

The French Language at a Glance: A Socio-Historical Perspective

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ABSTRACT Apart from English, very few international languages can boast of such a rich history and documentation as the French language. It enjoys, more than many other languages, tremendous prestige and internationality. It is arguably at par with English in its status as a major language of business at the United Nations. French literature, on its part, has made an enduring impact on the literary developments of the Western world, being the most subscribed after English. The new status being enjoyed by French was however brought about by the efforts of Ronsard, Du Bellay, etc. in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. From its Latin origins in the early Middle Ages, it grew through various levels of development and standardization before assuming its final standard form in the 18th century. However, in spite of France's promotion and propaganda efforts through its various agencies like the Alliance Française, the TV5 international television channel and the numerous French Cultural Centers all over the globe, many people today do not still seem to appreciate fully its incredible socio-cultural endowment. Moreover, its contributions to world literature and international affairs are quite substantial. Unfortunately, many people still do not see French beyond the surface value of its common sounds and practical, everyday use.

INTRODUCTION

Many of our compatriots and even colleagues in the ivory tower usually take French for granted. For many, it is not more than one of those clichés or leitmotifs of *Comment ça va; comment allez-vous?* Or, *we k'omonte na ivu?*, meaning: "You impregnated that girl?" (in Urhobo, a major language of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria); playing upon the homophony between sound and meaning. Yet for others, it is the language of Charles de Gaulle, the language of France, Togo and Benin Republic, etc. It follows that many of us make do with deriving fun from echoing some of its common sounds, believing that learning it is either impossible or not worth the while: to what avail will a Nigerian put his energy into the study of French. In a sense they are all right. They are wrong in many more senses. In the intellectual and literary world, many scholars and researchers who carry out their research in the English language more often than not, tend to ignore the utility of French in world politics, literature and Science. They hardly think beyond William Shakespeare Chaucer or even Samuel Beckett whose works are translated from the original French. Those who stumbled over some French in their school days just feel satisfied to tell you "bonjour" or "comment ça va?", which many others cannot even attempt.

The above problems stem from the inadequa-

cies of our education system which has over the years been built on narrow curricula and programmes. In Togo or Côte d'Ivoire it will certainly not be so for a graduate of the lycée (high school or college), especially those who got to the sixth form. They would discuss many subjects with some relative ease, even in English. This tradition of conservatism which we inherited from the British owners of our language, has contributed largely to our failure to expose ourselves to and learn the world's number two language, second only to English by United Nations standards. It has also contributed to our failure to secure many international jobs. Many of us do not know the other side of Kofi Anan, the current Secretary General of the United Nations: he is quite at home in French. Bhutros Bhutros Ghali, his predecessor, was proficient in English, French and several other languages outside his native Arabic. Our notion of French here is much broader than it may sound ordinarily. It means French as a teaching and research discipline at University level. One can also talk about French studies in this context, comprising the language itself, its morpho-syntactic, phonological aspects, its use in time and space as well as its literatures. It also includes aspects of the cultural and behavioral patterns of the owners of the language. The major objective of this paper, therefore, is to establish a concise, panoramic view of the origin, development and

growth of the French language as an important international language in the modern world.

THE ORIGINS AND SCOPE OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

We must first situate this language in the annals of history in order to be able to establish a true picture of its growth, stability, its dynamism, its potentials and prospects in the international affairs of the new world. The import of this lies in the theory that languages can exist, grow or flourish and die. Many which do not die completely undergo quite substantial changes over time, just like Yoruba and many Edo languages and dialects being modernized and anglicized today by our young folk. Latin and Greek for instance have become dead and almost extinct. Our definition of a dead language here is that one which ceases to be useful in the daily communication and documentation requirements of its own society. Even though most of the liturgy and mass at the Basilica of Saint Peter in the Vatican may still be dispensed in Latin, it is no longer possible for the inhabitants of that city-state to carry out their daily functions in Latin. And if their representative has to contribute to the debate at the United Nations' General Assembly session, he will have to do so in English or French. On the other hand, Latin was the language of prestige and intellect up to the end of the Middle Ages and even part of the 17th century. It was the language of the church, the language of literature, science and medicine.

