

Patrick Corcoran



The Cambridge **Introduction** to

Francophone Literature

CAMBRIDGE

www.cambridge.org/9780521849715

This page intentionally left blank

*The Cambridge Introduction to
Francophone Literature*

The literature of French-speaking countries forms a distinct body of work quite separate from literature written in France itself, offering a passionate, creative engagement with their postcolonial cultures. This book provides an introduction to the literatures that have emerged in the French-speaking countries and regions of the world in recent decades, illustrating their astonishing breadth and diversity, and exploring their constant state of tension with the literature of France. The study opens with a wide-ranging discussion of the idea of *francophonie*. Each chapter then provides readers with historical background to a particular region and identifies the key issues that have influenced the emergence of a literature in French, before going on to examine in detail a selection of the major writers. These case studies tackle many of the key authors of the francophone world, as well as new, up-and-coming authors writing today.

Patrick Corcoran is Assistant Dean in the School of Arts at Roehampton University.

Cambridge Introductions to Literature

This series is designed to introduce students to key topics and authors. Accessible and lively, these introductions will also appeal to readers who want to broaden their understanding of the books and authors they enjoy.

- Ideal for students, teachers, and lecturers
- Concise, yet packed with essential information
- Key suggestions for further reading

Titles in this series:

- Christopher Balme *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies*
Eric Bulson *The Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce*
Warren Chernaik *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's History Plays*
John Xiros Cooper *The Cambridge Introduction to T. S. Eliot*
Patrick Corcoran *The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature*
Gregg Crane *The Cambridge Introduction to the Nineteenth-Century American Novel*
Kirk Curnutt *The Cambridge Introduction to F. Scott Fitzgerald*
Janette Dillon *The Cambridge Introduction to Early English Theatre*
Janette Dillon *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare's Tragedies*
Jane Goldman *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf*
Kevin J. Hayes *The Cambridge Introduction to Herman Melville*
Nancy Henry *The Cambridge Introduction to George Eliot*
Leslie Hill *The Cambridge Introduction to Jacques Derrida*
David Holdeman *The Cambridge Introduction to W. B. Yeats*
Adrian Hunter *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*
C. L. Innes *The Cambridge Introduction to Postcolonial Literatures*
M. Jimmie Killingsworth *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*
Pericles Lewis *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*
Ronan McDonald *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*
Wendy Martin *The Cambridge Introduction to Emily Dickinson*
Peter Messent *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain*
David Morley *The Cambridge Introduction to Creative Writing*
Ira Nadel *The Cambridge Introduction to Ezra Pound*
Leland S. Person *The Cambridge Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne*
John Peters *The Cambridge Introduction to Joseph Conrad*
Sarah Robbins *The Cambridge Introduction to Harriet Beecher Stowe*
Martin Scofield *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story*
Emma Smith *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare*
Peter Thomson *The Cambridge Introduction to English Theatre, 1660–1900*
Janet Todd *The Cambridge Introduction to Jane Austen*
Theresa M. Towner *The Cambridge Introduction to William Faulkner*
Jennifer Wallace *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy*

The Cambridge Introduction to Francophone Literature

PATRICK CORCORAN



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521849715

© Patrick Corcoran 2007

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provision of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-37243-8 eBook (Adobe Reader)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-84971-5 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-61493-1 paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of urls for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page vii</i>
Introduction	1
The francophone world	1
Conceptualising <i>francophonie</i>	6
Historicism and historiography	13
Postcolonial theory and francophone literature	21
Chapter 1 The Maghreb	27
Overview	27
Mouloud Feraoun	38
Mohammed Dib	43
Kateb Yacine	48
Driss Chraïbi	51
Albert Memmi	56
Rachid Boudjedra	60
Assia Djebar	64
Tahar Ben Jelloun	71
Chapter 2 Sub-Saharan Africa	75
Overview	75
Henri Lopes	86
Ahmadou Kourouma	92
Sony Labou Tansi	97
Ken Bugul	102

