this particular function of the word 'francophone' it is commonly used as a term of 'opposition' and as a way of marking a contrast between metropolitan France/French and 'other' speakers of French. In blunt terms, being able to state that one is 'French' is to claim a particular identity whereas the fact of being 'francophone' merely indicates a relationship to an 'identity' that belongs to someone else or, at best, to locate oneself in terms of a culture that is not one's own. The word 'francophone' *alludes* to identity without ever quite conferring it. Inevitably, this is a context of incompleteness, marked by difference, an inescapable sense of lower status and ultimately, possibly, exclusion rather than inclusion. These are emotive issues and deserve to be treated with some circumspection. It is not the case that the homogenising discourse of official *francophonie* works against inclusiveness. On the contrary, the rhetorical thrust of such discourse is unashamedly inclusive but it is invariably an inclusiveness that proceeds by way of assimilation. The celebration of difference and diversity is a fundamentally un-republican sentiment and it can only be allotted a space within official discourse and official thinking to the extent that its real implications remain unexamined. In a republican context what the unexamined future holds for such diversity is its eventual assimilation and transformation into a republican uniformity. The contention here then is not that the French/francophone distinction repeats colonialist or racist distinctions, or reinforces particularist views, but that it is constructed on the same type of binary opposition that characterises such distinctions.

Ultimately, of course, any attempt to assign meaning involves establishing differences and making distinctions: identity and 'otherness' are, after all, mutually dependent (mutually constitutive) concepts. But what is most striking in the case of the word 'francophone' is its radical ambivalence. The homogenising discourse of official *francophonie* appears to co-exist alongside a conception of the 'francophone' individual as irreducibly Other. Clearly these two notions are incompatible and allow scope for interpreting the systematic tension between the centre (metropolitan France) and the periphery (the francophone world) as an archetypal binary opposition separating 'us' from 'them'. Once again it is worth considering the fact that the words 'anglophone' and 'francophone' display a remarkable degree of dissymmetry in this respect. 'Anglophone' is used to designate 'a person who speaks English' and although it may be used

to refer especially to native speakers of the language it is also used of other English speakers. It is thus a neutral, linguistic term, with connotations of inclusiveness and without connotations of hierarchy. There is none of the over-determination of the word that we find in the way 'francophone' is commonly used to refer to a particular category of French-speaker, occupying a particular, frequently inferior, position with regard to metropolitan France / French speakers.

Clearly both these contrasting usages of the word 'francophone' relate to two quite different ways of conceptualising *francophonie*: in hierarchical terms, the first might be seen as a top-down version that emphasises the unified vision radiating outwards from the French centre; the second is a bottom-up version which intrinsically values and celebrates diversity for its own sake and consequently challenges the (republican) authority of the centre. Arguably, the first usage has never ceased to dominate the institutionalised, political discourse of *francophonie*. The will to maintain influence, power and control, as well as to defend and promote French interests has underpinned this conception of *francophonie* from the outset. The second usage is the one that has come to dominate *francophonie* in the domain of cultural practice and cultural production and is therefore directly relevant to our investigation of the francophone literary scene. For one thing, the implicitly subaltern status it confers on the 'francophone' reflects not only the historical reality of the ways French-francophone relationships largely came into being and evolved, it squares more accurately with what we know about the contemporary world and contemporary international relations. Moreover, the emphasis on 'difference' reflects the wider heterogeneity of the various types of francophone identity and through a process of retroaction it helps call into question the stability and homogeneity of the notion of Frenchness itself, particularly when portrayed as a characteristic of the metropolis alone. If we pursue this line of thinking, we find not only that 'meanings' need to be interrogated more closely but that conceptual frameworks need to be adapted and recast to reflect the decentring of France and French from the position of authority these words continue to occupy in the first type of usage. Indeed, the two types of usage could themselves be caricatured as, on the one hand, an imperial (or post-imperial) usage which seeks to extend the sway of Frenchness over other spaces while assimilating the 'francophone' into a single homogenised totality, and on the other a counter-hegemonic usage which insists on respecting the individuated identity of the francophone 'other' and its capacity for autonomous agency.