The factors that led to the fall and eventual death of Latin are beyond the scope of this paper. But its prestige and use declined with the fall of the Roman Empire which was brought about by the invasion of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. But unlike Latin; French has made steady progress as a modern, living language ever since the 9th century AD when it was first attributed the status of a language. This progress and growth may continue in view of the fact that wars and conquests occur less in the modern world.

France is often described as a country of Latin language and culture. This is because the French language, civilization and culture, as they stand today, have their roots in Latin and the Roman culture and civilization. Indeed, most peoples of the world today have adopted the languages of their masters, either through conquest or through

colonization. The former was the case of France.

By 52 AD Caesar had completely overrun Gaul (as France was then called) and established dominion over it. This meant that the Franks, the original inhabitants of Gaul, had to adopt roman religion, legal system and language, which, of course, was Latin. And this Latin necessarily went with Roman culture, naturally vehicled by it. However, the adoption of a language is not usually a clear-cut process. It is not usually observable in the immediate but only after sometime when changes are noticed.

French was a child of necessity which evolved from Latin through a process of simplification and vulgarization of Latin. The man on the street found the classical Latin rather difficult, especially the grammar with all its inflections and the word order of the basic structure. Even at the phonetic level vowel clusters and diphthongs were dropped. For example *aurum* in Latin, meaning gold, became *or* (French). The initial process of pidginization and simplification lasted some seven centuries before the earliest version of what could be called French was documented in 842.

Upon the death of Louis the Pious, a descendant of Charlemagne (Charles the Great) in 840, there was a succession struggle between his three sons, Louis the German (Louis le Germanique), Louis the Bald (Louis le Chauve) and Lothair. Even though, by all accounts and considerations, Lothair had the fairest claim to the crown, his brother, Louis le Germanique was more politically inclined, endowed also with some sugar-coated tongue. He then mobilized followers and, flanked by Louis the Bald, he made a solemn declaration on oath, in the city of Strasburg (France) laying claim to the crown of the Empire. The Language of this oath, usually called the Strasburg Oaths (*Le Serment de Strasbourg*), was romance (le roman). This romance document of 842 is generally agreed to be the earliest record of written French. It was, of course, half Latin and half French as the text below shows. According to Peter Rickard (1974: 30) the text of the oaths was included in the middle of a Latin chronicle titled *The History of the sons of Pious* by Nithardus in the original *romana lingua*.

Pro Déo amùr et pro christian poblo et nostro commùn salvamént, d'ist in avant, in quant Déus savir et podir me dunat, si salvaràì éo cist méon fràdre kàrlo et in ajudha et in cadhùna cosa, si cum om per dreit son fradra salvar dift, in o quid il

mi altresì fazet, et in Ludhér nul plaid nùmquam prindrai qui, méon vol, cist méon fràdre Karlé in damno sit.

(For the love of God and for the salvation of the Christian people and for our common salvation, from this day forward, in so far as God gives me knowledge and power, I will help this my brother Charles both in aid and in everything, as one ought by right to help one's brother, on condition that he does the same for me, and I will never undertake any agreement with Lothair which, by my consent, might be of harm to this my brother Charles).

EARLY DEVELOPMENT: THE QUEST FOR PRESTIGE AND RECOGNITION

Interestingly, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (894-1154), which occupies about an equivalent position in the history of the English language, was written about the same period. We cannot help making this comparison at this stage because French and English, two very close but rival languages on both sides of the English Channel, have always had to interact and compete with each other. However, whereas the Anglo-Saxon chronicle established the annals of English prose poems in appreciable volumes as early as that period, the Strasburg document was mainly socio-political in content. Literary texts in old or middle French were to appear as from the 12th Century. In line with our objective to treat English here as a sister, albeit rival language which shared identical history and experiences, let us hasten to mention here that with the Norman conquest of England in 1066, Anglo-Norman, a French based language, was imposed on the English court as official language.

The second landmark in the records of written French is *The Song Of Roland*, *La chanson de Roland* (1170), an epic narrative of over 4,000 lines. It is classified under the so-called "chansons de gestes" (songs of deeds) or mimed songs, because the poems were presented through acting, miming, music and dance, accompanied by various instruments. The stories were usually built on Christianity, passion, war as well as war heroes and important personalities. *The song of Roland* particularly features Charlemagne's wars of expansion in the Pyrénées and Spain, against the Sarasins with Oliver as Charlemagne's hero. An epic narrative based on legend and history, the major story was inspired by the account of a

great historian, Eginhard, on the Life of Charlemagne in his famous book *Vita Caroli* (*The life of Charles*).