Chapter 3 Oceania – Middle East	109
Overview	109
Mauritius	111
Ananda Devi	112
La Réunion	117
Axel Gauvin	118
Madagascar	124
Raharimanana	126
The Middle East	129
Amin Maalouf	130
Albert Cossery	133
 Chapter 4 Canada	 138
Overview	138
Gabrielle Roy	152
Anne Hébert	157
Marie-Claire Blais	164
Jacques Godbout	170
Réjean Ducharme	175
 Chapter 5 The Caribbean	 180
Overview	180
<i>Négritude, antillanité and créolité</i>	184
Aimé Césaire	199
Frantz Fanon	204
Patrick Chamoiseau	207
Raphaël Confiant	213
Edouard Glissant	218
Ernest Pépin	226
Maryse Condé	228
Haïti	233
 Conclusion	 239
<i>Notes</i>	242
<i>Bibliography</i>	249
<i>Further reading</i>	260
<i>Index</i>	262

Acknowledgements

This book has been several years in the preparation and consequently the influences upon it have been as diverse as they have been diffuse. Friends and colleagues in the Society for Francophone Postcolonial Studies have helped increase my knowledge of, and shaped my views on, the francophone literatures examined here. I offer them my sincere thanks.

In more practical terms my thanks are also due to colleagues in the School of Arts at Roehampton University, particularly, but not exclusively, to those working in the developing area of Modern Languages. Jacqueline Page deserves a special mention for shouldering many additional burdens while I worked on this project. A period of research leave in 2005–6, supported by funding from Roehampton University and matched funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, ultimately made it possible for this book to be written. Thanks are also due to helpful staff in a number of University libraries, particularly those of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University College London and Kings College London.

Above all I feel I owe a deep debt of gratitude to Professor Charles Forsdick of Liverpool University and to Dr Nicholas Harrison of Kings College London. Without their support this book would never have progressed beyond the planning stages.

Finally my thanks to Céline, Camille and Mathilde, my ‘three noisy girls’, for their love and patience.

All translations into English of French quotations are my own.

Blan napa capav travay san nwar?
– Plim bizwin lank.

Note on the text: references to primary sources are given as page numbers in the text; full details of the works cited are provided in the bibliography.

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 Andreï 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'Ile 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'Ile 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

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.

Both Reclus's expansionist views and his nationalistic pride were of his time, of course, and the date of the neologism's creation more or less coincides with the date of the Berlin conference of 1884–5, generally accepted as marking the beginning of the so-called colonial 'Scramble for Africa'. The Berlin conference marked the centenary of another less frequently cited, but in the context of this discussion not insignificant, event: the publication in 1784 of the *Discours sur l'universalité de la langue française* by the émigré count Rivarol. In this remarkable eulogy of the French language Rivarol not only professes a blind faith in the intrinsic merits and importance of French, he makes a leap from the particular to the general that allows him to claim a universal value for the cultural achievements which have found expression through French. 'It is French books that make up the library of human kind', he claimed. Like Reclus, Rivarol based his views partly on the notion of geographical spread. It was because French could claim to be the *lingua franca* of intellectual debate and international diplomacy across eighteenth-century Europe that he felt empowered to argue its status as a language of universal significance, capable of speaking to the whole of humanity about the full range of concerns humanity may have. It would, of course, be anachronistic to use terms such as 'nationalism' or 'imperialism' when discussing the pre-revolutionary writings of Rivarol, yet his essay provides as clear an example as one could wish to find of the phenomenon of cultural imperialism.

This view of French as a universal language, somehow sacralised by the role it had assumed as a conveyor of 'civilisation' and enlightened values, was one major part of the legacy which Reclus inherited. But the century which separated Rivarol and Reclus had been marked by an event which had also had a major impact on the French language and the myths generated around it: the French Revolution. This would provide another important part of the legacy. To the pre-revolutionary association of French with universal, humanist values could now be added an association between French and republican ideals, ideals which were constitutive of the nation itself. The egalitarianism of the revolutionary period brought a normalising, homogenising and standardising force to bear on linguistic matters as it did in every other area of public life. The celebrated speech by Barère (a notorious member of the Committee of Public Safety) to the Convention in January 1794, railing against the use of the various *patois* and regional languages then current in France, exemplifies the intolerance of heterogeneity that was so characteristic of this 'nation-building' phase of French history. It was echoed in a more moderate form by l'Abbé Grégoire, another major figure of the revolutionary period: 'Pour extirper tous les préjugés, développer toutes les vérités, tous les talents . . . fondre tous les citoyens dans la masse nationale . . . il faut identité de langage.'²⁵ [To eradicate all

prejudices, nurture all truths and develop all talents . . . to meld all the citizens into the mass of the nation . . . we need to speak a single language.] Conceived in this way, language becomes a vital, political tool for building the nation.