So what tends to be the problem at the heart of these two contrasting types of usage is not so much what is *meant* by the word 'francophone' in each case, as how each serves to highlight (or to mask) the situation of the speaker in relation

to the word's meaning. In other words, the expression 'francophone' inevitably evokes a relationship or a set of relationships. To argue for a view of *francophonie* as foregrounding *relationships*, spoken or unspoken, is both to echo and to advocate an essentially pragmatics-based approach to understanding the word. In practical terms this means paying careful attention to subject positions (who is speaking? where from? and for what purpose?), delving into historical and cultural contexts so that we avoid imposing our own values and hierarchies on others, and laying bare conceptual and ideological affiliations that otherwise might easily be left unexamined. These type of concerns are all consistent with a view of francophone literatures as postcolonial literatures, rather than as exotic offshoots of the national literature of France.

The importance of the 'positioning' of the subject can be easily illustrated. On a relatively abstract level it can be demonstrated once again by contrasting the way the words 'French' and 'francophone' are used. Unlike the adjective 'French', which is relatively unidimensional and homogeneous (the nation talking to itself or to its own kind), the word 'francophone' is multidimensional and always connotes the presence of 'otherness' somewhere within the chain of communication. Whether this 'otherness', this difference, is seen as a threat or as a resource, as desirable or undesirable, as something to be preserved or something that should be allowed (or encouraged) to be gradually assimilated and reduced, will depend on the perspective of the parties involved. These perspectives themselves will have deep and complex motivations with psychological, political, economic, cultural, social and gender dimensions. The term 'francophone' tells us nothing substantive about such attitudes and motivations. In this respect it is a very blunt instrument indeed. Its job is merely to remind us that such issues vaguely form part of the context in which the word is used and that they possibly deserve our attention.

On a more concrete level the importance of the subject position can be exemplified by applying the epithet 'francophone' to two contrasting individuals: it can be used with equal accuracy to describe both the Congolese writer Sony Labou Tansi, the 'colonised subject' who claimed 'J'écris en français parce que c'est dans cette langue-là que le peuple dont je témoigne a été violé, c'est dans cette langue-là que moi-même j'ai été violé' [I write in French because it is in that language that the people to whom I bear testimony was raped, it is in that language that I myself was raped], and Leopold II of Belgium (the colonising European ruler responsible for the 'rape' in question).⁴ This example is all the more pertinent in that it clearly serves to conflate as many distinctions as it can be called upon to elucidate. Moreover, it actually locates both of these very different uses of the word 'francophone' outside metropolitan France. But whereas Leopold's claim to francophone status is grounded in contiguity (France and Belgium

share a common border) and overarching solidarity of purpose (France and Belgium were both metropolitan colonial powers), Sony Labou Tansi's francophone identity can be seen as foregrounding conflictual relations and resistance to 'Western' domination. There is something scandalous about the fact that a single term can be used to describe two such different men. But what we should not lose sight of is the lesson this juxtaposition teaches us about the limits of the word's usefulness, indeed its power to occlude vital historical and political distinctions.

The shortcomings of the term 'francophone' identified here are bound up with the fact that it is inevitably used in contexts where power relations are crucial and yet it purports, by and large, to remain silent about such questions. To understand the full extent of this silent complicity with power structures it is worth looking a little more closely at the way the word emerged as a particular way of encoding French nationalism as this was mutating into fully fledged imperialism.

Historicism and historiography

As is well known, the first recorded use of the word 'francophone' is attributed to the geographer Onésime Reclus who published a number of works in the latter third of the nineteenth century in which he militates in favour of colonial expansion. His originality lay precisely in the importance he accorded to language as a key element of the imperialist project. In his view, the prestige of France and the cultural values France held dear were inextricably linked to the French language: so much so that imperialist expansion itself could be envisioned primarily in linguistic terms. In the early 1880s far more influential figures than him, such as Jules Ferry, then minister of foreign affairs, were also arguing that France must pursue expansionist policies and were 'justifying' their stance by appealing to notions of racial superiority, commercial self-interest and the internal power play of European political influence. Reclus argued from a more abstract and far narrower position. He believed that ensuring the spread of the French language to other regions of the globe and to other populations was sufficient as an end in itself. What both men shared was a large dose of nationalistic pride and a conviction that expansionist policies were right for France. For Reclus these could be figured metaphorically in terms of 'mapping' the globe but more tellingly through the synecdoche by which the nation and its civilisation were figured through language. The aspiration to export the French language to far-flung corners of the world was in effect the way that nationalism could be translated into imperialism.