Apart from the above major landmarks in the history of the French language, there are other significant milestones in the development and metamorphosis of the language in the 16th century:

- 1549: Publication of the famous *Défense et illustration de la langue françoise* (later *françoise* and then *française* (modern French) by the poet Joachim du Bellay. Apart from being the best known plea for the independent existence of the French language, it set out standards rules and guidelines for the writing of poetry and basic rules of grammar.
- 1559: The great humanist Jean Bodin put up a plea for the use of French as a medium of instruction in the arts and sciences
- c. 1559: Pierre de la Ramée called the bluff and started lecturing in French at the College de France.
- 1541: Calvin's *Institution chretienne*, originally written in Latin in 1536, was published in French. This is significant, in view of the intolerant attitude of the Church and the Sorbonne (University of Paris) to the use of the new vernacular, especially in the church and for worship.
- 1565: Robert Estienne published his *Traicté de la conformité du langage françois avec le grec*, arguing that French was superior to Italian and other European languages in view of its closeness to Greek.
- 1607: Charles Maupas published *Grammaire Françoise*. Peter Rickard (1974: 102) sums of the enormous breakthrough at this period in the following words:

At least by now French had come of age, and was respectable: it was not something to apologize for. It was being used for a wide range of technical, scientific and literary purposes. It had proved its adaptability to changing circumstances, its suitability for conveying complex and subtle ideas, and its capacity for stylistic variation.

STANDARDIZATION AND DEFENCE OF THE FRENCH LANGUAGE

In the 17th century, the major developmental milestones were mainly in the areas of standardization and codification of the

breakthroughs of the previous century. With the long reign of Louis XIV who took so much interest in the arts and the French language, just like Queen Elizabeth 1 of England, just before him, the stage was set for what we now call modern French. Classical writers like Racine (tragedy), Pierre Corneille (tragedy) and Molière (comedy) wrote profusely in a French which is close enough to what we have today. But by far, it was the French Revolution and revolutionary years (1789-1799) that really aroused the consciousness for the elaboration of modern French. Some of the major milestones in the classical, neoclassical and the modern periods are as follows:

- The founding of the prestigious Academie Française (French Academy) by Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIV's Prime Minister, in 1635 to cater for the growth, development and standardization of the French language in the areas of grammar, vocabulary and orthography, etc. in terms of the foregoing (spelling, words, that are properly French, etc.) the dictionary of the French Academy, conservative as it is, is supposed to be the final point of reference.
- Other publications and events in the struggle for the survival of French are:
 - The publication of *Les avantages de la langue Française* in 1669 by Le Laboureur.
 - *L'Excellence de la langue Française* by Fr Chapentier in 1683
 - Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (dictionnaire raisonné des arts et des sciences) in 1748

Naturally, the fall of the Roman Empire had an immediate declining impact on the development of the new vernacular, ie the French language, which was tied to the Roman Empire and its Latin. But paradoxically, this fall of Latin was to serve as a catalyst to the rise and development of the emerging French language in the 16th century, a period which witnessed most of the legal, political social and structural instruments and foundations for the proper establishment of the French language. It was in the 16th century that Ronsard, Joachim du Bellay and other members of the Pléiade, a radical intellectual group fighting for the growth of French, mounted the defence of the French language, a defence clearly unprecedented in the history of languages. This defence has not even abated today, especially when it is faced with an ever tougher competition with an ever growing rival, English. The only significantly known defence body for English in

the modern world is the Society for Pure English established in 1913 to resist and campaign against degenerate tendencies in the use of English.

CHALLENGES IN THE MODERN WORLD

We have just inferred above that, more than in any other international language, defence is quite an issue in the case of French. Aside the works and efforts of Ronsard, du Bellay, etc, as well as the French Academy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries respectively and after, which constitute defending the French language, the formal definition of defence here is the steps taken in the modern world to ensure that French maintains its position as the world's foremost language of international diplomacy and politics. In spite of the concessions we have made to English in the preceding paragraphs as being "superior" in prestige and in numbers to French, Peter Rickard (1974: 150), an Englishman himself, in fact concedes that English has rivaled French only in the twentieth century.