In reality the two strands of Reclus's legacy highlighted here – the discourse of universal values and the discourse of nation-building egalitarianism – sustain and nourish each other. French was the language in which the first ever Declaration of the Rights of Man was drafted, but it was promulgated only a handful of years before the Convention passed the decree insisting that government agents should use French alone in the course of their official duties or risk imprisonment. The contention that French was, and in the opinion of many French people today perhaps still is, in some ill-defined way, inherently suited to expressing universal human values must somehow accommodate itself to the reality that, from the Revolution onwards, political leaders in France have never shied away from using the French language as an instrument for the implementation of unarguably nationalist policies

From its earliest uses then, the word 'francophone' is linked to (one might almost say complicit with) a way of thinking about 'Frenchness' that has deep historical roots in Enlightenment thought and the revolutionary politics of nation-building. Both strands provided arguments that weighed heavily in the balance as France expanded its colonial presence across the world during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The notion of the superiority of the French language, which could only with great difficulty (and possibly disingenuousness) be dissociated from the notion of the superiority of French culture and of French social and political institutions, was one of the cornerstones of attempts to rationalise and justify this colonial expansion. Since the step from nation-building to empire-building is one of degree rather than category, the different views and arguments about language that had been articulated by Rivarol and revolutionary leaders were equally influential and relevant to the context of imperialist expansion. And in the context of colonisation, as in that of revolutionary France, events on the ground were often decisive while the *post hoc* justifications and rationalisations of them struggled to keep pace. As we know, by the end of the decade following the conference of Berlin the area claimed as French territory would increase almost tenfold. As Raoul Girardet points out in *L'Idée coloniale en France*, the vaguely theorised imperialist impulse was largely generated by 'pressure groups', among which he specifically includes 'geographers' and therefore, by implication, Reclus. These groups made no claim to be representative or accountable and bore no responsibility to anyone but themselves, yet the pressure they exerted was transformed into a practice of colonial expansion which took centre stage in the politics of the day.

It is around this time that the rather abstract argument about the status and value of the French language, so valuable when enlisted to help articulate the imperialist 'credo' in the 1870s and 1880s, would be subsumed under the more general set of arguments about the need (or the duty) of the more advanced nations to participate in the *mission civilisatrice*. The shift may be seen as slight but it marked a generalisation of the argument. When the focus had been placed on the French language it had perhaps been understood that language was being seen both as the repository of cultural values and as the vehicle by which these values could be transmitted. In its more generalised form, the appeal to the notion of the *mission civilisatrice* allowed the argument to become focused on the cultural values themselves. It was thus divested of some of its nationalistic overtones. It could more easily be presented as a pan-European argument which each individual nation could adapt to its own ends. Implicit within this version of the argument was the notion of the superiority of European culture, European languages, European institutions, in short a Eurocentric view of the world. The irony is of course that many of the individual nations of Europe (France, Great Britain, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Russia) who deployed the argument of the *mission civilisatrice* as a 'one-size-fits-all', homogenising justification for expansionist policies would, within a few decades, be at each other's throats in the Great War of 1914–18.

These historical considerations are of course historicist considerations since they seek to explain how events were linked to ideas and beliefs prevalent at the time. The notion of *francophonie* was one of the significant strands of thinking which fed into the imperialist discourse that began to emerge from 1880 onwards. The defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 had been followed by a period of *recueillement* [retreat into oneself] that can easily be likened to the 'calm before the storm'. But the storm that was unleashed a decade later was, in a sense, displaced and its effects were felt not in Europe but in other parts of the world: the decade 1880–90 would see decisive French military action in Tunis in 1881, Annam in 1883, Madagascar in 1884, Tonkin in 1885 as well as expeditions in Congo and the Sudan.

The constitution and consolidation of this second empire, its history and its geography, its 'story' in its various ramifications, have tended to provide the raw material for the numerous accounts of *francophonie* that have appeared in recent years. But it is only if we adopt the Eurocentric bias that we have identified as underpinning the imperialist project that we can blithely assume that 'French' history provides the key to a master narrative on *francophonie*. Even the term 'Second Empire' belongs to a specifically French narrativisation of its own history. It is an inward-looking term used to refer to the régime in power in France between 1852 and 1870 and which intentionally evokes

