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Patrick Corcoran

Excerpt

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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

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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;

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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

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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.

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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

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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’.

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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

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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 unrepublican 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