The distribution of the French language in the world today, whether as a first or second language, is impressive, when we compare it with position of French at the time of the Revolution; but such a comparison is of limited validity for French, which had no serious rival then as an international language...

In spite of the growing rivalries of English in the nineteenth century, French continued nevertheless to be the normal diplomatic language. In the twentieth century, however it has met with serious setbacks in this function.

Rickard's position clearly unravels the paradox of the French advantage in international bilingual arrangements and organizations. It is more of official usage, aesthetic appeal and influence than numbers. The French have continually had an advantage at the United Nations whose proceedings and documentations are officially in French and English. Kofi Anan is Secretary General today because France threatened to veto any candidature that was not bilingual. In Canada, from Trudeau to Brian Mulroney and Jean Chrétien, French Quebec, one out of ten province with a population of 8 million out of Canada's 24, has produced three Prime Ministers in a row. As we said in the opening paragraphs, it is due to the fact that the French speak and write English more than the English reach out to French, probably due to conser-

vatism. Otherwise, if numbers were the determining factors for linguistic dominance, Chinese, spoken by a quarter of the world's population, should control the affairs of the modern world.

But quite apart from the physical attractiveness of the French language, France has not folded its arms to watch the language decline or grow. It has done quite a lot for the continued survival and sustenance of the language through the creation of agencies and institutions which ensure that French does not yield grounds in terms of prestige and position in international affairs. Individuals and non governmental organizations have also been involved in the fight for survival. Such organizations have always had some generous financial and other forms of support from the French government.

The biggest and most recent of such organizations is the Francophonie, a counterpart of the Commonwealth, which ensures economic, political and social cooperation among the French speaking nations of the world. Starting from Versailles, near Paris in 1986, it holds biennial conferences of French Heads of State to strengthen the French *brotherhood*.

The Alliance Française (op. cit.), an organization set up purely to spread the teaching and learning of the French language to all corners of the earth as deliberate policy, has been growing steadily, with some five branches and twice as many French Language Centres in Nigeria, for instance. In addition to this, every foreign mission of France has a French cultural Centre by its side. The considerable energy which the French plough into the maintenance of their cultural heritage, part of which is the language, is outstanding. S.E Osazuwa (1997: 11) argues that the political tension in Quebec (Canada) is rather a socio-historical one for Quebecers struggling to assert their French roots.

Indeed the Quebec sovereignty question is not a question of money, nor is it an economic problem. It is much more than a political question. It is a historico-cultural question. It is about a French people who find themselves drowned in an American socio-cultural environment, incapable of finding its French and Francophone essence.

In terms of publications and research organizations set up for the survival of the French language and culture, especially in the middle of the nineteenth century, many are still surviving and growing. Among them are:

- Le Bilinguisme mondial (1951) for the

encouragement of international bilingualism, obviously to the advantage of French.

- Le Français Fondamental (1954) a collection of basic essential vocabulary for the teaching of French as a foreign language.
- Office du vocabulaire français (1957)
- Comité pour la defense et l'expansion de la langue française (1966)
- Fédération internationale pour la sauvegarde du français universel (1963)
- Academie Canadienne française (Montreal 1957)
- Office de la langue française (Quebec, 1961)
- Conseil pour le développement de la langue française en Louisiane (Louisiana-USA, 1961).

The above organs of the French 'war machine' have been in the vanguard of the promotion of the French language. An exhaustive list is impossible within the limits of this view of French "at a glance". For the French, the struggle continues.

CONCLUSION

In spite of its past glories, especially up to early twentieth century when French enjoyed unlimited prestige as the language of selected aristocrats, there is still a lot to be done, especially in the face of English invading essential areas of high tech like the computer and other hardware in information technology. Although borrowing is an essential traditional character of language, French has borrowed so much more than it has given out to English in the modern world of science and technology. The computer key "enter" or "return" has become a universal language which even the computers with French keyboards have had to adopt. Even at that, French has today established itself as a choice language of international diplomacy and politics, international sports like the Olympic Games and the World Cup, as well as an important international language for cultural, literary discourse.

Although it had in the past dominated the language of hotel management and gastronomy, tourism and diplomacy, this new era of technology might herald the beginning of a new war of supremacy with English.

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