resonances with a Bonapartist 'tradition' harking back to the creation of the first empire in 1800. These choices of names for the régimes in power in France may seem natural and unproblematic, yet they can also be seen as involving a commodification of history designed, first and foremost, for internal consumption by the French. Hence these uses of the terms 'empire' and 'Second Empire' are self-absorbingly introspective; they have been 'used up' within a discourse that gives precedence to the glorious connotations of imperial power associated with Napoleon Bonaparte and his grandnephew, Napoleon III. Yet this leaves the field of French colonial history rather bereft, particularly when historians need to refer to pre-nineteenth century colonial adventures. French historians therefore tend to use the expression 'le premier empire colonial' [first colonial empire] when alluding to those territories brought under French rule prior to the Treaty of Paris in 1763. This treaty saw the effective dismantling of this first colonial empire. In what ways it was either colonial or an empire at all is, of course, highly debatable, but tacking the adjective 'colonial' on to the end at least allows the distinction to be made between France's overseas territories of the eighteenth century and Napoleon Bonaparte's later imperial ambitions focused on Europe. Similarly, the second French 'empire', the late nineteenth-century version, was alluded to by another name. It was generally referred to by the French as 'nos colonies'. Unlike the British, the French seem to have been remarkably reluctant to refer to their colonial possessions as an empire at all, possibly because the vocabulary which would have allowed them to do so was not available for use in this context.

Such questions of vocabulary are quite literally historiographical since they have a direct bearing on how the narrative of French 'imperial' history is conceived, structured and deployed. In this instance, an interrogation of the word 'empire' as used by the French points up the tension between an internally facing and an externally facing usage. Not that one is less Eurocentric than the other. On the contrary, both enable a French perspective on events to be articulated and allow no space for unfolding alternative histories, envisaged from the point of view of those on the 'receiving end' of the forces of history. Yet *francophonie*, seen as a generalising term for the plurality of voices and histories engaged in the relationship with France but contesting France's ownership of History, is precisely the framework within which such 'alternative histories' have begun to emerge. This is the 'postcolonial' version of *francophonie* that functions as a counter-discourse, challenging and interrogating 'official' *francophonie*, often from within. It is for this reason that the word 'francophone' can also so frequently be associated with a certain recalcitrance and scepticism with regard to French views about the legitimacy, authority and proprietorship of the French language itself. This is simply one illustration of the fact that

the French–francophone relationship can be envisaged in a variety of ways but rarely as an unproblematic partnership between equals.

It is true that in historical terms ‘French’ is the marker of the originary language, culture and nationhood from which versions of *francophonie* have derived. The process by which the French language emerged as a national language from the Strasbourg oaths through the *Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts* to the founding of the Académie française and beyond, is punctuated by political and institutional efforts to create and consolidate firstly the state, and subsequently, in post-revolutionary France, the concept of the nation. The full force of this argument can only be felt when one accepts the organic links that bind together language, culture, literary representation and nationhood. But if narratives have helped to constitute nations they can also be deployed in ways that allow other groups to be ‘imagined’ and in ways that challenge the master narratives of nations and empires.

In fact, two overlapping foundational arguments need to be proposed here. The first is that the history of the French language is inextricably bound up with the emergence of the ‘idea’ of France as a state and later as a nation. The ‘invention’ of France depended on, and was enabled by, the emergence of French, firstly as a vernacular idiom challenging the use of Latin, later as the increasingly prestigious international language of the French state, French diplomacy and French culture, and ultimately, since the medium is the message, as the very material that France was exporting in fulfilment of its self-imposed *mission civilisatrice*. This defence (and illustration/promotion) of the French language was conducted with ever-increasing self-consciousness and ever-increasing awareness of the issues at stake. Nowhere is this more evident than in the late nineteenth century as French nationalism mutates into French imperialism and articulates an ideology of imperialism conceived in fundamentally linguistic terms. The second foundational argument is that which links the emerging sense of nationhood to literature. The consolidation of the idea of the nation-state relied on a set of supporting discursive practices that operated in the literary domain as much as in other areas of political and social life. To national literatures fell the task of codifying and exemplifying what was distinctive about the ‘national community’.

To the extent that ‘postcolonial’ *francophonie* offers itself as an alternative to ‘French’ (by offering different variants of the language, different accounts of events, originating from different cultural contexts underpinned by different political relationships, expressed through different forms of representation) it constitutes a challenge to the hegemony of French language, and, by extension, to the narratives and discourses by which French political and cultural life legitimates itself as an originary authority. Once again, of course, the term