

Re: La Francophonie

Lessons from France: How English in the U.S. might benefit from international advocacy

Report by Gerda Bikales

Though I can hardly say it without a chuckle, my French acquaintances assure me that there is nothing funny about the word "francophonie," a term coined in 1880 by an obscure geographer wanting to denote the totality of people and countries utilizing the French language in some fashion. Today it is a serious word applied to a serious purpose, which French people readily understand and approve.

Watching in anguish as English steadily forged ahead to become the world's foremost international language, France has not stood idly by. Starting in the sixties, the French government undertook a series of counter moves to hold the line on the erosion of French around the world. In 1965, it signed a bilateral accord with Quebec, making teachers of French

Gerda Bikales is a writer and public policy analyst who has long been active in the defense of English as the common language of the United States, serving for five years as the first executive director of U.S. English. She reports from Paris where she will be residing for two years.

available to the Province. The following year, a high level commission for the defense of French was chartered, and a year later an international association of French-speaking parliamentarians was launched. The push for a still stronger international organization for the defense of French came largely from the newly independent African states, anxious to preserve the language of their colonial past as a bridge to the modern world and to one another, and wishing to see its prestige restored. In response to these concerns, the High Council for *la francophonie* was created in 1984, and held its first summit meeting two years later, attracting representatives from 41 countries.

Bureaucratically, *la francophonie* was initially given a very visible presence within the office of the Prime Minister, then attached to the Ministry of Culture. The Government of President Jacques Chirac transferred it recently to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where it enjoys a quasi-autonomous sub-cabinet status of considerable importance. The move to the ministry of Foreign Affairs is significant: language is perceived as a component of French foreign policy.

La francophonie has evolved a three-pronged mission that is clear, widely known and readily accepted by the

French public. It is, first and foremost, to expand the reach of the French language across the world. A related objective is the creation of conditions favorable to the development of the French culture and civilization wherever. Finally, it is the vehicle for promoting a sense of solidarity among all French speaking countries, rewarding them economically and politically for their loyalty. So successful have the French been in keeping their former colonies in the French camp that the President of Benin, host of the sixth summit held in his country last December, chided President Chirac for France's insufficient adherence to *la francophonie*. This pique brought a promise from the French president, who at times has been known to slip into fluent English, that he will soon issue an executive order mandating that all cabinet members traveling abroad speak French in public.

The importance of *la francophonie* was underlined by the presence at the summit of the French president, who came despite a series of crippling strikes that paralyzed his country. Jean Chretien of Canada was there, and so was the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. The summit was a fine opportunity, of course, for the head of that troubled organization to

court votes in his re-election bid among the countries in attendance. But should he be unsuccessful in his quest for a second term as Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros-Ghali need not worry about his future employment: the delegates decided to create a Secretariat of *la francophonie*, to be headed by a Secretary-General and based precisely on the United Nations model. The well-known French-speaking Egyptian diplomat would appear to be the ideal candidate for this position.

The Benin summit admitted its forty-ninth member: Moldavia, formerly part of the Soviet Union, now an independent republic. Rumania and Bulgaria, former Eastern bloc countries in which French survived the imposition of extensive Russian language teaching, are full members. Poland, once very much in the French camp, has probably drifted too far into English to join up. Quebec is a member, *naturellement*. But so is New Brunswick — and so is the Canadian federation itself. Louisiana has acquired observer status.

Long-term planning on the future direction of *la francophonie* is carried out by

the aptly-named “committee for reflection,” which urged the rapid development of a competitive position for the French on the new information highways. France, an early leader in the computer revolution, has seen its advantage dissipate, in part because the field has progressed in English. The English language dominance in electronic communications is decried as a threat to cultural diversity, a threat to which *la francophonie* is pledged to respond with substantial investments to make the electronic highway more accessible and friendly to French-speakers. While francophonie summitry has played out on an international scale, France has not neglected the interests of the French language at home. In 1992, taking no chances on any internal challenge to the supremacy of French, the constitution was amended to declare that “the language of the Republic is French.” Further elaboration of this principle was enunciated by law in 1994. Recently, in a move to counter the popularity of English-language songs, radio and television stations have been ordered to devote forty percent of their music

programs to songs in French. None of this has created much of a fuss. Unlike America, where any attempt to give a measure of legal protection to the national language is greeted with hysterical denunciations and predictions of an imminent fascist take-over, the need to protect the French nation’s language is self-evident to its people.

There may be some useful lessons for Americans in the history of *la francophonie*, especially in the wake of several court rulings that endanger the various state and local laws protecting English as the common language of the U.S. Just as France’s former colonies in Africa and Indochina have found it productive to pressure their formal colonial masters for the protection and promotion of French, so the former British colonies in North America in which English is under serious challenge may benefit from pressuring England to take the lead in the creation of an aggressive international body for the defense of English. Sri Lanka, India, and perhaps other countries where the cementing role of English has come to be appreciated, may wish to join North America in lobbying Her Majesty’s government for such an organism. For no one in the English-speaking world — no, make that no one in the world — can benefit from a United States and Canada decimated by the assault of competing languages. Anglophonia, anyone? □